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**IN THIS ISSUE -
4 NOVELETTES!
A CORPSE
FOR
CINDERELLA**
by DAY KEENE
- PLUS -
**WILLIAM R. COX
FRANCIS K. ALLAN
BRUNO FISCHER**



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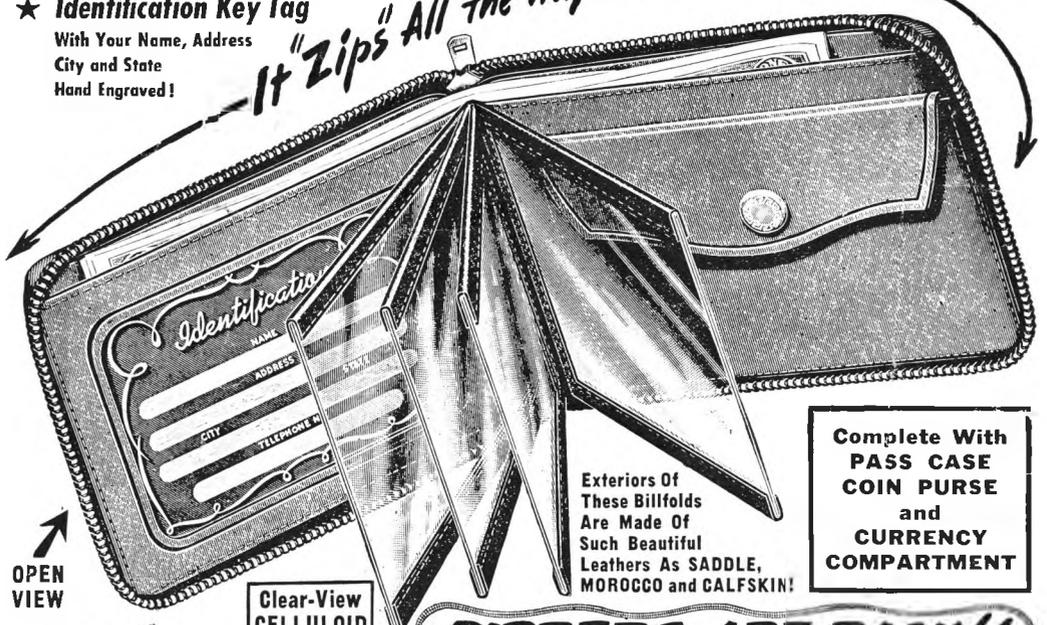
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NEXT ISSUE OUT MAY 4th!

Volume 31

May, 1945

Number 4

SPINE-TINGLING MURDER-NOVEL

THE MAN WITH THE X-RAY EYES.....Francis K. Allan 52

That fabulously fascinating none-such, Duke Danube, strange human contradiction from the past, could easily see into the future. . . . But the future he saw for himself was a one-way trip to a sealed and secret grave, when he played a grisly game of tag with a dead man!

FOUR STARKLY DRAMATIC NOVELETTES

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Helen Wright, to her friends, was "that wonderful, brave little woman." To her soldier-husband's best friend, just returned from Germany, she was a dead ringer for a black widow!

"THEY'LL KILL ME!".....William R. Cox 32

It was natural that Tom Kincaid, Broadway gambler gone Hollywood, would want to produce "Gamble for Two. . . ." Until some red-handed, itchy-fingered characters decided to make it a real gamble, for either a cool million—or murder!

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Eddie couldn't promise the only thing that would make his sister happy. . . . Then a fresh corpse on his doorstep showed him that he might make that pledge—if he could live long enough to keep it!

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When Tommy Martin took on the job of de-bunking the unexplicable "kiss-of-death" killings, he didn't know that he himself had No. 1 priority on Dahut's lethal lips—backed by a gruesome pair of rod-packing corpses who chose him as partner for their deadman's quadrille!

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The bayou, to Joad, was a lovely, mysterious woman, who would keep hidden his dark secret. But, like many women, it was not to be trusted too far.

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Karl Jennifer believed the terrifying wisdom of those wild owls could fathom life's darkest secret. . . .

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Each passing minute told Dick that the girl he loved would love him more—if he were dead!

— AND —

MYSTERY'S DARK PORTALS.....A Department 6

Join the Inner Circle where we meet together in solemn conclave. . . .

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

Published bi-monthly by Poplar Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and executive Offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York 17, N. Y. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary; Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter September 14, 1944, at the postoffice at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1945, by Poplar Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 15c. Six-issue subscription in U. S. A. 90 cents. Foreign postage 35 cents additional. Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling

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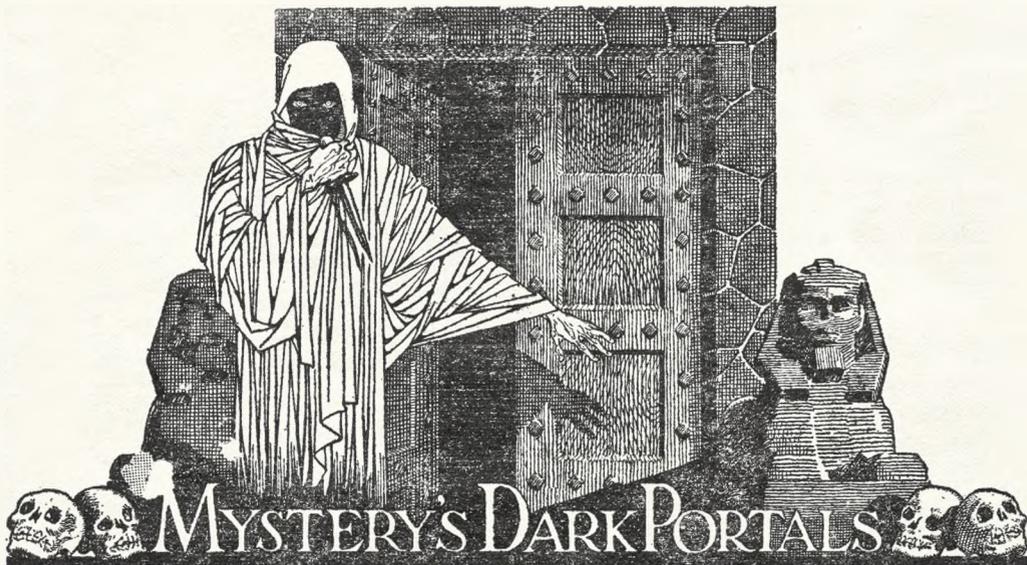
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But we must admit that our idea of fiction in a world at war is somewhat different and, we believe, justifiably so. **DIME MYSTERY** offers its readers—and is proud of it—a chance to forget for a moment the stress and strain of wartime living—the worry that gnaws at the heart of each family with a son away from home, the rigors of their long working day, the thousand and one small but necessary sacrifices that each of us is now called upon to make.

DIME MYSTERY feels that facing these things daily as we all must, its readers want escape—if you will—from the day-to-day grind of fighting in and subscribing for a total war. In offering a wide variety of mystery fiction, with human, credible characters, we hope that for a short while our readers can get away from the problems besetting them *now*; we hope to give them a chance to catch a breath and hold it for a moment, while we wonder if the hero will get out of a tight and deadly spot. And while we're concentrating on him, we can't be bothered about our own troubles.

And that's good!

Feeling this way, we were encouraged by the following letter from Robert Blackwood of New York City who seems to agree with us in the main, in addition to having his own particular bone to pick with a literary critic. See what you think!

To the Editor:

I don't ordinarily write letters to magazines, but I read something the other day that interested me a lot, and I think it may be of interest to you.

I refer to an article by one of the better-known and respected literary critics. The article goes into the merits and, mostly, the demerits of detective and mystery novels. This critic claims that such novels have no appeal for him, and says that he believes the publishing of so many of them is a misdirected use of paper which might better be saved for "literature."

To prove his point he analyzes several novels by the better-known detective story writers, and dismisses all of them as being badly written. Most of these authors, he says, don't know how to tell a story, how to draw characters, how to create atmosphere—therefore, nothing in their writings is interesting or worthwhile.

He goes on to say that most murder mystery readers don't really expect good writing, but are interested only in trying to figure out who the murderer is. But he can't understand how people can wade through so many pages to find out something that usually isn't logical anyway.

I think he's right—up to a point. I used to read a lot of detective stories, and enjoyed a great many of them. But after reading a certain number I began to get restless—it often didn't seem worth the effort to read all the pages between the murder and the solution, so I began skipping to the end. When you get to that point,

(Continued on page 8)



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bookkeeping
"chores"?
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HIGHER!**

**BECOME
an
ACCOUNTANT**

IF you are doing the "chore" work of accounting as a bookkeeper, ledger clerk, cost clerk, billing clerk, or in one of the other many record keeping jobs—

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(Continued from page 6)

I think it's time to quit reading detective stories. And that's what I did.

But whatever you say about the low literary value of crime, there is something awfully entertaining and relaxing in reading crime stories, and I got restless *not* reading them. It was about that time I came across your magazine, and I want to tell you now how much I appreciate it.

The reason? Well, it's because the stories in DIME MYSTERY don't depend on a puzzle and a couple of shootings for their interest. Almost every time there is plenty of atmosphere and character interest—enough by themselves to keep me interested and entertained all the way through. I don't have to be always wondering if I'm going to be able to figure out who the killer is before the end of the story—the suspense of the moment and fear of what will happen next keeps me all wrapped up, and I forget about the mechanics of the plot, and about where my next cigarette is coming from. And that's what I want in my off-hours reading.

And the critic I mentioned seems to agree with me. About the only good book he found in all those he talked about had an atmosphere of horror and black magic. Whether or not he thought horror made the book "literature" I don't know—maybe so. But whether or not mystery, hovering black evil, and eerie suspense make "literature" or not, I know that I like it.

Anyway, you don't read mystery stories to get educated, you read them for relaxation and entertainment. Any stories that do that for me I want to read. DIME MYSTERY gives me stories like that, and I'm going to go on reading your magazine whether the critics go with me all the way or not.

Robert Blackwood

We're glad that you feel that way about it, Mr. Blackwood. And if anyone else has any more ideas on this topic, we'll be delighted to hear them.

Also in our mailbox was an interesting request from Dave Wheeler of Savannah, Georgia.

Dear Editor:

You could have knocked me over with a feather when DIME MYSTERY suddenly jumps the gun and goes to 15c. "What's the idea?" I thought. "Just one more thing that's gone up in price along with everything else I like." And I don't mind telling you I was pretty sore.

Then I noticed the merger with 10 STORY MYSTERY—another of my favorites—and the news that the magazine was now enhanced

by sixteen more pages of the kind of stories I like to read. Fair enough!

The only thing I can think of that you haven't got in your magazine—something I think would interest a lot of people besides myself—is an illustrated feature, perhaps showing celebrated crimes and unsolved mysteries of the past. And I guess I don't need to tell you that there are plenty of 'em! I think it would sort of tie in, too, with the policy of your magazine of printing stories that are set against an unusual background with characters that, while real enough and people you know you've known yourself—are still just enough different to make you know that that story couldn't help but have happened to them.

How about that?

Thanks, Dave. As a matter of fact, talking about jumping the gun, you've done it. We've just been giving that same suggestion some serious thought ourselves, and are glad to know that the idea has at least one firm supporter to send it off. Anybody else?

Steven K. Read writes us from St. Louis that he's a Poe fan from way back, but he'll take DIME MYSTERY—when he can't get Poe—at least until something better comes along. And we're here to see that it doesn't. One part of his letter says:

As far as I'm concerned, nobody can hold a candle to the mysteries of Edgar Allan Poe. He could make the warmest backbone turn to ice, I'm convinced.

I guess that's why the stories that appeal to me most are the creepy ones—the ones that make you feel damned glad you're actually sitting beside your own fire and not going through the spine-tingling adventures of your hero. If you can spare a moment from the story to remind yourself of that fact!

I like detective stories well enough—the fast-paced dick stuff, too. It's real, and I wouldn't quarrel with anyone who found it exciting in its way. But for real chills give me a story that takes me out of the things I see around me everyday.

For anyone who shares Mr. Read's preference for a chiller, Talmage Powell's story, "The Dark, Unfriendly Tide" in this issue should be just what the doctor ordered. Try it!

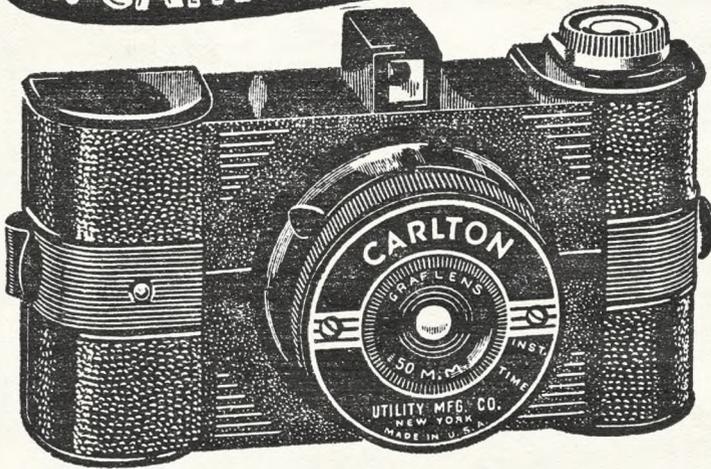
And while you're still with us, the next issue of DIME MYSTERY, combined with 10 STORY MYSTERY, will be published May 4th, with a full complement of suspenseful, dramatic mystery-fiction stories by famous fiction-masters who know how to brew powerful crime-mystery fare!

—The Editor



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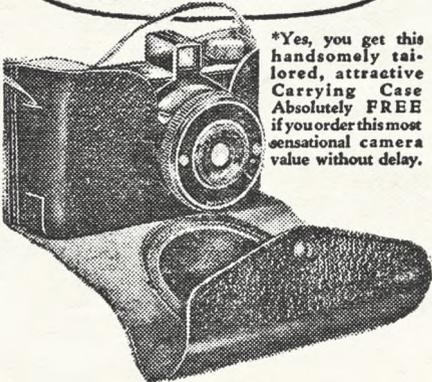
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CHAPTER ONE

The Vanishing Corpse

NO ANSWER, though I could hear radio music in the apartment. Maybe she was asleep or taking a bath. I pressed the doorbell again—longer and louder. Still no answer. I was turning away when the radio music suddenly blared.

In that long silent hall of the apartment house, I waited for somebody to come to the door. Nothing happened. Beyond doubt someone was in that apartment and had turned up the radio. In annoyance, I rattled the door-knob.

It turned in my hand. I was about to push the door in when a woman's voice said through the panel: "Who is it?"

"Mrs. Wright?" I asked.

"Yes. Who is it?"

"I'm a friend of Walt's," I said. He asked me to look you up."

A wife whose husband is facing death daily on a battlefield in Europe should be eager to hear about her husband. But beyond the door there was silence intensified by the radio music. I think it was at that moment that I started to hate her.

"Don't you want to see me?" I said testily. Her voice came thin and strained through

I saw no face, for I'd
already started to throw
myself aside.

Deadlier Than The Male!

By BRUNO FISCHER

To her many friends, beautiful Helen Wright was a "wonderful little woman"—but to me, only her soldier-husband's best pal, and the guy she was framing for murder—she looked more like a black-widow!



the door. "Where is Walt?" she asked me. "Still fighting in Germany, as far as I know. I'm home on a furlough."

Again that silence. My hand was still on the knob, and I felt my fingers tighten around it furiously.

"Just a minute," she said. "I'm not dressed."

I felt myself relax. She must have been taking a bath and had probably been shivering on the other side of the door with nothing on except maybe a towel, while I had been getting foolish ideas about her not wanting to welcome a man who had fought side by side with her husband. Laughing at myself, I released the doorknob.

I had been standing there holding the door open an inch, and now when I let go, it swung inward. Through the open crack I could see into a small foyer. And the woman stepping into the room beyond was fully clothed.

Anger returned. I pushed the door all the way in. When I was halfway across the foyer, I could see into the living room. She must have heard me, because she had stopped moving and faced me.

Helen Wright was as beautiful as her picture—with the build of a pin-up girl and a small-featured oval face dominated by green eyes. It was easy to see why Walt felt about her the way he did.

For long seconds we said nothing. It was her play.

Her gaze dropped. "I meant, of course, that I wanted to put make-up on." She gave a forced, low laugh. "A woman hardly considers herself dressed until her face is made-up."

She seemed to be wearing enough paint for ordinary purposes. I just stood there in the

foyer looking at her, not knowing what to say. One thing was sure: she wasn't at all anxious to have me there.

"Won't you come in, Mr.—" She glanced at my sleeve. "You can't be Sergeant Peter Cole?"

"Yes," I said, coming all the way into the living room. It was one of these swanky modern apartments where the rent was at least twice Walt's pay as corporal. But he'd told me he was pretty well off.

"Walt wrote me all about his sergeant," she was saying. "He thinks the world of you." She added absently: "He writes me every day."

"That's more than you do for him."

Helen Wright shrugged very fine shoulders. "I am so busy with various war organizations."

I said bitterly: "I've seen Walt write to you while crouching in a foxhole under enemy shelling. I've seen his face when I passed out mail and there was none from you. The few letters you *did* send him didn't cheer him up much."

She gave me a quick, sharp look. "What was wrong with them?"

"I don't know. He showed me some of them." I was standing beside the radio, and it was so loud that I could hardly hear my own voice. "At the front you share everything, even letters. Walt said your letters weren't ardent enough and that they didn't sound like you. I'm not married, so I never received a letter from a wife, but when I do, I'd want the letters to be less formal. There's something cold even about the neat way you type them."

"And I suppose," she said, "Walt sent you to check up on me."

"Not exactly, but—" The radio was too loud; I couldn't talk against its blare. I said, "Do you mind?" and turned it off.

THE SILENCE was as deep and breathless as at the sudden cessation of a bombardment. And then I heard a sound—a whisper, a slither, a movement so small that I wouldn't have paid attention to it if her green eyes hadn't flicked toward a closed door at the farther end of the room. I knew then that somebody else was in the apartment and that she had turned up the radio to drown out the sound of him hiding. Somebody she didn't want anyone who might visit her to find with her.

Her eyes were back on me. "I don't believe I've ever met you before," she said casually.

"No. I didn't meet Walt until I was transferred from Italy three months ago. I got a chance to come home for thirty days, but Walt is still there, going through hell, while his wife—"

"I think you'd better go," she said stiffly.

I wasn't letting her get away with it that easily. I was too sore. "Maybe it's none of my business, but we men at the front get mighty close to each other—closer than some of them are to their own wives. To wives like you, anyway. I've seen how the men out there in muck and death feel when they don't hear often enough from their wives. And you, the wife of the swellest kid I know, are the worst of them."

I expected her to fly off the handle, and I didn't care. But she just stood there, stiff and indrawn, her green eyes hard.

"Please leave," she said quietly.

"Sure," I said. "In a minute." And I started across to the closed door through which that small sound had come when I had turned off the radio.

Helen Wright flung herself at me as I swept by her. Her hands clawed at my arm. "Where are you going?"

I hadn't been absolutely sure before this that she was hiding somebody in the bedroom, but now I was. "To beat hell out of a guy for Walt," I said, and kept going.

She clung to my arm in frenzy, her fingers hooking in my sleeve. "Please! I'll give you anything. Money. A hundred dollars if you'll go away."

I laughed harshly and tore her hands from me.

"A thousand!" she moaned.

I flung the door open. The light was on in the spacious bedroom. At first glance I saw no man in there. My eyes swept the room again—and a pair of legs were sticking out of an open closet.

"Get up!" I shouted.

The legs did not stir. I strode over to them, and saw the rest of the man lying face down inside the closet. The weird immobility of his body told me what was wrong with him, I had seen too many dead men not to know.

I looked back. Helen Wright had followed me as far as the bedroom doorway. She was silent now, her oval face pale and taut, her green eyes narrowed.

I got down on my knees and leaned into the dimness of the big closet. The dead man was huge, close to two hundred and fifty pounds. In his left temple there was a little round hole. Only a thin trickle of blood ran over the ragged patch of burned skin around the wound. A small-calibered gun, making hardly enough noise to be heard outside the apartment, had been placed against his temple. He must have died instantly.

Still kneeling, I turned to look again at Helen Wright.

"A boy friend you tired of?" I said. "So *this* is the girl Walt's been eating his heart out for!"

The widening of her eyes warned me. I re-

membered that the dead man couldn't have made the sound I had heard and twisted back to the closet. The solid row of dresses had parted, and I glimpsed a shape standing over me, an arm swooping down. I saw no face, for I'd already started to throw myself aside.

I was too late. Fire knifed into my skull. I felt myself falling long after my chin hit the floor—falling into dark, sickening emptiness. . . .

IT WAS again the night in the Huertgen Forest in Germany when I was stunned by a mortar shell and staggered blindly with no sense of direction. Then a soldier caught me—Walt Wright. He'd gone after me and was gripping my arm and gasping, "Pete, for God's sake! You're headed straight for the Jerry lines!" And I—

Now I stared in bewilderment. The man who was holding my arm wasn't Walt. He was bigger, his uniform was blue and he was saying, "You sure got yourself a snoutful, Sarge."

Relieved laughter trembled on my lips. My head ached and my stomach was queazy, but I was back in the good old U.S.A., where there were no men to be killed and none trying to kill you. Blinking, I looked around. I was in a narrow alley beside a tall brick building.

"Where am I?" I asked.

"That must've been some party," the cop chuckled. "I seen you coming up this ally with the blind stagers."

He put a brawny arm under my shoulders and led me to the street. My knees were wobbling under me. I tried to remember where I'd had so many drinks. Let's see—I'd docked in New York, but no party, no drinking. I'd been in a hurry to go somewhere. But where? Thoughts came sluggishly and increased the throbbing in my head.

"Think you're okay now?" the cop asked. We were under the street lamp and he was looking at me closely.

I nodded. The movement made a red-hot needle jab into my skull. My hand went up under my hat; I felt hair matted with dried blood. Then I remembered.

"The dead man!" I muttered.

"Huh?" The cop's finger tapped the ribs on my chest. "I guess them medals mean you killed your share of men."

I knew this building in front of which we were standing. There was a big 132 above the door—the number Walt Wright had given me when he had asked me to look up his wife.

"I mean the dead man in the house." My voice sounded thick and unfamiliar in my ears. "A murdered man. I found the body in a closet. They must have killed him just before I arrived, and Mrs. Wright turned up the radio so I wouldn't hear him drag that heavy

body into the closet. Then when the murderer heard me coming he hid in the closet and hit me with something, maybe the gun."

The cop peered into my face. "What are you talking about?"

"I told you—murder. Right in that house. I guess I didn't go out cold when I was hit. I got away, staggered out of the house." I took off my cap. "See that wound."

"You were clipped all right." The cop looked down the alley. "Could be. The fire-stairs run down to a fire door into the alley. Murder, eh?"

"Come on," I urged. "Before they get rid of the body."

THEN we were standing in front of that door, and through it I heard a woman laugh. That sound made me a little crazy. Helen Wright was probably laughing over how she had pulled a fast one on me. I shoved myself in front of the cop, pushed the door open and plunged through the small foyer into the living room.

Half a dozen people were in that room. It was an intimate little party. Most of them had cocktail glasses in their hands.

I stood there gaping. Helen Wright had been wearing a blue dress, but now she was in something brief and tight and pale-green that matched her eyes. She put down her glass and came over to me with a half-smile.

"I trust you have sobered up, Mr. Cole," she said. She looked past me and stiffened. "What is it, Officer?"

The cop was behind me, gawking every bit as foolishly as I was. The people in that room reeked of respectability. I passed my hand over my eyes and wondered if I had lost my mind.

Everybody was watching me, waiting.

The cop broke the silence. "This soldier, ma'am," he said uneasily, "he told me there was a murdered man in this apartment. It's my duty to investigate, ma'am."

"What nonsense is this?" A gray-haired, square-jawed man stepped to Helen Wright's side. "Do you know this soldier?"

She frowned at me. "He was here a while ago, Mr. Dixon, and said he was a friend of Walt's. But he was quite drunk and became—modestly, her eyes and voice dropped—obnoxious. I had to ask him to leave."

I swayed groggily and heard myself say: "No, she's lying. There's a murdered man in the bedroom closet."

An Army major stepped forward, rigid and gimlet-eyed. "Drunk, eh?" he barked at me.

"I'm not, sir," I said. "I was struck when I discovered the body and managed to stagger as far as the street."

One of the women in the room laughed. She was buxom, well into middle-age. The third

woman in the room was a slip of a woman, and I heard her call the third man Mr. Gurley. Gurley had an enormous nose and wore thick-shelled glasses over pale, peering eyes. He was as strange to me as was Dixon. I heard the major say harshly that he wouldn't stand for any man in uniform acting like a hooligan.

Then the cop decided to assert his authority. "Well, ma'am, I guess we can settle this easy by having a look in your closet."

"Of course," Helen Wright said. "Come this way, please."

The cop and I went with her, and I could hear the others tagging along. The bedroom was the way I had seen it before, except that the closet door was closed. And when the cop opened the door, there was no body inside. No sign of blood either because the fat man had bled hardly at all.

"The body is somewhere in the apartment," I muttered. "They couldn't have got him out so quickly."

There weren't many places in that apartment where a two hundred and fifty pound corpse can be hidden. Within a couple of minutes we were back in the living room and Helen Wright was smiling sweetly up at me. "Are you satisfied, Mr. Cole?"

My legs were weak again. I reached out to cling to the back of a chair. Had I imagined a dead man while in a drunken stupor? If only my head would stop whirling!

"Dead drunk!" That was the major. He had pencil and paper in his hand and wanted to see my furlough papers.

I was showing them to him when I heard Helen Wright say to the cop: "After all, Officer, these people have been here at least an hour."

An hour! I looked at my watch. It was ten of eleven—and I had called on Helen Wright a little before eight.

Three hours had passed since I'd been knocked out. Plenty of time before the guests arrived to carry even a fat man down the fire-stairs and out by way of the alley, then remove me from the building in the same way. They had left me in the alley—out cold. Because of the fog in my head, the time lapse had been completely lost on me when I came to.

"Wait!" I said.

The faces turned to me, but my eyes were focused only on Helen Wright, a ghost-smile on her lovely mouth. She wasn't afraid; she knew that I hadn't a scrap of proof. Words couldn't help me. I turned my back on all of them and started out.

"Just a second, Sergeant," the major called after me. "See me at the Coast City base tomorrow at eleven. Major Rumsey."

He couldn't make that an order under the circumstances; the most he could do was to fetch an M.P. to arrest me for drunkenness,

but he was passing that up. Still, a non-com doesn't turn down an officer's request. Besides, Major Rumsey was the third man in the room whose name should have meant something to me, but didn't.

I said, "Yes, sir," and left the apartment. As I closed the door behind me, I heard that laugh again.

CHAPTER TWO

"A Wonderful Little Woman"

THERE was a black border around Ernest Barber's gossip column in the *Coast City Post*—the last column he had written before his death. During the night his body had been found on the waterfront, the head crudely hacked off with an axe-like instrument.

I read this in an anteroom in the Coast City Army Base, waiting for Major Rumsey to get around to see me. A hot shower and a night's sleep had put me back in pretty good shape.

According to the paper, the police believed the murderer had removed the head and disposed of it in order to destroy Ernest Barber's identity, for his pockets had been emptied and the labels torn from his clothes. But Barber's enormous bulk had been well known in Coast City and Mrs. Barber had been brought to the morgue. She had positively identified her husband through birthmarks and an operation scar.

In spite of Barber's missing wallet, police were inclined to dismiss robbery as a motive. A thief wouldn't care whether or not his victim was identified. More likely it was a vengeance killing because of something Barber had written in his column. The police were studying his recent columns for possible news.

I folded up the newspaper and sat staring into space. After a while Major Rumsey sent for me.

He was alone in the office, standing in front of his desk and smoking a cigarette. I had expected him to receive me with that rigid Army expression that I wore myself when about to make things hot for a G.I. But instead he acknowledged my salute with a pleasant nod.

"I understand, Sergeant, that you are Walt Wright's close friend."

"He was in my platoon, sir, in mighty hot fighting in Belgium and Germany," I said. "He asked me to look you up, sir, when I reached Coast City. You and Mr. Dixon both. Your names sounded familiar to me last night, but my head was in too much of a whirl to place them till this morning."

Major Rumsey flicked ashes on the floor. "How's Walt?"

"Not happy, sir."

"Wants to come home, eh?"

"Who doesn't?" I said. "But it's more than

that, sir. Walt is the dreamy sort to begin with. Carries a book of poems with him in battle. What I'm getting at, when that kind of man broods over a woman, he pretty nearly goes to pieces."

The major nodded. I know. His father was my friend. When Joe Wright died a couple of years ago, I sort of looked after Walt. Or wanted to, but the war interfered." He stubbed out his cigarette. "I was afraid that Walt had too much money for his own good."

"Is Walt very rich, sir?" I asked. "I know he's well off, but he never talked about that part of his life."

"Too rich for a boy who never had to work for anything. And impulsive. I was stationed on the West Coast when I heard that he had married a girl he'd known only a few weeks. That bothered me. Thought he might have been hooked by some gold-digging tramp."

"Wasn't he?" I asked softly.

MAJOR RUMSEY looked at me sharply, but he didn't get sore. He said reflectively: "When I was transferred back to Coast City, Walt had already gone overseas. I visited his wife and found her as refined and sensible as she was beautiful. That didn't satisfy me. I investigated her family. It's a good Virginia family with a good background.

I must say that Walt did better in choosing a wife than I had sometimes feared he would."

"Walt is crazy in love with her, sir. But I doubt if it goes the other way around." And I told him how the lack of ardor in the few letters she did write had tormented him.

"Strange," Major Rumsey mused. "The way she spoke to me about Walt, I had the opposite impression." He stepped away from the desk. "Turn around, Sergeant."

In bewilderment I obeyed. His fingers probed the back of my scalp. I winced.

"Nasty," he said. "You better get that dressed."

"It's nothing, sir. At the front we'd consider that a scratch."

"I'd say a sharp instrument made that gash."

I said: "I believe it was the barrel of a pistol, sir."

The major expelled smoke through his nostrils. "Frankly, Cole, last night I was determined to crack down on you. Then I spoke to the policeman after you left. He told me about your wound and that he hadn't smelled any liquor on your breath. I remembered that I hadn't either. Whether or not you were drunk last night, you are sober now. Do you still tell the same story?"

"I do, sir."

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"Come, Cole, it's fantastic."

"Is it, sir?" I showed him the newspaper account of Ernest Barber's death.

"Do you know this man Barber?" he muttered as he handed the paper back to me.

"No, sir. And I didn't see his face in the closet. But he was as fat as the paper says Barber was. And the missing head fits in. Don't you see it, sir? If the corpse were found with a bullet in its head, that would in a way corroborate my story about seeing a fat man in Helen Wright's closet who had been murdered just like that. Besides, it's not so easy disposing of a body in a big city. Getting rid of the head alone is simpler—the head that contained the bullet."

"It doesn't wash, Cole. Why let *you* live then? It would have been safer to kill you right there in the apartment. Your unconscious body had to be lugged downstairs anyway. Why not your dead body as easily?"

I said: "For all they knew, I might have told somebody I was going to visit Helen Wright. The elevator operator would remember taking me up; I had asked him which was Mrs. Wright's apartment. If I were found murdered, the police would trace me there without trouble. If I disappeared, it would come to the same thing, because the Army would try to track me down as a deserter. So they played it safe by letting me live."

Major Rumsey's face looked gray. "Ridiculous, Cole. That wonderful woman! There is absolutely nothing in Helen Wright's background to indicate that she is capable of murder."

"I don't say she did the actual murdering, sir. There was the man in the closet who knocked me out."

Nervous—he prowled the office. Suddenly he swung on me. "Sergeant, are you home on sick leave?"

"No, sir. I had two solid years of combat and the C.O. thought I deserved a rest at home."

He looked at my ribbons. "Purple Heart. How badly were you wounded?"

"That was long ago at Salerno, sir. Only shrapnel in my thigh—invalided for only three weeks. Since then I've been lucky."

"No combat fatigue or any kind of battle-neurosis?"

I got it then. He couldn't accept my story of the murdered fat man, and so he was looking around for an excuse to reject it. My nerves were haywire from too much battle; I was suffering from delusions, of which a dead man in a closet was one. Simple.

"I'm perfectly normal, sir," I said stiffly.

"Of course," he muttered as he went behind his desk. He sat down. "You may go, Sergeant."

I saluted and got as far as the door before

he spoke again. "How long do you propose to stay in Coast City?"

I turned and felt my jaw muscles harden. "I've got nearly all of my thirty days left, sir. There's a lot I planned to do with them, but I'll spend them all here if I have to."

"I see." He toyed with a pencil on his desk. "I could, of course, keep you from causing more trouble. You were either sick or drunk last night."

"Please, sir." I took a step back into the office. "It's not because of myself. Sure, I'm sore because I was smacked around and made to look like a sap. But there's Walt. He's got a right to know what kind of woman he married."

Major Rumsey looked at me for a long time. Then he said: "Keep away from Mrs. Wright. She's a refined, upright woman."

"Yes, sir," I said and left. I had a bad taste in my mouth.

THE LETTERING on the frosted window of the door read: "Dixon and Gurley, Attorneys-at-Law." So that was where Gurley came in—the third man at Helen Wright's party last night. This morning I had remembered that Dixon was Walt's lawyer, but I had forgotten until this moment that the firm-name Walt had given me was Dixon and Gurley.

Both partners were in Dixon's private office. Dixon must have sent for Gurley while the receptionist had kept me waiting.

"Mr. Dixon," I said briskly, "I have a letter to you from Walt Wright."

The partners read the letter together—Edward Dixon, iron-gray and square-jawed, seated solidly behind his desk, Ronald Gurley peering over his shoulder through thick glasses. The letter contained only a few lines from Walt to the effect that I had kindly consented to bring back to him a report on his affairs.

"This letter means nothing," Dixon said, tossing it back across the desk to me. "Walter is mailed a regular monthly accounting from us."

"I don't know anything about that," I said. "Walt hardly ever talked about money. He just asked me to look in on you."

"The way you looked in on Mrs. Wright last night?"

I brushed a hand over my forehead. "I'm sorry about last night. I've gone through a lot and I suffer from what is called combat fatigue. I have the damndest delusions."

Major Rumsey had given me the idea, and now I adopted it to get on some sort of footing with the lawyers. Dixon clucked his tongue sympathetically. "I understand, Mr. Cole."

But Gurley rubbed his over-sized nose and scowled at his partner. "All that means to me,

Ed, is that we shouldn't trust a man who gets delusions with any confidential information."

"I handle the Wright estate," Dixon said testily. "Besides, there is nothing confidential. Mrs. Wright is in immediate control of the estate."

This was a new wrinkle to me. "Did Walt leave his wife power of attorney when he went abroad?"

"It's customary under the circumstances," Dixon said. "The estate is large and involved."

"That's why he should have given you the power of attorney, Ed," Gurley declared. "I've been looking at the books. Mrs. Wright is inclined to be extravagant."

"To put it mildly." Neither of the partners were talking to me now; they were discussing a grievance between themselves. "The estate can't stand it. I've written several times to Walter about that." Dixon looked at me. "Has he mentioned it to you?"

I shook my head. Walt wouldn't care how much money his wife spent; he was more concerned over the amount of love she lavished on him.

"Money never meant a thing to him," Gurley complained. "Mrs. Wright is a lovely and charming woman, but I hope she leaves something for herself and him by the time he returns."

Dixon sighed. "Mrs. Wright started off properly when she gave up the big Wright town house and moved into a small apartment. But then she went and put a fortune into remodeling the summer home in Mound Rock. That, however, could not have cost more than a few thousand dollars. What she does with the rest of the money, I cannot imagine."

"Now don't be too hard on the little lady," Gurley admonished. "I understand that she is contributing large sums to war relief organizations."

"But there is a limit to what even a large estate can stand." Again Dixon became aware of me. "But we're boring you, Cole. Don't give Walter the wrong impression about his wife. She is a wonderful woman."

That's what they were all telling me. This business about the finances didn't particularly interest me. She was his wife; he had married her to share his life and money with her. She might be playing him for a sucker, but there was nothing unusual in a wife's doing that to her husband. It was nothing compared to the matter of a murdered man in her bedroom closet.

"How well do you know Mrs. Wright?" I asked.

They looked at each other.

"What does your question imply?" Dixon said sharply.

"Not a thing," I told him. "I believe that

Walt met her and married her while he was stationed in Virginia. Then right after that he went overseas."

"Naturally," Dixon said. "There were papers to be signed. The day before Walter went overseas, he introduced her to Gurley and me and asked me to look after her because she was a stranger in Coast City. Since then I made it my business to visit her at least once a week."

"Has she many friends?" I asked. "I mean, Walt wants to know if she's lonely."

"Why not ask her?"

"I will," I said, and turned to go, then stopped. "By the way, I see by the paper that Ernest Barber was murdered last night."

The air in the office became suddenly stifling. Dixon straightened behind his desk, watched me narrowly. Gurley tugged at his nose and said: "Are you back to your delusions, Cole?"

I smiled. "You've got me wrong. Walt mentioned that he knew Ernest Barber. I wonder if Mrs. Wright also knew him."

Walt had told me nothing of the sort. It was a shot in the dark, and it landed nowhere. "Mr. Gurley has given you excellent advice, young man," Dixon told me frigidly. "For personal information concerning Mrs. Wright, ask her."

"Sure," I said amiably. "So long, gentlemen."

My next stop was the public library, where I spent a couple of hours going through Ernest Barber's gossip columns in the Coast City Press. His stuff was pretty hot—barely skirting libel. I could see how a number of people wouldn't be sorry to see him dead. But Helen Wright, as far as the columns went, was untouched by local scandal.

In recent months Barber had mentioned her three times: when the highly eligible Walt Wright had married her; when a Virginia cousin by the name of Bertha Scott has visited her at her Mound Rock country home; when, last week, Major Rumsey had escorted her to a country club dance.

I returned the papers to their files and walked slowly back to my hotel. I was a block away when somebody called my name.

Helen Wright sat behind the wheel of a modest coupe. As I walked over to her, she handed me a friendly smile.

"Please get in, Mr. Cole," she said. "I'd like to have a talk with you."

CHAPTER THREE

The Road to Death

FOR a while Helen Wright and I rode in silence. Her smile was gone. Her face was strained forward toward the windshield

and her hands were fierce on the wheel. She wasn't much at ease with me, which wasn't surprising. I decided to wait her out.

Presently she said: "I feel as if you're the only link I have with Walt. And I'm so desperate."

"I'd be too if I'd just murdered a guy and chopped his head off."

She kept her green eyes on the road. We had left the city and were racing along an open highway. "I didn't kill Ernest Barber," she muttered.

"Then your boyfriend did. But you were there and covered up for him, which makes you just as guilty."

"Yes," she said tonelessly. "I suppose it does."

She was telling me what I already knew and there were no witnesses, but the fact that she was confiding in me meant something. The wife of Walt Wright couldn't be all bad; even the law sometimes finds good reason for killing. I owed it to Walt to give her at least a chance.

"So there was a boyfriend," I said. "Was that why your letters to Walt got cold?"

"Probably." She crouched over the wheel. "I was lonely and foolish. Ernest Barber found out. Walt has the *Post* sent out to him; and he would read about us."

"That would just about tear his heart out."

"I knew that," she said. "And so when Barber wanted money not to print anything about me, I was ready to pay. You see, Barber used his column as a club to blackmail people. I had the money in my apartment last night, and Barber came up to collect. The man I had been seeing was also there. Scandal would hurt him as much as it would hurt me. He had a gun and he stepped over to Barber and shot him dead."

"Nice playmate you selected," I observed wryly.

"I hadn't known what he was like." Helen Wright took a hairpin turn on two wheels. "He told me that a blackmailer never stops making demands and that the only way to protect yourself from one is to shoot him. And just then you rang the doorbell."

"And you held off answering till your boyfriend dragged the body into the bedroom closet."

"Can you imagine how I felt?" she said. "Even if the police did not arrest me, there would be a frightful scandal that would reach Walt."

I set fire to a cigarette. "Who's the guy?"

"I can't tell you that. He really is a murderer, but I can't altogether blame him for what he did."

It was a mess. I tried to decide what Walt would have done if he had come home and found a murdered man in her bedroom. The

answer was easy: Walt would go to bat for his wife no matter what she had done. He was that kind of guy. And in a way I was pinch-hitting for Walt.

"Now what?" I said.

Helen was silent a moment before answering. "There doesn't seem to be much to be done, does there? I mean, nobody will ever know who killed Barber or why."

I looked at her. The somberness of her lovely profile was enough to twist any man's heart. It was easy to see why Walt had fallen head over heels for her and why those other men spoke of her as a wonderful woman. I was beginning to succumb myself.

"In other words," I said, "you want me to stop prying."

"I'm putting myself in your hands, Pete." She gave me a warm, friendly smile. "You don't mind if I call you Pete?"

That smile was a mistake, along with the sentence that followed it. They struck two discordant notes in a tune of repentance. The change of mood was too abrupt. *Hello, sucker*, I thought and blew smoke at the windshield.

"Not so good, Helen," I told her. "Why didn't you let well enough alone? There was very little chance that Barber's murder could be traced to you. Nobody believed you. Even Walt wouldn't take my word against yours. It was settled, finished, forgotten in a couple of days. Yet you waited for me at my hotel and opened it all up again by confessing."

"I had to confide in somebody," she protested.

I shook my head. "It's a good story. Maybe part of it is true, but not the part about why Barber was killed in such a hurry? Why in your apartment, leaving a corpse to get rid of? Why not later in the street or in his own home? Your boyfriend would have more sense, but maybe you didn't have. Maybe you shot him and then called up somebody you could trust to help you get rid of the corpse."

"You fool!" Her voice was suddenly harsh. "There's not a scrap of evidence against me."

"Yes, there is," I said. "I don't know what it is, but it must be a mighty big scrap that can be easily found if anybody looks for it. You know I'm looking for it. That's why you're working me for a promise to stop prying."

Helen took a long time to ponder. "All right, Pete," she decided. "I'll tell you everything. We're well on the way to Mound Rock. Suppose we go there for a drink and a chat."

"I've got nearly a month to spare," I told her.

SUDDENLY the car slowed down. We were on an empty stretch of road running through woods. There was nothing I could see to stop for.

"Anything wrong?" I asked.

"I think one of the front tires is soft." Helen brought the car to a full stop. "Would you mind taking a look?"

"Sure." I got out. The front right tire was fine. I started to cross the front of the car to see about the left tire.

With a roar, the car leaped at me. What saved me was that instant's interval before the clutch fully caught. A couple of years of dodging shells gave a man split-second reflexes. I threw myself in the direction I was going, and I felt myself caught in the hip and tossed across the road.

I was lifting my chin off the road when the car stopped fifty feet ahead. Helen Wright had the left door open and was looking back at me. Fury prodded me to my feet; pain jabbed my hip. I ignored it and ran toward the car on unsteady legs.

Her head and shoulders dipped back out of sight. The car was charging away before I had covered half the distance.

Sweet girl! No doubt that she stopped to see how much damage she had done to me. If I hadn't been thoroughly dead, she would have finished me off with a wrench. But I had had too much life in me. A wonderful woman!

I hobbled to the side of the road. My hip was bruised where the mudguard had smacked me, but the car hadn't been going fast enough to really hurt me.

One thing was clear: she had given me a chance to live. If I had agreed to keep my nose out of her affairs, we would have had a couple of drinks at Mound Rock and parted pals. But I hadn't agreed, and so she had had to use her alternative plan to stop me. Because the perfect murder hadn't been so perfect after all. Somewhere she was wide open to prying, and she was scared of me because I was the one who was doing it.

Well, sister, here I come, I said. Walt might be a sucker for your looks and maybe he would want me to keep out of it, but from here on it's strictly between you and me.

THREE separate lifts brought me the thirty-five miles to the little village of Mound Rock and the Wright RFD mailbox, from which a narrow, gravel, private road wound through a sprinkling of oaks and maples. Helen Wright might be expecting me, and the kind of reception she would plan made it safer not to be seen approaching. I left the road and went forward through the trees.

The shot wasn't loud, but it sent me flat on my face in that automatic, dirt-eating attempt to vanish from sight I had learned so well. Only now, I realized a moment later, I was unarmed with no way of preventing the sniper from walking up to me and putting a bullet

into the back of my head. I jumped up and crouched behind the inadequate trunk of a maple. I heard nothing, saw nothing.

How could I be sure it had been a shot? Come to think of it, it hadn't sounded like much of anything.

After a couple of minutes, I started forward again, darting from tree to tree. At the last tree I stopped. From there on, a lawn stretched for a hundred feet to a low white house. Beams from the sinking sun sparkled against the windows.

This was a pretty swanky summer estate—or had been. The lawn had been allowed to run to crab-grass. The house wasn't really white any longer; the siding was dirty gray from lack of paint, and the once-blue window trim was a sickly pink. Only a few hours ago Dixon had said that Helen Wright had spent a fortune remodeling this house. If a single cent had been put into the outside of the house or the grounds in the last five years, I was totally blind.

Keeping in among the trees, I moved on to get a look at both sides of the house. There was no movement anywhere, virtually no sign of occupation. But Helen Wright had come here after having tried to run me down. Her coupé was in the gravel parking circle at the side of the house.

Behind me a twig snapped. I tensed and eased myself against a tree. Straining my ears, I thought I heard a rustle of sound which could be made by stealthy feet, but I wasn't sure. More likely a small animal. I was starting to relax when I saw her.

The low branch of a tree hid her from the waist up. I saw bare feet and a pair of trousers made of some thin, sleazy material. That was what told me it was a woman; it didn't seem to be the sort of outfit any man would wear. Even so, those trousers were too thin for country wear. And she was out of sight so quickly that I couldn't really take in the figure.

I didn't hear her move on. Those bare feet deadened sound. So Helen Wright had taken off her shoes and stockings to stalk me! She had seen me coming and that first shot of hers had missed. She had retreated in fright, but now she was back, looking for me again.

Well, I was pretty good at stalking myself. The trees weren't so thick that I couldn't catch an occasional glimpse of her form flitting toward the gravel road. Where the road broke out of the woods and ran across the lawn, I caught up to her.

SHE WAS standing with her back to me, looking down with hunched rigidity at a square-jawed, gray-haired man who was lying face up. Edward Dixon's eyes were staring at a patch of sky, but they weren't seeing anything. They would never see again.

"Don't you ever get fed up with killing?" I said.

The girl uttered a choked gasp and spun toward me. I had never seen her before. That queer outfit of hers was nothing but a pair of sleeping pajamas, and if I'd had any sort of look at her before, I would have known she wasn't Helen Wright. Her figure had the sex and grace of a matchstick. Where I could see skin, I could see bones also. Her hands were like the claws of a starved bird. Sunken eyes dominated her skeleton face, and from their hollow caverns stared dully at me while moans dribbled from her fleshless lips.

She was young, and maybe at one time a man could look at her without shuddering. But not now.

"Dead!" the girl moaned. "He's dead!"

"That's right," I said and closed in on her.

She let out an unearthly shriek and spun away from me toward the road. She was too thin, too weak to really run. I caught her a little way across the lawn. I put both hands on her boney shoulders and turned her to me.

"Who are you?" I asked.

She looked up at me with dull, dilated pupils and shivered under my grip. I doubt if she heard me.

Over her head I saw a woman approach from the house. She was already halfway across the lawn, and she held a double-barrelled shotgun competently in her hands.

"Take your hands off her!" she ordered.

If that had been Helen Wright, I think I would have made a dive for the trees, because, frankly, I was plenty scared of that lovely wife of Walt Wright when she had a weapon which could harm me. Not that this female with the shotgun didn't look deadly in her own right. She was somewhere in her fifties, tall and broad-shouldered, with a face as grim and remorseless as a buzzsaw. So I released the girl.

"Go into the house!" the woman said.

Without glancing at either of us, the girl shuffled across the lawn on her bare feet with all the animation of a sleep-walker. She went as far as the porch and then sank down on a porch step and buried her face in her skinny arms.

"Poor Miss Scott," the woman said. "She is always trying to run away."

"Bertha Scott?" I asked.

"Mrs. Wright's cousin. Mrs. Wright brought her here from Virginia to spend her last few months in peace and quiet. She's dying."

"Are you her nurse?"

She moved the shotgun a little so that the twin muzzles rested casually on me. She was too far away for me to try to take the gun from her, and close enough to blast my head off if she were so inclined.

"I don't know if it's any of your business, young man," she said sternly, "but I'm Miss Ludd, Mrs. Wright's housekeeper. I've been taking care of poor Miss Scott. Sometimes she gets spells when she tries to run away."

I said dryly: "And you go after her with a shotgun."

Miss Ludd sniffed. "I heard her scream and I saw you from the house. We are alone here and I am a nervous woman."

I doubted if a regiment of demons could make that frozen-faced housekeeper nervous. I said: "Why is she kept drugged?"

"To alleviate the pain, naturally. She suffers frightfully." Miss Ludd frowned at me. "You're asking too many questions. What do you want here?"

"I came to call on Mrs. Wright."

"Mrs. Wright hasn't been here in days."

I was careful not to look in the direction of Helen Wright's car. But I did glance back at the trees. The body was not in my line of vision, which meant that Miss Ludd couldn't see it either. She might or might not know that it was there, but I was certainly not going to tell her—not while she had that gun in her hands.

"Well, I'll be going," I said, trying to sound casual, and I turned my back to her. The skin between my shoulderblades tightened against the possible impact of buckshot.

When I reached the gravel road, I looked back. Miss Ludd was prodding Bertha Scott up the porch steps with the shotgun.

CHAPTER FOUR

Light, Shadow—and Death!

THE bullet had entered the back of Edward Dixon's skull and killed him instantly. He hadn't been dead more than a few minutes, so it was the shot I had heard that had done the job.

I let the head drop back to the ground, and the open eyes again stared up at me through the deepening twilight. Distantly I heard a car, but it did not turn up the Wright's private road. My mouth was dry. Men died too casually, too quickly, without ever knowing what threatened them. Any of the shadows which surrounded me could be a man or a woman with a gun.

I had a gun of my own. I found it in the dead lawyer's pocket—a compact .32 automatic, fully loaded. Dixon had come here to defend himself if necessary, but he had never had a chance. The killer had slipped up behind him as he had been walking along the gravel road.

I smiled at the gun as a man might smile at a woman he loves. It put me on even terms with the killer.

In the house a woman screamed.

My blood ran cold and then hot as I listened. The screams were endless, rising and falling in strident waves of pain, and now and then words mingled with them. "I can't stand it! Please, no more!"

Not Miss Ludd and certainly not Helen Wright. Bertha Scott was being punished horribly for having tried to run away from her nurse.

Gun tight in my hand, I raced across the corner of the woods. As I reached the lawn, reason returned and I checked myself.

I had left Miss Ludd only a few minutes before. Wouldn't she wait to punish Bertha Scott until I was well out of earshot? It was a trap then to bring me to the house in reckless fury.

I kept to the woods, working my way down the side of the house toward the rear. The screams died; probably the emaciated girl had fainted from exhaustion. Suddenly lights started to appear in window after window, until the house was completely enclosed in a circle of radiance. It would be almost impossible to cross the circle of light without being seen.

I might have walked right into those two if I had not paused to watch the lights go on. Suddenly voices seemed to rise from the ground at my feet.

It was a good spot for an ambush. From this angle my line of vision included three sides of the house. They were smarter than I had thought. They were waiting outside, and whether I ran up to the house or crawled up, they would spot me. I'd be an easy target for a rifle.

THE VOICES came from the opposite side of a great oak, and they were low to the ground, whispering. Helen Wright was saying irritably: "Stop worrying. Those screams will bring him. I'm sure Cole is the kind who will plunge into the fires of hell to rescue a woman in distress."

"Then why hasn't he come already?" a man's voice whined.

"Perhaps he is being careful—trying to crawl up to the house."

"Suppose he gets away? How much does he know?"

There was a silence. Then she said: "I don't know. But we mustn't let him get away."

"You're clever," the man said bitterly. "Did you have to shoot Barber in your apartment?"

"I couldn't let Barber leave alive. He would have written it up and left it somewhere to hold over us as a guarantee of his safety. And how could I know that Cole would arrive at just that time? Even that would have been all right if he hadn't thought I was hiding a man in the bedroom and barged in."

"Everything's gone wrong since then," the man complained. "Cole made Dixon suspect, so I had to kill Dixon before he reached the house. God, when is this killing going to end?"

"It would have ended a while ago if you had got rid of Cole in the woods when you had a chance. Instead you ran away."

"I can't take murder in my stride like you. I shot Dixon and then heard somebody coming. I dragged the body into the woods and hid. I didn't know it was Cole till Miss Ludd told us later."

"She's another fool. She had a chance to shoot him with the shotgun."



The man said harshly: "We're not all natural killers like you. My God, why didn't we just pull out with what we had when Barber found out?"

"And let a thing as good as this go? Nonsense. There's still plenty left. All we have to do is take it. . . . Here comes Cole!"

I felt something jump inside of me, and my eyes swirled madly in the gloaming. If those two could see me, why couldn't I see them? They couldn't be behind me because their voices were in front of me and—

"He's quite a distance," the man's voice said. "Are you sure you can hit him?"

"Of course, but I'll wait till he comes a little closer."

This was utterly crazy. I couldn't see out to the lawn because a tree was in my way. I leaned around it.

"Are you sure it's Cole?" the man asked hoarsely.

"Isn't his uniform plain enough?"

Then I saw him too. He was on the gravel road, having just emerged from where it ran through the woods. The light wasn't good enough to distinguish much more than an Army uniform, but when he stepped into the circle of light around the house, he'd be an easy target.

It was up to me. I went quickly around the great oak, and there in the twilight were Helen Wright and Ronald Gurley behind a fallen log at the edge of the woods. She was lying prone, sighting a rifle.

"I'm the man you want," I said.

Their heads swivelled. The last rays of the dying sun showed their stunned surprise. Gurley muttered stupidly: "Then that isn't you over there?"

I laughed.

Helen Wright rose slowly to her feet. Her rifle was in the crook of her arm, her lovely oval face set and impassive.

I said: "Drop that rifle. And let's have your gun, Gurley."

Dixon's law partner wet his lips, reached into a pocket and dropped a small revolver to the ground. His over-sized nose twitched. It was plain that he wasn't the strength and will of the combination.

I centered my attention on Helen Wright. "Now *your* rifle."

Her lips drew back over even white teeth. "You wouldn't shoot Walt Wright's wife."

"I'd like an excuse to kill you," I said tonelessly. "Drop that rifle."

Her eyes flicked past my shoulder. She smiled. I heard a step and started to turn, then changed my mind because I didn't dare let my eyes leave the rifle. But whatever I had done, it wouldn't have made any difference. Miss Ludd was behind me with that double-barrelled shotgun of hers.

"DON'T shoot!" Helen Wright told Miss Ludd. She stepped over to me, plucked the automatic from my hand and tossed it carelessly away. "A shot will warn Major Rumsey."

The major was on the porch, no more than a hundred feet away, and clearly revealed in the light. He must have heard us, for he was peering in our direction.

"Major Rumsey too!" Gurley moaned. "He had a talk with Dixon after Cole left our office. Perhaps if we're quiet, he'll go away."

"Not if I can help it." Helen Wright was back behind the fallen log. "He knows too much."

"Oh, God!" Gurley said. "You can't keep on killing!"

She turned her head to look at the lawyer with cold contempt. "They can only hang us once, Ronald, and that would be for Barber's murder. And I don't intend that I should hang at all."

She raised the rifle to her shoulder and drew a bead on Major Rumsey. He had come down the porch steps and was scowling at us without quite seeing us. A novice couldn't miss him with a rifle.

That was the moment I'd been waiting for. Miss Ludd was making the mistake she had avoided twenty minutes ago. Because of the poor light she'd let herself come too close to me. I spun, bringing my wrist up under the barrels of the shotgun. Automatically her finger contracted on one trigger, but the muzzles were tilted upward by then and buckshot rattled among the leaves overhead.

Then I did what I had never in my life thought I would do. I hit a middle-aged woman in the jaw with my fist and knocked her out cold!

Helen Wright was twisting her body around to me. She had been prone and facing away from me at the moment of my attack on Miss Ludd and the rifle was too cumbersome for quick, close work. I left my feet and landed on top of her. Her face was turned to me, exposing her very lovely jaw, and for the second time within seconds I smacked a woman. She relaxed without a sound, falling to the ground with a soft thud.

I jumped up to look for Gurley. I needn't have worried about him. He seemed hardly able to stand on his feet. His shoulders and knees sagged; his face was buried in his hands.

That was when Major Rumsey reached us. "What in the world is going on here?" he panted. "Was that a shot I heard?"

"The situation is in hand, sir," I said.

Wracking sobs floated to us. The major and I turned together and saw that the thin girl had appeared on the porch.

Major Rumsey frowned at me. "I suppose that's Bertha Scott?"

"No, sir," I said. "She's the real Helen Wright!"

MAJOR RUMSEY mixed swell cocktails. He refilled my glass.

"After you left my office, Cole, I got to thinking," he said. "How much, after all, did any of us know about Helen Wright? Even Walt hardly knew her; it had been one of these war marriages, immediately after which he had been sent overseas. I visited Edward Dixon and found that he was also wondering about her. Even for a very extravagant wife, she was bleeding the estate at too great a rate. It was Dixon's suggestion that we might find out more about Helen by visiting her cousin Bertha Scott, who, Dixon had heard, was staying at Mound Rock to recover from an illness. We arranged to take a late afternoon train together."

"And Ronald Gurley overheard you, sir."

"Evidently. I missed the train and took a later one. Poor Dixon might still be alive if I had got there with him." The major looked into his drink. "Or we'd both be dead. One murder more or less didn't bother them."

"They didn't start out with murder in mind," I said. "That is, except for the eventual murder of the real Helen Wright, but that was to come much later. The cousins were enough alike to be mistaken for each other by anybody who knew neither of them well, and Walt had brought Helen to Coast City only a day before he went overseas. Bertha Scott had her plans ready. As soon as Walt left, she got Helen out to Mound Rock, where Miss Ludd kept her prisoner, and Bertha assumed Helen's identity."

"She fooled me completely," Major Rumsey admitted. "Of course I'd never seen the real Helen; I returned to the Coast City base after Walt had left. But Dixon and Gurley had met her once."

"Gurley was in on it," I said. "Bertha

needed somebody on the inside with Walt's legal representatives to help her bleed the estate. Gurley stopped the financial reports from reaching Walt; he advised her just where to take out money so the whole structure wouldn't topple suddenly. When there was nothing left for them to take, Bertha and Gurley planned to kill Helen. It would be assumed that Helen had run out on Walt after having spent all his money."

"What I don't quite understand is why they didn't kill Helen at once."

"They needed her to sign various papers, as well as the letters to Walt which Bertha typed. So they kept her doped up and a prisoner in the country home. Helen became so thin and wasted that she no longer looked like herself or her cousin, which was fine with them. But then Ernest Barber found out. Helen saw one of his columns in which he mentioned that Bertha Scott was visiting her cousin. Doped up, she still had enough reason left to slip a letter into the R. F. D. mailbox which told Barber the truth. It may seem queer that she didn't get in touch with the police instead; but remember, sir, she was drugged and he had mentioned her name in his column; her mind made a simple connection. All she accomplished was to put into Barber's hands a blackmail weapon. And all it brought Barber was death."

The major nodded. "That was the weak spot in their scheme. Helen alive was a constant menace, yet they needed her for her signature. They weren't so much worried about your prying into Barber's murder, as they were that you'd turn up the fact that Helen was Bertha and Bertha, Helen."

"That's just about it, sir," I said. "But it's come out all right. In a few weeks the real Helen, the girl Walt married, will be as good as ever and writing the kind of letters Walt wants."

I raised my glass. "To Helen and Walt!"

THE END



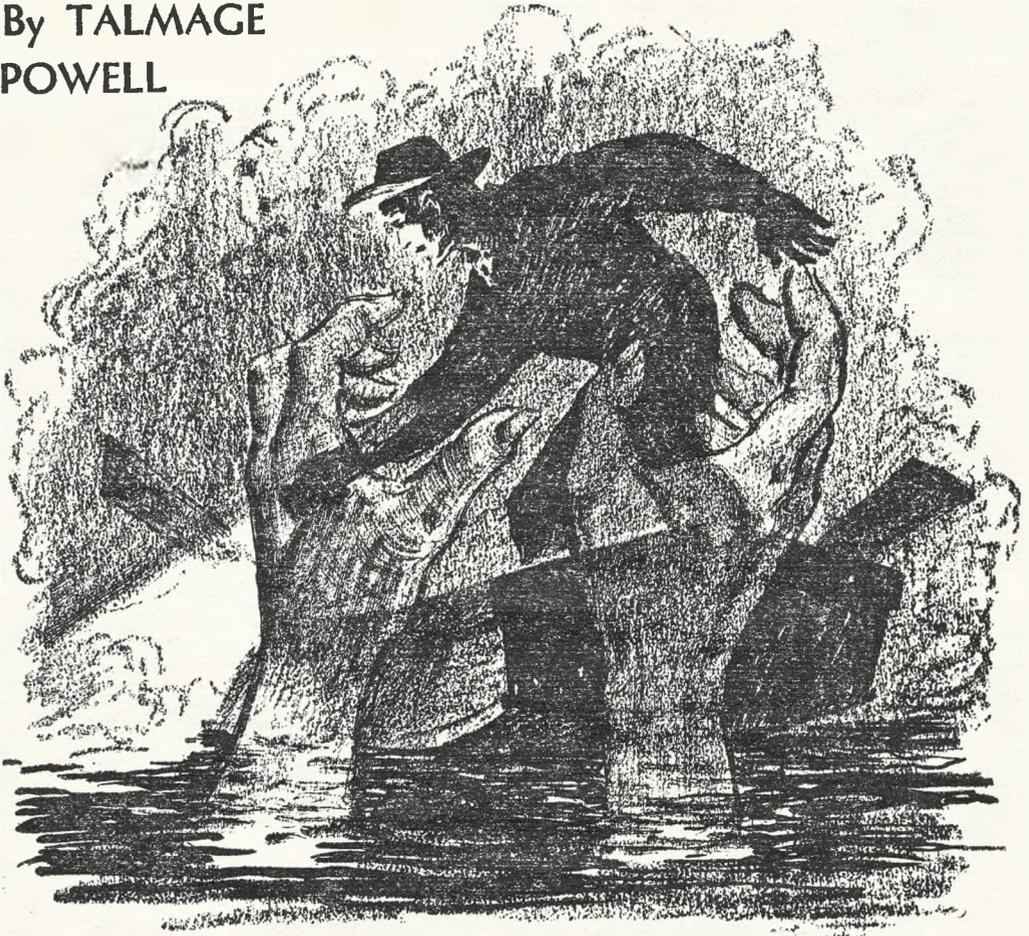
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By TALMAGE
POWELL



How far had the swirling currents carried her?

Joad Hyder liked the dank-shored motionless bayou with its black sand and the feel of slithering, creeping things. The bayou was his friend, he thought. He had yet to learn that it had a mysterious—and very deadly—will of its own. . . .

THE DARK, UNFRIENDLY TIDE

THE wind was from the south, off the bayou, and all Florida swamp people mistrusted the south wind, he remembered. The wind of storm, and death. The wind that brought a psychic sixth-sense of things dark and without name. But Joad Hyder was not superstitious, he told himself, smiling mockingly into the face of the wind.

Now, as his lumbering gait carried him nearer the bayou, he could hear the soft click-

ing of bamboo in the wind. Black sand squished wetly beneath his feet as he turned from the path into the coarse marsh grass. The bayou lay before him, and the wind was dank and chill, as if it came from the depths of the motionless water, bringing with it all the secrets of the bayou, the smell of slime, the feel of slithering, creeping things. The wind was the breath, pungent and moist, of the earth the waters of the bayou had claimed in

ages past, the breath of the snags and decay. But the bayou, he told himself, was his friend.

He heard the faint rustle of skittering lizards as he turned toward the long, low pier. Walking heavily, his squat body bent beneath the seventy-five pound weight of the smooth sandstone in his hairy hands, his hard, clumsy footsteps echoed over the water as he walked the pier's rotting length.

He was alone; he and the bayou and the south wind. Gray twilight was deepening thickly; his small, darting eyes, under his broad, lumpy forehead, searched the bayou. He smiled. Kneeling, he laid the heavy stone gently in the scaly, flat-bottom boat tied close to the end of the low pier. The boat tipped, rocked gently in the water.

He removed the coils of hemp from about his left shoulder and laid the rope in the boat beside the stone. He rose, breathing deeply, the dankness of the wind biting into his lungs, and wiping his face with a red bandanna, turned and walked back.

He paused a moment, feeling the lowering darkness; then turned left, toward her house, the trees weeping Spanish moss over him. He'd found her note in its accustomed place in the hollow tree earlier in the day. But today the note had been different. In his mind he reviewed the last few weeks. She had become more demanding, more dangerous. Now today, the note, threatening him. Maybe he'd known all the time that someday it would come to this—that it would reach the stage of the stone and rope in the boat, and that he would need the bayou for a friend.

Ten minutes walking brought him to her house. As he crossed the sandy yard, he could see the dying sun off in the distance, a drop of blood that had splashed into the waters of the Gulf, leaving a few crimson streamers threateningly in the western sky. He passed the nets Big Tom, her brother, had put out to dry, walking through a mantle of fish smell, and saw her waiting for him on the porch.

KEROSENE lamplight splashing from the open door behind her, she met him at the edge of the porch. She tried to slip her arm through his, but he shrugged her away. He knew women; they would smile while they got ready to cut your throat.

"Where is Big Tom, Ellie?"

She remained standing close to him. "I sent him off the island for the night. He's on the mainland. Didn't you get my note?"

"Yes, Ellie," he said, "I got your note." Laboriously, he rolled a cigarette with one hand. "I didn't like your note, Ellie."

He felt her breath on his cheek. "I'm sorry if I . . . sounded mad. I didn't mean for the note. . . ."

"You threatened me. Said if I knew what's good for me I'd be here tonight."

She pushed her dingy blonde hair back from her eyes, took his arm. "Let's go inside. We can't talk out here."

"All right," he said. But there was nothing amiable in his voice.

In the bare living room, he sat down in a creaking wicker chair and looked at her. She still excited him. She was young and slim; her tanned face was clear and her lips were soft and smiling. But he smoked silently, and she stood a moment awkwardly, a stranger to him. This wasn't like so many of the stolen moments they'd had in the past. She didn't slip her arms about his neck; he read the faint, growing fear in her eyes as they looked at each other.

He put out the cigarette in an ash tray she'd made of sea shells and glue. "I won't be coming back here any more," he said. "You mustn't leave any more notes for me."

Her mounting fear became hot, livid; different from the fear he'd seen in her blue eyes a moment ago.

She dropped beside him and looked up into his face. He met her gaze squarely, knowing she could read nothing in his eyes. She said, "But you've got to come back, Joad! I couldn't live without seeing you, knowing. . . ."

"Don't go woman-like on me," he said brutally. "You don't have to get wild or start yelling. It's just over, that's all. I'm not coming back."

She sat and took in his words, and her eyes changed again. Darkened—like the depths of the bayou.

He watched the vein swell on the side of her smooth neck. Her voice was like the desperate cry of a gull: "It's Clara! It's your wife, and the five-thousand dollars!"

He said nothing. He'd never seen as much as a thousand dollars in one lump in his whole life. He'd lain awake during long, foggy nights trying to visualize five thousand dollars. He'd never quite succeeded, but he knew it was a lot—a fortune.

Her voice broke in on the whispering of the water in the distance. "You rule Clara. You'll rule the five thousand dollars."

He had an impulse to tell her she was wrong. He wouldn't rule the five thousand dollars. He'd take it, when the insurance company paid off a policy on Clara's uncle, whom Joad had never seen, in a few more days now.

He sat with his thick hands hanging at his sides, and Ellie shivered, her arms creeping up about his thick waist. Now her voice was the inviting murmur of the hidden currents under the surface of the bayou. "Remember the way we planned, Joad? Pa and

Ma died and I was stuck on this island with Big Tom. Just my brother and me. Then we got to speaking to each other—you and me. And you said we were going off the island one of these days—together. Remember?"

He shook her hands loose, rose to his feet. "I don't want to talk about it. It's all over."

She rose slowly to face him; he saw her hands clench until the knuckles were white. He watched the color wash out of her face, back again. Her voice was the beating of hammers against his eardrums. "It's not all over! You hear!"

"YES," he said. His lips peeled back from his teeth as her nails laid hot pokers against his swarthy cheeks. He seized her wrists, cursing as she screamed and struggled. He felt the warmth of his blood coursing through his beard stubble, and it brought a red film over his vision, as if the blood were gushing over his brain instead of his cheeks. Her scream shattered against his ears, tightening his throat, causing his heart to thud.

She pulled back away from him. "It's not over! You think you're smart, Joad Hyder?" she panted. "Well, I reckon I'm a little bit smarter! You're taking me off the island, just like you said, before I rot here! I've waited for you—lived on hope. Now you take me off, or I'm going to Clara. I'll tell her about me and you, you hear? I'll tell her and Clara will leave. You boss her, but you know her well enough to know she'll leave, when I tell her. And then where will your five thousand dollars be?" She jerked away from him and stood trembling; he looked at her eyes and knew there was something stronger driving her than her fear.

"All right," he said. "We'll leave. Write your brother a note."

The quivering left her body, and after a moment, smiling in cautious invitation, she took a step toward him. "I knowed you would, Joad. I thought all the time you were just kidding. I . . . I'm sorry I yelled at you like that. It'll be fine when we get off the island and forget Clara and this place. You'll see."

He shook her hand from his arm. "Write that note to Big Tom."

He watched as she bent excitedly over a center table and scrawled on a piece of paper with a stubby pencil. "Read it to me," he said.

"Dear Big Tom," she read. "I have left the island, and am not coming back again ever. Don't try to hunt me up. Your sister, Ellie."

"Leave the note on the table for him."

She laid the note down, edging the smoky lamp over the corner of it. As she turned, he reached out his left arm. She lifted her face to his. At his side, the knife came free in his

right hand. He smiled at her, drew her close with his left arm. The knife sank under her left shoulder blade with the ease of a canoe cleaving lazy water. Her body stiffened abruptly into a taut arc, mouth open, lips working spasmodically, hands like talons on his biceps. He held her upright, closing his eyes to keep from watching her face. The waiting, hushed silence of the room was broken at last by her faint, "Oh." It was a hurt, bewildered cry, quickly muffled. She went limp, and he opened his eyes.

He laid her face down on the rough floor to keep from smearing blood. In the next room, he found her coat in a small, mussed closet. He came to her holding the coat. He withdrew the knife, wiped the blade on the lining of the coat; then spread the coat over her, covering the blood, and picked her up. She wasn't heavy, and the lightness of her over his shoulder the tap of her dangling fingers against the back of his knees as he walked, made her feel strange.

At the edge of the back yard, he heard a rustle of sound. He paused, quivering, seeing nothing. A lowing sound came from the heavy darkness. Then he relaxed. It was his cow in Big Tom's small patch of corn again. He and Big Tom had argued about the cow wandering from Joad's place, across the island, and getting in the corn. He considered taking the cow home. He wanted nothing to lead Big Tom to him, at least until the limp weight over his shoulder had been gone a day or two. But the cow, he decided, could wait until later. Slowly he turned his steps toward the bayou.

Grey tendrils of fog were beginning to clothe the water in chill gossamer. The bayou rustled hungrily, and the moisture-laden wind from the south bit into his bones.

He placed her still form on the end of the decaying pier. Working quickly now, he scooped the rope from the flat-bottomed boat, bound it tightly about her waist, knotting it securely.

The blackness about him was stygian, leaving them and the bayou in a sightless, rank world of their own. Fumbling with his feet, he planted himself securely in the boat; he leaned over the edge of the pier, found her with his hands and placed her in the boat.

The stone was next. He criss-crossed the rope, binding the stone securely with hands that had begun to shake.

He bent himself to the oar, perspiration and fog like clammy oil on his face, the water rippling quietly along the side of the boat. The slithering stringers of fog were long fingers reaching up at him as he moved through the water—fingers curling about his throat, his chest, rising and falling beneath the faded blue of his damp shirt. Sliding

away from him mockingly, giving him a moment of freedom—then back again.

Over and over he whispered to himself that the bayou was his friend, that the limp form in the bottom of the boat had brought violence on herself. But still the gray fingers of moisture clutched at him, and he was breathing raspily when he reached what he judged was the middle of the bayou.

Frantically, he clutched her, jerked her prone form until she was draped over the side of the boat. The boat shipped water in a thin trickle. His fumbling fingers explored the darkness for the stone, found it. Now, the end of the thing was here, causing all his remaining coolness to leave him. He hurled the stone; he didn't want to be with her another second.

He heard the whip of the rope playing out. In another moment now the weight of the stone would take her to the bottom of the water; the bayou would have another secret. . . .

THEN the blistering grip closed about his left ankle, searing his skin. Screaming, as his mind burst with the thought of a prowling bayou denizen clutching him, his arms flailed as the tug of the grip snapped him toward the water. The boat made a splashing sound, shipping water, and he smashed the surface of the bayou flat on his face.

The grip on his ankle tugged him down, down. He screamed again, and the waters of the bayou fought to swirl down inside him. He clamped his teeth shut, fighting with his arms to get back to the surface. The water was ink about him, a million slimy arms dragging him down to the very bottom of the bayou.

He felt a hand—her hand, and knew they were sinking together. He thrashed as he sank, fighting to get away from her, from the touch of her wet flesh. Her limp fingers trailed along his arm. Lungs bursting, seared with breath held too long, he shoved her away. The grip on his ankle was merciless.

The desperate need for air brought a grain of sanity to his bursting brain. He doubled, sinking in the water, touched his left ankle where the rope twisted just above the top of his heavy shoe. He tore at the rope, ripped his nails, cursing himself for a fifty fools. He'd hurried too much: it had been too dark. In planting his feet in the boat he had slipped his ankle under a coil of the rope. He'd been too eager to be rid of her to think ahead to such an accident. And now the stone was dragging him with her to the silt on the floor of the bayou. . . .

The roaring in his head warned him that it was only seconds now. Then he remembered the knife. He fumbled with it, almost dropped it; his pulses stopped. Then he was slashing at the rope, slicing his shoe, his flesh. The weight of the stone jerked free, and he swam to the surface.

Treading water, he sobbed breath into his lungs until they were on fire and he was giddy with oxygen. He'd never known how precious air was before.

Looking for the boat, he could see nothing but the faint grayness of the swirling fog. He swam a few strokes, clumsily, and his fingers touched the boat. It had righted itself, and waited for him like a faithful dog. He rolled himself over the side of the boat, and lay panting, his hair matted with water, his clothes soggy and chill.

Thinking now of her, he rose unsteadily. The boat rocked gently as he rummaged in the metal box among the tangled fishing tackle and found the flashlight.

Crouching in the boat, he began to play the light around. He'd hacked the rope in two, separating her from the weight of the stone, and he should see her floating grotesquely in a moment or so now. He told himself that in a whisper, playing the light into the fog on the water. Then he was saying it aloud, mumbling: "She'll rise in a minute. In a minute I'll see her. She'll rise. . . ." After a long time, the words degenerated to a whimpering babble of inco-

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herent sound. He forced himself to stop saying them, turned the light off and sat a moment in the boat getting a grip on himself.

The fog wrapped him like a shroud. He knew the fog was caressing her face out there somewhere. Fifteen feet away? How far had the swirling currents of the bayou carried her before she'd risen to the surface?

He gripped an oar like a matchstick in his right hand, the flashlight in his left. He turned the light on again and began rowing in a slowly-widening circle.

"I'll find her tonight, sure," he told himself. "Nobody'll find her tomorrow, for I'll find her tonight sure."

Overhead a star, cold and distant, winked on. The water gurgled about the boat. He listened to the bayou, and his stomach drew itself in, for he heard nothing. None of the usual pleasant chirpings, croakings. The whole bayou was gripped in a deathly hush as it watched him hunt her.

"The bayou is my friend," he said.

The fog kept his clothes from drying; he shivered with a chill, though always before wet clothes had left him unaffected. His oar cleaved the water more rapidly; the finger of light increased its slow, careful tempo over the face of the water, dancing and stabbing into the foggy night.

Beneath him the bayou was alive as it had never been alive before. The bayou had been his friend; but now he felt its growing malignance. There in the darkness and fog, elusively playing her grim game of hide and seek with him, he felt the bayou's swelling anger. He'd tried to make the bayou partner in evil, and now he wanted to smash at it with his oar and run away.

His boat nuzzled the rushes at the edge of the bayou, and he turned it, started back. Through set teeth, he cursed the bayou; he rowed and his light stabbed over the water. The bayou was placid, implacable, secure in its strength—meeting his challenge with silent mockery. Waiting for him. . . .

DAWN. The sky in the east was as gray and bleak as the leaden clouds gathering overhead. He stumbled along the path toward his house, his eyes aching holes burning in his skull, his head pounding like the beating of a heart in the middle of his brain. His arms dangled, and he still held the useless flashlight which had burned out half an hour ago.

The first needle points of rain whipped scathingly into his grimy face. Sometime during the night, he had torn his shirt open, and the rain splashed on his hair-matted chest, touched his swollen lips like sharp pins.

As he came out of the grove of gnarled cypress trees, his house stood like a mirage before him, a small, weather-eaten unpainted

pine structure. He stood swaying, hesitant; then he started toward the house, his mind framing words to say to his wife, Clara.

Halfway across the yard, his hound, Grouse, came snuffing to him, his tail whipped the sodden legs of his master's pants, and Joad walked on across the yard, the hound prancing awkwardly about him.

He opened the kitchen door, shutting Grouse outside. Clara turned from the smoky, wood-burning stove and looked at him; he watched her eyes, the expression on her thin, pinched face. He said, "I been frogging. Down at the bayou."

So slightly he hardly caught it, her colorless brows raised. He felt the throbbing in his throat as she lowered her gaze and turned back to the stove.

"I been frogging, I tell you!" he said.

She kept her face away from him. "I looked for you. I brought our cow home. It was in Big Tom's corn again. Big Tom said he'd shoot the cow, the last time it got in his corn, if it came back again. He's just crazy enough to do it."

He stood spread-legged, the dead flashlight still in his hand, forgotten. The warmth of the kitchen was drying his clothes, leaving them caked with black silt from the bayou. His red, aching eyes bored into her, but she stayed at the stove, busying herself, and didn't turn.

She knows, he told himself. She hunted me—and found the cow. Why was she hunting me at Big Tom's house—at Ellie's house? Why didn't she hunt me at the bayou? Maybe she did hunt me at the bayou, after she brought the cow home. He wondered if she had heard him cursing the bayou, calling to Ellie. Had he been screaming Ellie's name in those last long hours before dawn?

He didn't know; he could remember the night only indistinctly, as one long period of black sky, gray fog, and dark water that glistened under the finger of his probing flashlight. He'd been suspended in an eternity of crushing madness, fear and anger, and now the individual actions of the night ran together in the dark whirlpool of his mind, and he didn't remember if he had screamed Ellie's name.

He watched her at the stove, wondering if he had destroyed every one of the notes Ellie had written to him. Watching his wife bend over the stove, he felt a growing certainty that she'd found one of the notes. He looked at the knot of hair that quivered when she moved, the fine hairs at the base of her skull below it. With his strength, it would be like crushing an eggshell. One quick blow just below the knot of hair and Clara would never tell anyone what she knew. His thick fingers tightened about the flashlight.

She turned to him, and he dropped his eyes. "Breakfast is almost ready," she said dully.

He was glad she had spoken. The sound of her voice had shaken him, and now, trembling, he laid the flashlight on the table. For a moment, he had been filled with the madness that had lurked in the bayou all night waiting to strangle him.

He mustn't kill again. He would find Ellie's body this morning, and no matter how much Clara knew, it would never do anyone any good. Ellie had written a note to Big Tom, her brother. Ellie had gone away. Nothing could ever be proved—if only the sullen, angry bayou would be his friend again and give him back Ellie's body.

Hunger lay in his stomach like hard bricks, but two bites of Clara's corn fritters, a quick swallow of coffee, and he was filled; he pushed back his chair. "I'll be back after awhile. You'd best stay in close today. This rain will give you cold."

She ate without looking up at him. "I'll stay in close," she said.

He left the house. His brain buzzed with a need for sleep; his limbs ached dismally; he laughed harshly at the thought of sleeping. Grouse, his red hound, followed at his heels as Joad trudged back toward the bayou, down the rickety pier to his boat.

Grouse whined and sat on the end of the pier, his long-eared head cocked, as Joad dipped the oars into the dark water. Long swells—beginning to roll slowly over the bayou, lowering the boat.

"I'll find her this morning sure," he told himself. The rattling of palm fronds, the dismal sighing of swaying pines, the whispered whistle of the south wind through the coarse marsh grass, the clicking of rushes and bamboo, the morbid murmur of the rain on the face of the water—these sounds rolled across the bayou to answer him. Lowering his shaggy head on his bull neck against the rain, he told himself the bayou was lying. "I'll find her this morning sure," he said through clenched teeth.

TURNING the boat, he saw the swift flash of white. For a moment he sat stunned, not daring to think. Then he was digging the oars deeply in the rolling water.

He brought the boat to a stop, his breath

trembling and rattling in his throat. Rising slowly, sinking gently, rising again until she was only inches under the surface, this grotesque, water-bloated thing was Ellie.

He sobbed relieved laughter, spat disdainfully in the face of the bayou and leaned toward her.

The laughter strangled in his throat as he looked at her. He waited a long time, staring, before he could force his hand to reach toward her.

Then his throat knotted as he heard Grouse bark. He jerked his attention away from her, and faintly through the whispering of the wind and the dirge the water chanted, he heard a man whistling.

Big Tom! Her brother. Out there beyond the ragged palms, approaching the bayou.

His teeth chattered. Grouse barked again, and Big Tom yelled a throaty "Hallo!" Ellie's hand tapped the side of the boat.

The bayou had trapped him out here with her! He could never hide her before Big Tom came in sight. The water stretched naked about him, offering no place of concealment.

Quietly, he slipped over the side of the boat. The sound of whistling neared, shrilling in his ears as if it were inside his head. He clutched the side of the boat nearest him with his left hand, stretched his trembling right hand across the boat to grip the other side. With a heave that drained his strength, he pushed down with his left hand, tugged up with his right. The boat tipped, shipped water, settled back.

The whistling of Big Tom was clear and distinct, now. He shouted again, and Grouse ran from the pier to meet him.

Choking hoarsely, Joad smashed at the boat again, throwing all his weight against it, his feet thrashing in the water. With a sharp smack the bottom of the boat lifted clear of the surface tension of the water. The boat turned over, plopping on the water with a dull thud like the listless handclap of a giant. Lips peeled back from his teeth, he clutched her, thrust her down, pushed her up under the prison of the overturned boat.

Treading water, he turned his face toward the shoreline. Palm fronds parted, and Big Tom stood off there before him.

"What do you want?" Joad shouted.

Big Tom didn't answer directly. He asked:

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"What happened to you?"

"What does it look like?" Joad demanded hoarsely. "My boat turned over."

He thought he saw Big Tom shrugged. "Must have been a bad swell," Big Tom said. "A flat-bottom's hard to tip over."

Joad swallowed tightly, threw his arms over the boat, too weak to continue to tread water. "A boat's a tricky thing," he said. "Sometimes hard to tip, sometimes ain't." It sounded lame. He swallowed again.

"I'll swim out and give you a hand," Big Tom said.

His nails dug in the boat. "No! No!" he shouted. "I'm all right. Just leave me be. Just get the hell away from here."

"What's eating you, Joad?"

"Nothing, I . . ." He cringed, his jaw muscles ridging until they cramped. Big Tom knew. Big Tom was playing him like a helpless snapper on a line. Why hadn't Big Tom mentioned Ellie? Why was he standing there with his hands so knowingly cocked on his hips. . . .

Joad said, "How come you're down here?"

"Just got back from the mainland," Big Tom said. "Went on a spree last night." He'd have done that, Joad knew. Ellie never had had any trouble getting Big Tom off the island for the night. On the mainland there was liquor. "Just come down here from the house," Big Tom said. The bayou waited. Big Tom said, "Ellie's gone."

A swell passed over the water, bobbing the boat. In her prison, her knuckles knocked gently on the side of the boat. "Ellie's gone," Big Tom said again. "She left me a note saying so."

"Then why're you down here?" Joad demanded.

"Just thought you might have seen her," Big Tom said. "With so few folks living on the island, just thought she might have said something to you or Clara."

"Well, she didn't," Joad said. "You go on. I'm busy."

Big Tom stood a moment, rebuffed. Then he laughed, turned and disappeared in the rank greenness that surrounded the bayou. His laugh floated on the water. Joad closed his eyes, laid his head against the boat, and whimpered.

Somewhere above the low-lying clouds, the sun continued its march across the sky. Joad waited, watching the shoreline. "Big Tom would hide and watch me," he whispered to the bayou. The rain pattered down.

He clung to the side of the boat as long minutes crawled past. His immersed pores had drunk in dark water, making him feel bloated. His swollen tongue clumsily formed words: "Big Tom is gone now. He wouldn't have waited this long, just watching me. He'd

have asked me why I don't right the boat."

His hand crept away from the boat, into the water, up under the boat, reaching for her—found nothing.

He went rigid for a moment. His hand began a slow search under the boat, closed about water. Tight bands squeezing his heart, he gulped in air, sank beneath the surface of the water. Making one frog-like stroke underwater, he reached up, and his hands felt the sides of the boat. He pulled himself up until his head bumped the bottom of the boat. Nothing. Frantically, he splashed from end to end of the boat, smashing his knuckles against its sides. Ellie was gone!

HE DUCKED under the side of the boat, broke the surface. His gaze darted over the face of the water and the face of it told him nothing. Ellie, water-logged, had sunk gently while he'd talked to Big Tom. Where had those swirling currents carried her?

He cursed blisteringly and smashed at the bayou with his hands. It had toyed with him, tricked him, given her to him only to take her away again, baiting him. He swam to the shoreline, lay prone and weak in the marsh grass, panting. The hate of the bayou shrouded him as he lay shivering.

Whimpering, his dog, Grouse, nuzzled him. He smashed at the dog's muzzle with his hand. The hound yelped, backed away, trotted off toward the pier.

He lay with his thoughts, lost track of time. All the hours of the night clustered together, bearing down on him. He had forgotten the dawn, feeling as if he had been here on the bayou hunting her always. The bayou whispered grimly that he would never find her, that he would search, sodden and sick, until the last second of his life ticked away. He sat up and said, "No! The bayou is my friend. . . !"

The growling bark of Grouse made him sit up. The dog was standing hunched on the end of the pier, looking at the water. *At the water!*

Splashing, tearing his way through the grass, he staggered drunkenly down the length of the pier. She was there, where the current had carried her, sinking slowly at the end of the pier.

He flung himself down, straining over the end of the pier, and, catching his fingers in the rope he'd bound about her waist, pulled her to the surface of the water, tugged her up on the pier. Grouse growled deep in his throat.

Joad kept his eyes from looking at her. He wanted to laugh. He ran back down the pier, searching the earth for a stone, a weight of any kind, working his way slowly from the bayou. The earth was wet, black sand. He paused breathing hard; then he ran toward the lean, swaying pines. At the base of one

of the pines, he found a stone—oblong, flat, heavy.

Turning back toward the bayou, the stone in his arms, he saw the dog out on the pier. Grouse bayed, nuzzled the still, wet body. Ellie rolled, tipped, then splashed into the water. The hoarse shout strangled in Joad's throat, he saw only the dog as he weaved drunkenly toward the pier, the stone still in his arms.

Grouse looked up at his master, his long tail whipping. Joad flung the stone. It struck the dog's lean shank, and the wagging tail went between quivering legs.

Joad leaned over the edge of the pier, his eyes searching, seeing only black water, hearing only the sullen voice of the bayou, returning his curses. He whirled, started toward the dog, and the hound fled, yelping.

Then Joad stopped, halfway down the pier, as he heard the thin echoing ghost of a scream over beyond the pines. There was only one woman who could scream like that—Clara. On the wings of the scream came the popping sound of a shot, the bark of a carbine. The only person on the island who owned a carbine was Big Tom. Had Big Tom found out? Was he coming after him?

Joad stood on the pier, shaking. They were coming after him. Clara knew. Big Tom knew. They would come, Big Tom with a gun. They knew and soon they'd get him. After that, the sheriff and half a hundred men from shore would search the bayou. There was no safety for him anywhere. The whispering

of the bayou called him. He walked unsteadily back down the pier. The wind, the low clouds were unreal. He fumbled for the stone which he'd flung at the dog. His eyes played him tricks, the lush green growth about the bayou vanished. There was only black water. He clutched the stone to him, and the water closed over his head as he fell. The dark silt at the bottom of the bayou felt down-like. He sat down, laid the heavy stone in his lap and opened his mouth wide to tell the bayou that it was his friend. . . .

Seconds later, his wife, Clara, ran breathlessly to the end of the pier. Big Tom was close behind her, holding his hand out pleadingly.

"I'll make it right to Joad," Big Tom begged. "I was on a spree last night and didn't feel so good, and Joad insulted me when I came down here this morning, so when I got home and found my corn tore to smithereens by that cow again . . . well, I told him I'd shoot the cow if it ever did it again. Now don't you get so crazy excited, Clara. I'm sorry now I did it, and I'll make it right. If I'd known. . . ."

His words died sharply as Clara screamed. He followed Clara's pointing finger with his gaze.

It took throbbing seconds for him to realize that it was Ellie rising gently to the surface of the water—Ellie, who looked almost wisely at the last thin stream of air-bubbles that rose in the black water near her, above where Joad lay on the soft, dark, bayou silt.



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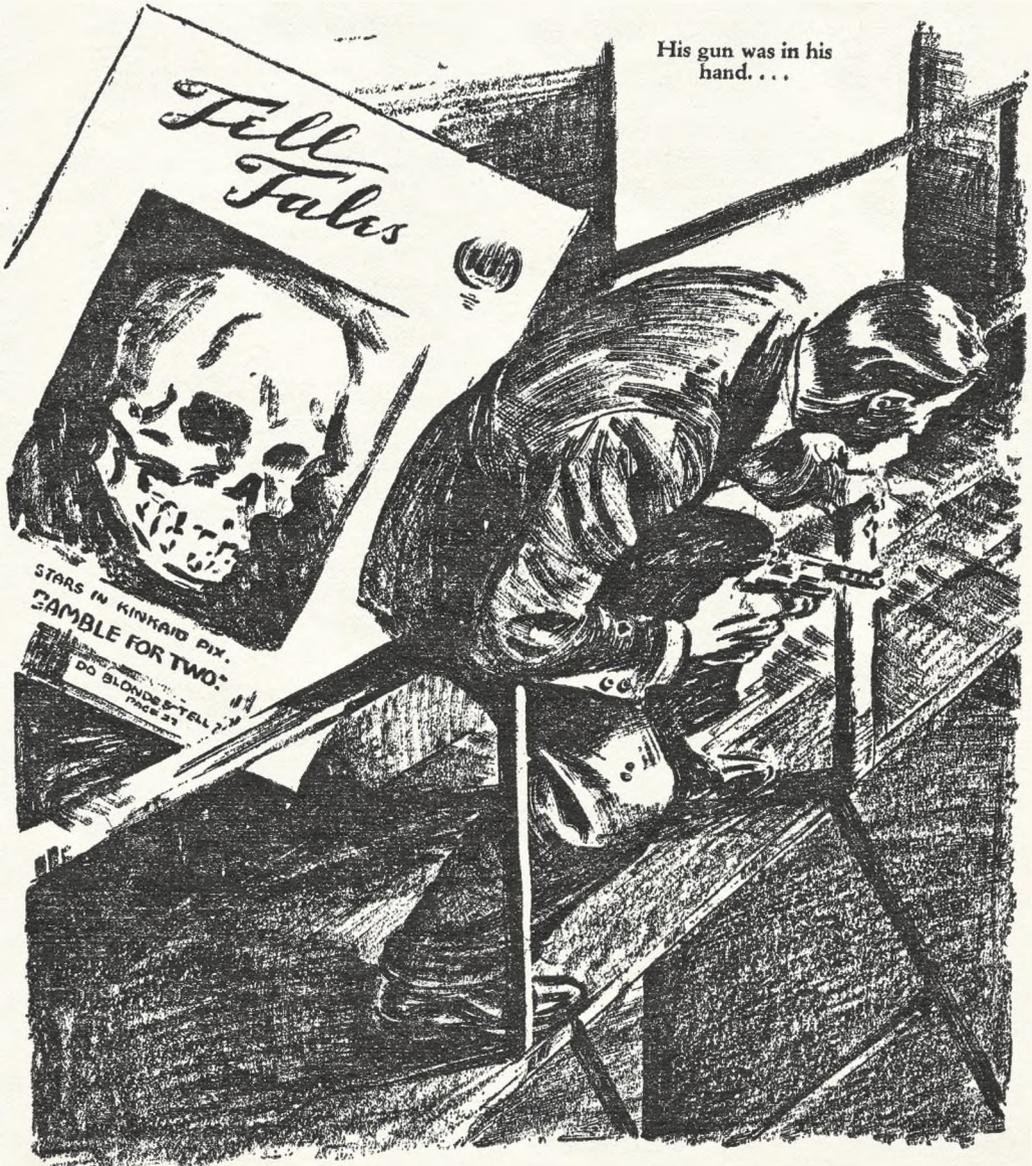
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"THEY'LL KILL ME!"

A Fast-Paced Tom Kincaid Novelette



By

WILLIAM R. COX

CHAPTER ONE

Ring Around a Murder

THE very rich and elegant Ronald Vesper was giving a party. Tom Kincaid moved cautiously among the amazing number of guests, marvelling at the effrontery of Vesper; his secretary, burly Jack Carey; the hatchet-faced woman who was Leila Lynch; Sam Valenti, the picture star; and Maxie Keystone, late of Greenpoint.

Motion-picture players, directors, producers, agents, hangers-on mingled in a sort of desperate gaiety, drinking heavily of Vesper's wines and liquors, swimming in the two pools or playing tennis on the fine courts or walking over the fabulous grounds of the immense Beverly Hills estate. Roxanne Queen, blonde, grinning, shapely as an *houri*, met Tom at the edge of the larger swimming pool and said, "How crummy can you get? Did you ever see such people? This, lover, is Hollywood. Nobody cares for Ronnie Vesper, but they'll all lap up his liquor and trample his grass."

Matt Durkin, lurking at Tom's elbow, growled, "Keystone wants to gamble. Vesper wants to muscle in on us. Leila Lynch wants us dead as hell. Sam Valenti makes muscles at us." He lowered his voice, "Jack Carey is spyin' but good."

Carey, Vesper's secretary-companion, ex-athlete gone to seed appeared as if by magic before the trio, smiling flatly. "Ronnie would like to see you indoors. It's important, kids. Please go in."

Tom Kincaid, rubbed his greying thatch. He was a large, rumped man, thoroughly out of place among the visiting local firemen. "I came here to meet Charlie Ring. You know damned well I don't want any part of your boss."

"You're here," said Carey. "Ronnie wants you."

Tom said, "Where is Charlie Ring? He came in here, drunk or drugged."

Carey said, "You heard me, Kincaid." He turned, cat-walked past some shrubbery and was gone.

Roxanne said, "If Charlie wasn't the best director in Hollywood and we didn't need him damned bad, drunk or sober, I'd say let's scam this joint."

The party was gaining headway and a starlet screamed into a comedian's ear as the two of them embraced and fell fully clothed into the water. Stolid-faced waiters bore trays of cold glasses which were replenished as if by magic. Tom said, "Right out of Roman history. . . . The world is burning, remember? But look at all the fiddlers!"

Matt shrugged. "We got a story. We got a lot to shoot it on. We got almost enough dough to start Coronet Pictures off with a bang. Why must we have this Ring? Leave us get Hitchcock. He does things with suspense. Better he should *give* with suspense than we should *live* in it!"

Tom said reprovingly, "You are getting more Hollywood every day, young man! What the hell do you know about suspense in pictures?"

"I am a picture fan," said Mat injuredly. "I read the magazines. Hitch has got suspense."

"And I have got the itch," said Roxanne, "to go to work. Let's see what Ronnie wants. The evil old sissy may have a dirty hand on Charlie."

They threaded their way through the crowd, past a silent, broad-shouldered guard who looked faintly familiar to Tom, into the enormous, rococo house which Ronnie Vesper had built practically with his own imagination.

Nobody would ever accuse Ronnie of doing anything with his hands. They were white, boneless and fat. He had a pink, vacuous face, with opaque china-blue eyes and blond wispy brows. He was partially bald and fully perfumed. Wearing silken slacks of pale yellow and a chartreuse sports shirt cut off at the elbows, he stood in the middle of a room which could have been done by Dali and contained not a chair a decent person would sit upon. "Thank you for coming in," he lisped. "It's so good of you. You are in a bit of trouble, I'm afraid." He made a helpless gesture with his flabby hands.

Jack Carey bit his lips, scowling. Maxie Keystone wandered in, a sparrow of a man with a sharp nose like a fox terrier's. Maxie said, "Hiya, Tom? Hiya Matt?" He went closer and attempted to take Roxanne's hand. "Baby, you're the Queen of pitchers!"

Roxanne said without rancour, "Beat it, you

second-hand Brooklyn Romeo. Go murder your grandfather."

Maxie said admiringly, "Always quick with the gags, huh, baby?"

Leila Lynch entered from another room with the predatory sinuosity of the cat she resembled. Thin-faced, dark, with a lean body of flowing steel, she was the widow of a man recently electrocuted, Morgan Lynch, the murderer. She looked at Tom Kincaid with glowing hatred and remained silent.

Sam Valenti moved behind her, handsome, swarthy, bulking large with muscle. The clan had gathered together now in Ronnie Vesper's den and Tom Kincaid felt the hair on the nape of his neck rise straight on end.

Tom said, "I'm looking for Charlie Ring."

FOR the moment, Ronnie Vesper seemed in charge of the group of dangerous people. He said in his falsetto-basso lisp, "That is the point, my dear Kincaid. You need Ring. But Ring does not need you." He unfolded a sheet of paper. "Here is Charlie's power of attorney. I am now his manager. He does not choose to work for Coronet Pictures."

Roxanne drawled, "How interesting! You phoney—Charlie promised me he would direct for me. His word is better than the bond of eight characters like you!"

"Where is he?" said Tom Kincaid. "I want to see Charlie."

"He has gone away," said Ronnie suavely. Maxie Keystone, raffish and bold, chuckled audibly. "Yeah. He has swallowed a powder. He has lammed, chums!"

Tom said, "I'm searching this place, Vesper."

Valenti growled and stepped forward. "Like hell you are. I'm aching to take a crack at you, Kincaid."

The familiar-looking guard was lingering at a French window. His name, Tom remembered, was Facey Glower, and he was a super-thug and gunman. Trust Vesper to hire the best, Tom thought grimly. Leila Lynch sat quietly, radiating hate waves.

Maxie grinned cheerfully and said, "How about a li'l crap game, Tom? I'd like to get some of your moola. Ferget Ring. The joik is always inna bag anyhow. Get another dope to direct your pitcha."

Tom said, "Like that, eh? We hire them, you lose them. A great stunt, Vesper, if you can do it."

"My offer for Coronet Pictures and Miss Queen's services stands at half a million dollars," purred Vesper. "Including your first story, of course."

"You can still go to hell," said Tom.

"All of you—in a hack," added Roxanne sweetly. "Especially, you my dear Leila, in fact, you are my first choice."

Leila Lynch said in a voice dry as martinis, "I take it that you are marking me as your particular victim. That is satisfactory to me. You and your henchmen need . . . educating."

Matt Durkin said, "So you all talk." The dapper little ex-gambler had remained very quiet until now. He was smaller than Maxie and his sharp features were almost delicate, but for cold ferocity, he matched any of the enemy gang, Tom thought admiringly. Matt said, "We're searching this overgrown charnel house. We're doin' it careful and slow. I like Charlie Ring, even if Hitchcock has got suspense—anybody want to stop me?"

He had his hand in the front of his jacket. Vesper looked significantly at the hulking Facey Glower. The gangster came in through the window. Matt's hand pounced, came out bearing a small-calibered revolver. He purred, "I'd as soon give it to you now as later, Facey—or any of the rest of you."

Nobody moved. Facey Glower turned to stone, his hand on his hip. Vesper's opaque eyes glittered like shallow gems. Leila Lynch said icily into the silence, "If you let them get away with it, you all ought to pay the price."

None of them had the courage to interfere. Matt said, "Come on. It's open house at Vesper's."

Tom started for the hall where stairs led to the upper two floors of the immense mansion. Roxanne moved beside him, watchful, her purse in her hand. Roxanne was carrying a tiny automatic these days. Tom circled to let Matt cover the room. Outdoors the din grew louder as the party gathered momentum.

Tom went first up the stairs. Matt and Roxanne kept the hall door in view. On the upper landing Tom paused, examining a line of doors on either side of an artificially-lighted hall. It would be necessary to go into each room and search carefully, and this would take much time. Charlie Ring had been drunk when he arrived, and might even now be gagged and bound, or drugged and sleeping. But he called loudly, "Charlie! It's Tom Kincaid and Roxanne!"

Down the hall a door opened. Charlie Ring himself, dishevelled, red-faced, stumbled into sight. He was a roly-poly little man with a misleading assortment of pudgy features. He was smart as a whip when sober, keen as a male witch about picture angles, and as honest a character as Hollywood afforded. He said thickly, "They shanghai'd me, Tom. What made 'em think they could do me that way?"

Tom said, "Come on, pal. You're going out with us."

He glanced back down the stairs. Roxanne was looking gladly up at him. She had heard Charlie's voice. Matt was watching the door from the bottom step so that none of the

enemy could come through and make an attack. Charlie put one hand against the wall to steady himself and said, "They're a rum crowd. Had me sign somethin'—slipped me a needle, I think. Maybe jus' another drink, huh, Tom? I been drinkin' and dreamin' about our new set-up—trash' way I direct pitchers." He smiled affably, a moon-faced little man in a soiled linen suit. "Can't talk straight, huh, Tom? Ronnie's very smart, huh? Gonna ruin Coronet Pitchers." He hiccupped gravely.

Tom said, "Come on, hurry. Matt's holding them at gun-point. With all this crowd and the noise going on they might try anything. . . ."

"Sure," said Charlie. "Sure. Got t' hurry so's t' prevent Ronnie doin' what he thinks he is gonna do. Which is . . ." Charlie paused for breath and emphasis, wagged a finger. "Which ish to. . . ."

A door opened softly. There was a small crackling sound. The door closed as Tom leaped forward and plunged recklessly down the hall. Charlie fell forward on his face and clutched frantically at the carpet. He kicked twice as Tom went by, and mumbled, "The works—gimme the works. He's gonna sabotage. . . ."

Then Tom was wrenching at a locked door. Drawing his own .32 he fired a shot. The door swung ajar and he ripped into the room, his revolver levelled.

It was a blue and pink boudoir, containing a canopied, silk and satin bed, eight feet square. There were mirrors all over the walls and one imbedded in the ceiling, so that several baffled Tom Kincaids stared back at him.

In ten seconds he knew there was no one in the room. There was no way out of the room, except jumping from the three windows. He leaned out and looked down onto the party below. There was a flower bed, but no footprints where someone might have landed unhurt. He craned his neck and looked upward, but there was a sheer wall to the next row of windows.

He came back and rushed into the hall. Roxanne got up from a kneeling position beside Charlie Ring. She said in her full-throated voice, "He was the best damned little guy in the business. He's gone, Tom. But I'm going to have his murderer, if I don't live five minutes afterwards! I mean it, Tom!"

CHAPTER TWO

Death Tells No Tales

CAPTAIN Jeff Clarke of the L.A. detective force said, "Tom, I know it wasn't you. That'll satisfy Headquarters. And I'll fix it so I handle the case and you can operate more or less freely. But try not to kill anybody

until you got the thing solved. All these picture people—dozens of 'em—had it in for Ring."

"Because he was honest enough to tell the truth," said Roxanne. Her blonde beauty was enhanced by her rage, Tom thought. "Because he was regular and they are heels."

Clarke shifted uncomfortably. He said, "There's a story he was the feeder for 'Tell Tales'."

Roxanne said, "A damnable lie! That rag stinks. Charlie was honest and don't you forget it."

"'Tell Tales' never rapped him," said Clarke. "There have been a few yarns in the sheet that only Ring could have provided . . . I'm seein' Otis Carriker myself. I'll let you know what I get, Tom. There's nothin' I can do about Vesper and his mob. They're in the clear on your own say-so. They want Durkin pinched for pullin' a gun on 'em, and all I can do is quash that. The circumstances ain't exactly good for you, understand?"

Tom said, "You know they're a gang of highbinders."

"Mebbeso," said Clarke. "But politics ain't pretty."

Tom said, "I know; I'm grateful, Jeff. We'll work on the thing from our end. They're trying to keep us from making a Coronet Picture. They've killed our director. God knows what they'll try next. But you can't do a thing and neither can I, until something drastic happens. That's the worst of being on the level—something I found out when I was a professional gambler."

Clarke said, "What are you now, Tom, an amateur?" He chuckled and got into the prowl car, driving out of Roxanne's back yard, down the winding road from Hollywood Hills toward town. Tom went back to the verandah and sat beside Roxanne. He said, "Jeff's on the level."

"Charlie never played with Otis Carriker," said Roxanne hotly. "Otie is a thief and a blackmailer."

Tom said, "I know, Otie was at the Vesper party, too."

Roxanne said, "Anyone could have been in that room, heard what Charlie was saying, killed him and made a pre-arranged getaway—excepting that there seemed no way to get out."

"Of course there is a way," Tom said patiently. "People don't disappear; spirits don't fire guns. Poor Charlie was killed by a .22 such as Matt carries, from close range. I saw it happen."

Roxanne said, "Then we have got to return to Ronnie's and find how the murderer escaped."

"Exactly," nodded Tom. "Only Ronnie is going to be prepared to prevent us from doing

exactly that. He has bulled the police and the studios have done everything to play down Charlie's murder because of the unfavorable publicity attached to their many hired hands who were present and stinkin' drunk. We have to get a new director and start shooting, or we lose our dough and Coronet folds up. Ronnie has the ball right now, sweet, on our ten yard line!"

Roxanne said vigorously, "Jack Boodle, Charlie's assistant, can do the technical job on the picture. He can do everything but make actors actually work for him. So we go ahead—tomorrow!"

"Who directs?" asked Tom.

"You!" she said. "Matt helps Jack. The story is practically yours; the gambling sequences are all yours. Besides, you will have a fresh angle."

Tom said, "Are you crazy, darling? We have half a million tied into this thing."

"You'll do it," she said. "I love you, Tom, but I'm smart, too. I've been thinking about it, and I'm right. You're going to direct 'Gamble for Two.' If I didn't have confidence in you, I wouldn't show my face on the set would I? You know me!"

It was the most insane thing Tom had ever imagined. He said perplexedly, "They'll be after us every step of the way."

Roxanne said, "Poor Charlie died warning you that they would sabotage us. Where better can you know what goes on than in the director's chair?"

Tom muttered, "It's ridiculous. But I'll try it!"

Roxanne said, "Then start making tracks with Jack for our futures, if any."

She led him to the little office where Jack Boodle was making up the shooting schedule. The lean, humorous Boodle was poring over his layout, eyeglasses drooping on his long nose. He looked up and said quietly, "We're about ready to go. Homer Deal is through with Paramount. Alice and Drake are available."

Roxanne said, "You heard about Charlie. Tom is going to have a crack at directing. It means more responsibility and more money for you."

Tom cut in, "And it means danger. We have reason to believe 'Gamble for Two' is being sabotaged by a ring of murderers."

"I always liked Charlie," said Boodle reflectively. "He had deep brown eyes behind the glasses and a stubborn, lean chin. 'I'd like them to come at me, and me prepared.'"

Tom said, "You'll do. Tell me what and how we start."

ROXANNE, at the door, said, "Excuse me while I get beautiful. There are some stills to be made in costume."

Boodle looked after her and said, "I'd die and go to hell for Rox any day. We'll pull it out, Tom."

"Tell me how," said Tom. "I know all about gambling. I ran a chain of shops across the country with Matt Durkin. Matt'll be in to give you a hand as best he can."

"Matt's plenty quick and smart," said Booodle. "We'll start shooting the sequence in the gambling establishment, in the middle of the story. That'll put you on familiar ground."

When Tom thought about the time it was mid-afternoon and he was hungry and thirsty. Booodle had graphically explained the details of his job and coached Tom on his own role. The hours had flown.

The phone rang. Booodle handed it to Tom. Jeff Clarke's heavy voice said, "We haven't got a thing on the Ring case—not even a fingerprint. Nothin' but the bullet that was in his heart. But it was a sharpshooter killed him. We picked up Facey Glowder, but Vesper sprung him pronto. Anyway, Facey was downstairs and Matt was holdin' onto him for dear life."

"They all were," said Tom. "There must be another way to that room."

"Try and find it," said Clarke disgustedly. "Vesper's got six lawyers yammerin' at us. Sure, we cased the room and the house, but

you know how many people were runnin' around hollerin'. And we can't get back in because no judge'll issue a writ. Vesper's got the dough, Tom. Even murder cases can be slowed down."

Tom said, "I'll get into the place. Never mind how. We'll protect ourselves out here, too. Don't put cops on us. I want the killer to think we're out in the open."

Clarke said, "You're liable to get bumped, Tom. Miss Queen should be guarded."

"We'll guard her," said Tom grimly. "Keep working your angles and leave us alone."

"Okay," said Clarke. He added, "Of course Vesper claims you shot Charlie Ring because he ran out on an agreement with Coronet Pictures and signed with Vesper Incorporated."

Tom said, "With what?"

"A new outfit," chuckled Clarke. "Makin' pictures on the old Chapin lot. Started arrangements today. Thought you'd like t' know."

Tom said slowly, "What kind of arrangements?"

"Vesper wanted you to know, all right," said Clarke. "Told me all about it. A gamblin' picture. Maxie Keystone is his ace. . . . They call it 'Gambling for Two'."

Tom said, "How nice! Not even close to 'Gamble for Two,' of course."

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Clarke said, "Keep your powder dry," and hung up. The detective was not particularly interested in motion picture making. To him, Tom knew, it was just another headache. But he *had* taken the trouble to inform Tom that his story was being sabotaged.

Tom remembered Charlie Ring's dying warning. He called a number and asked the medical examiner a question. A dry voice answered, "Kincaid? Yes, there was a drug in Ring's corpse. It could be scopolamine. Yes, that might make him tell all he knew while under the influence. . . ."

Tom hung up. He said, "We've either got to beat them onto the market or they'll produce our story. They'll work quick with cheap help. I guess '*Gamble for Two*' is too much of a gamble for anyone, now."

Out on barn-like Stage 1, where Roxanne was having stills made, it was cool and dim, except where the strong white light shone upon the patient Roxanne. She was wearing a white evening dress which displayed her curves to extreme advantage. Jack Booodle whistled. "She's gettin' lovelier every day!"

Tom wrenched his eyes from the girl he loved, taking in the scene in its entirety. The other actors had come in and had draped themselves about the place, chatting idle nonsense or posing with their best profiles. There was a ladder leading up to the intricate cat-walks above where the technicians dwelt.

Tom mounted the ladder. It was fine to kneel on the walk and look down. He could see the whole studio stage now, and everyone connected with the goings-on below. Jack Booodle went forward and re-arranged Roxanne's dress, a photographer nodded. An electrician threw a switch and all but the spotlights went out. Drake, the leading man, a strong-faced chap with wide shoulders, clad in white tie and tails, went close to Roxanne.

There was movement—a draft struck Tom's neck. He turned, crouching on the cat-walk like a big, burly animal. A man stepped inside the portal and stood in the shadow, carefully examining everyone present, Tom was aware of a white face, glistening eyes.

Tom's gun came into his hand almost without volition as he saw the man take two steps forward and reach for his hip pocket. Tom leaned forward to escape the obstruction of a pillar. A photographer said, "That's all!"

The group below broke up in laughter and confusion. Drake and Roxanne separated and Booodle was saying something to Roxanne, who looked instinctively up at the cat-walks, as though searching for a sight of Tom.

The stranger's white face tilted upwards. He was hopped up, Tom saw. He whipped his hand into view. It contained, to Tom's horror, a cylindrical object which could only be a grenade. . . .

Tom holstered his gun as he swept down the ladder without touching a rung. He was on the right side of the man, twenty feet away. He saw the arm go back, almost heard the click of the pin. He bawled, "Down, everybody! Duck!"

He leaped like a shortstop into the air, catching the ugly, metal thing which held death for himself and everyone in the room, and threw it with all his might into the far reaches of the huge sound stage, reckless of damage to valuable machinery.

Flinging himself upon the retreating figure of the stranger, he whirled the man and went to the floor, keeping the struggling body grimly above him, yet rendering the man helpless. The explosion was prompt and terrific.

The lights went on and did not go off again. Dust and plaster settled. A beam tottered, and the man in Tom's grip screamed. A section of the wall came down majestically, split in two. The sash of a masked window lurched and struck.

Tom got up and said, "Anyone hurt? Rox!"

She said steadily, "I'm fine. Only some scratches, I think. Who did it, Tom? Have you got him?"

Tom propped a limp figure on a heap of debris. He said disgustedly, "I had him, but he got away. Maybe he saved my life, I don't know. Anyway, his neck is damn well broken!"

Jack Booodle fought through the excited actors and workers to stare at the thin, white face of the dead man. "Why, that's Rapetti," he said. "He's the last of the anarchists. He was always threatening to blow up someone!"

Tom said, "Now I wonder why he tried us? We're comparatively poor!"

He went to the telephone and called Jeff Clarke. "Check on a guy named Rapetti. Where he's been, whom he's been seeing."

Clarke said, "I know him. A crackpot and harmless."

"Right," said Tom. "Harmless as hell—now!"

CHAPTER THREE

Passport to Hell

ROXANNE said, "So Rapetti and Facey Glower were pals. So Rapetti is dead and Vesper protects Facey. So here we are again!"

Tom said, "I don't think they meant Rapetti to kill anyone. Because they want you alive. I think he was to sabotage the stage, then go back and do more damage to the other sections of the lot. But the anarchist was hopped up and desperate. So he tried to murder us all."

"That helps a lot," said Roxanne. It was very late, after three in the morning and she

could not sleep. She was nervous, a condition which Tom had never known in her before. "They've pirated our story. That's the worst thing. We can't rush a quickie through, Tom, just to beat them. We've got a serious program. We've got to be sincere—careful."

"And suspense," said Matt eagerly. He was sitting in a corner of Roxanne's living-room reading the script.

"And suspense," said Roxanne wearily. "Matt's a natural for this business. No nerves, no fears."

Tom cocked an eye at his dapper little partner. Matt said, "I think we oughta change this love scene just a little."

Tom said, "The gambling scene, that's your dish, pal. Figure it out—to yourself. Inaudibly. Rox must sleep."

She said, "You can't go out there alone. Vesper's got a dozen men beside Facey Glower and just as dangerous."

"I know, I know," said Tom. "I'll see you in the morning, beautiful. Matt'll watch over you."

"Don't con me around, lover," shouted Rox. "You're going to Vesper's and probably get killed."

He waved at her, going out the door. "Cook me a fine breakfast about noon. I'll be here to eat it." He got into the small coupé Rox usually drove, went down the steep path to the Canyon, and out onto Sunset, where he turned north to Beverly Hills.

The trouble was, everyone in Vesper's gang was accounted for by Matt's holding them under his gun while Charlie Ring died. It would seem, therefore, that the director was killed by a stooge—a hired killer with experience. The affair of Rapetti and the bomb seemed to point to such tactics upon Vesper's part.

Yet Tom was not satisfied. Vesper, was subtle, he had strenuously objected to having his house searched. Somewhere in that fantastic mansion lay an answer to Ring's murder, Tom was sure.

He thought of Otis Carriker and his rotten scandal sheet "*Tell Tales*." The fat, oily man had been getting away with blackmail for years. Jeff Clarke had believed that Ring was mixed up with Carriker, yet Charlie was reputed to be an honest man.

There was a brick fence around Vesper's estate, but Tom had been there before. He reached for the lower branches of a tree, swung himself up easily and dropped over the fence. He landed noiselessly, reaching for his gun.

Behind him something poked into his spine and Facey Glower's voice said, "Been waitin' for you, Kincaid. You was a long time comin'."

Tom said, "I was thinking about you, though."

"Ain't that cunnin'?" said Facey. "Walk, Kincaid."

Tom walked across the lawn, past the swimming pool on the south side of the house. The French windows of the room where Matt had held Vesper and his cohorts at bay were open, and lights burned. He went in, prodded by Facey's sub-machine gun.

Everyone looked sleepy except Vesper. The smooth-skinned, pale man said, "Well! Fancy seeing you here!"

Maxie Keystone looked up from a solitaire game and said, "Lay off the con talk, Ronnie. Kincaid's a busy man. So'm I."

Leila Lynch glowered and said nothing. Jack Carey bit at his fingernail. Sam Valenti flexed his muscles and looked hungrily at Tom. Ronnie said, "We wanted to see you, Kincaid."

Tom said, "That's all right with me. Tell your poodle to take his gun out of my spinal column."

Facey said, "Oughta take this guy right now. He's mean."

"Go away, Facey," said Vesper boredly. "Guard us well. Kincaid will not harm us."

Facey reached under Tom's coat and jerked his .32 from its holster. He growled, "Not if his teeth are pulled he won't hurtcha—much!" He went out through the French windows.

Maxie said, "It's too damned late. I'm tired." He yawned. "Tom, how about leavin' Hollywood? Half a million, cash dough. You ain't losin' Roxanne fer life. Jest fer a couple pitchers."

Tom said, "You mean I should quit?"

Maxie said, "Not like that. We pay off, see? Five hunnert thousand berries—green stuff."

"When a friend of ours is killed, we like knowing who did it," Tom told him. He kept his glance casual, but he was not missing a detail of the room he was in. It contained a lot of chi-chi furniture, and a grand piano behind which stood an ornate, modernistic screen. He wanted very badly to go behind that screen. Leila Lynch and Sam Valenti barred his way. He stood easily, making no attempt to move, looking out the wide doors into the hall. He could see the stairs upon which Matt had stood. He looked back at Sam and the woman. His hand went up to his chin and he pondered deeply, listening to Maxie's half-jocular wheedling. Maxie said, "Like I say, I'd gamble you for it. . . ."

Tom broke in, "All right, Maxie. I'll cut you high card, right now. I get out of Hollywood, or you tell me who killed Charlie Ring and how."

Maxie said virtuously, "That I couldn't do, on account of how would I know who knocks people off? Me, I do not make with moiders, Tom, as you should well know."

SUDDENLY Tom wanted to get out of there. The drawling Maxie, the sissified Vesper, the nervous Carey, the belligerent Valenti and smouldering Leila were monsters, their reflections distorted in the mirrors and other glass of the room. They were all at him, and he felt like an alley cat at bay among a pack of mongrels.

Outside was Facey Glower and the mob of guards he controlled. There was no escape. They could kill him and no one would ever know the difference. Vesper could undoubtedly hide a body if he had an hour's start. Vesper had the money and influence to do almost anything.

He said, "I understand you're pirating our story. Why do you want to buy me out? You can ruin us by throwing a quickie on the market ahead of us. Why all this generosity?"

Vesper batted his pale blue eyes. "It would save us much trouble for you to get out, Kincaid. We have no desire to make quick B pictures. We want to do things correctly."

Tom said, "Nuts! You're all money-hungry and power-mad."

He saw the quick exchange of uneasy looks between Carey and Leila Lynch. Something had gone wrong with their plans. He took comfort in this and went on, "You sent a character over to bomb us out and he failed. As soon as I trace him down to you, there'll be federal warrants out and you can't beat them."

Vesper said, "That's nonsense. Rapetti's a known crank."

It wasn't Rapetti, then. Tom could tell by watching Carey. The secretary was the weak link, all right. Carey moved across the room and stood by Leila; Valenti contemptuously moved away. Carey's hand was on the lean woman's shoulder and Tom surmised at once that the widow of Morgan Lynch had found quick consolation in the burly, nervous man.

Maxie said, "Look, Tom, this ain't gettin' us nowhere. Like a pal, I'm tellin' you—take the moola and scram!"

Maxie was really vicious beneath that easy exterior. He had personally placed the feet of enemies into wet concrete, then thrown men alive into the river. Maxie had used hot irons and whips and strangling wire, back in the racketeering days in Brooklyn.

Tom said, "And if I don't, you'll do me like you did Charlie?"

"Tonight," nodded Maxie calmly. "Tom, I got to tell you. You ain't goin' out of here alive . . . or you are goin' out with one half million simoleons in U. S. cabbage. You kin take it or leave it, pal, and I'm advisin' you to take it!"

"You got me, eh?" said Tom.

"We ain't missin'," said Maxie. "Me, I wouldn't moider a flea. But these other boids,

they are itchy-fingered. You should not of called Facey a poodle, neither. He might make you sorry before he knocks you off. That I would not like to see, Tom, on account of you are an old-time gambler and a straight gee."

Tom looked around at them. Carey and Valenti were jackals, one cowardly, one brave enough. Mrs. Lynch was dangerous. Vesper was an unknown quantity as yet. Maxie was bad.

Tom said, "It certainly looks as though you had enough men to do it. What with Facey outside and everything. . . ." He was stalling for time. He rattled a pair of dice in his hand. "You're sure you won't gamble me, Maxie? I thought you'd gamble for anything."

Maxie said, "This don't require no gamble. I'm holdin' a straight flush right now, and your face is red."

Vesper said, "I have the money in the house, Kincaid. We expected you."

"That's why you kept the cops out," Tom nodded. "So I would meet you on your own ground. Very smart."

"Stop stallin'!" Maxie said, a sharp note entering his voice. "Make up yer mind, Tom!"

Valenti was limbering up his muscles again. Leila Lynch was rummaging in her handbag—for a gun, no doubt. Vesper looked ready to cry.

Tom said, "Well, it's like this. . . ."

It was Carey he wanted. He moved lithely, quickly, before any of them could produce a gun. He jumped, ducked, and grabbed the secretary around the waist. As he'd thought, Carey struggled, cursing. Using Carey's own efforts, Tom threw the man into Maxie's flashing weapon. The two went down on the floor.

Tom bent and snatched the edge of a rug, yanking it toward him. Vesper, in motion, skidded and fell over a small splintery chair. Mrs. Lynch had her automatic out. Tom batted at her wrist and it flew away. Valenti roared and closed in.

Tom crouched, then came straight up inside the huge arms of the movie actor. His fists, held close together, caught Valenti in the throat. The screen star's Adam's apple convulsed and with a queer cry he plunged floorwards, clutching his neck.

Tom slid into the hall on his heels. A man's voice called weakly, "Kincaid! Over here!"

There was a small den. The door gave readily and Tom sped inside. A small, stout man was frantically working at bonds about his wrists. A gag hung loose where he had worked it from his mouth. Tom used a jack-knife and said, "Okay, Carriker, let's go out and face the machine guns."

Otis Carriker sputtered, but his short, fat legs twinkled in Tom's wake. They went out

of the house on the opposite side, and the bullets sang behind them. Tom said, "Duck behind me!"

He had seen a guard coming blindly forward. He waited, leaped, swinging his heavy fist. The man, struck behind the ear, fell forward. Tom calmly rolled him over and picked up a small tommy gun. "This is our pass to go out, Carriker. Let's use it."

There was extreme confusion behind them. They got through the gate with almost no trouble at all, right past Honey Summer and Cal Reck, a couple of hoods Tom recognized as Facey's men. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Out of Sight—Out of Murder

OTIS CARRIKER kept saying, "I'll sue! Vesper will pay through the nose! They threatened me! They gagged me!"

Roxanne said, "Dear Otie, when they gagged you, that was *it*. But you are not going to sue. You are going to play ball with us and with the police."

They were in Roxanne's pleasant house in the hills. Jeff Clarke, surveying Carriker as though he were an unpleasant bug, said, "You say Charlie called you the afternoon he was killed. He was drunk or drugged. What did he say?"

Carriker had a moon face and elliptical eyes camouflaged behind horn-rimmed glasses. He addressed himself to Tom. "You saved me, Kincaid. I am a man of loyalties. Once, many years ago, Charlie Ring helped me. . . ."

Roxanne said emotionlessly, "You are a nasty little rat. Otie, and we all know it. Spill your story and quick before I wind up and let you have one in the eye!"

Carriker winced and moved away from Roxanne. He said to Tom, "Maybe she is partly right. I make a living. *Tell Tales* is not a family sheet. But I tell you I have my loyalties. I always boosted Charlie, and he was good

enough to trust me. He called me from Vesper's, told me he was in a jam. He'd been drugged and had told your story to them—he remembered that much. He wanted me to hold it over them."

Tom said, "Charlie was smart to do that!"

"Charlie was the smartest man in Hollywood," said Carriker with dignity. "The *only* decent man. Well, he told me about it. Said I could break it if Vesper ever tried to beat you to the market with a similar story. I heard a click on the line. Perhaps someone was on the extension."

Clarke said, "Someone was. They picked you up and threatened you? I could pinch anyone but Vesper for that."

Roxanne said, "If he had done it to anyone but the editor of *Tell Tales*. The thing is, would they have killed Carriker? Was it that important, just because he knew about Charlie being drugged and about the story? What could he prove?"

Carriker blinked. "Charlie said, 'They're goin' to sabotage our movie, pal, and don't you forget it. I'll see you later if they don't pull one on me that finishes me. I think someone's listening. Otie. . . .'" Carriker said, "Then came the click, and a whirring sort of sound—like a dynamo was turned on. Then Charlie signed off."

Tom said, "Yeah. I see. You've been very helpful, Otie. Of course you are still in terrible danger."

Matt Durkin wandered into the room, reading the script of "*Gamble for Two*." He said, "In this here scene between Roxanne and Drake, should he say, 'Love is a dream beyond a gambler's ken?' That sounds corny."

Tom said, "*Not* the love scenes, Matt. The gambling house sequence is for you to criticize. Have you met Otie Carriker?"

Matt said, "Hiya, character!"

"Carriker" said the publisher with dignity.

"You look like a character," said Matt. "Have we got to take care of him, too? I got an idea, Tom. Leave us go over to Vesper's



and take the joint apart, without the law's help."

Tom said, "Motion pictures have slowed you down already. I just came from there and please catch up with the party."

Jeff Clarke said slowly, "Tom, he's got something. There ain't a thing I can do. Vesper's got more lawyers than the OPA. Downtown they're scared, and Charlie Ring's death is about to become another of those unsolved Hollywood killings. If you could move in on Vesper and. . . Well, I'm a cop and I shouldn't be talkin' like this. I better scram."

He looked significantly at them, nodded, walked out. Matt put down the script and said, "A good cop if one ever lived, which I sometimes doubt. How about it, Tom?"

Roxanne said, "I'm a direct actionist myself."

Tom said, "They've got a whole crew of hired thugs. Vesper and Maxie and the Lynch woman are scorpions entrenched in that big estate. And they're ready for us."

"Sure," said Matt. "We got to think up ways and means."

Carriker said, "Count me in, Kincaid. I'm no hero. But Charlie was my pal. I never had another pal." He did not sound lachrymose. He faced them—a little, vulgar fat man—and somehow Tom knew he was sincere.

"That's three against a score," said Tom.

"Four," said Roxanne. "You're not leaving me out."

"That Jack Boodle," said Matt. "He's game. I like that guy."

Tom said, "If Roxanne or Jack got hurt, the picture would go to hell."

"If Vesper gets away with this, we're licked anyway," said Roxanne. "You don't think they'll stop killing now? They had Otie all ready for the butcher when you walked in. Then they were going to extinguish your valuable spark of life."

"There must be some other way," muttered Tom. "We can't walk in there. They'd mow us down. Vesper would claim we were attacking him on his own grounds. . . ."

Roxanne said, "Then you think of something."

"That's what I'm trying to do. How about getting three or four hours sleep—in relays. Carriker will stay here, of course. We'll post a guard."

Roxanne said, "If we *can* sleep." For once she looked weary. Even her iron constitution had wilted slightly under the strain. Roxanne's entire career was tied up in this venture which was called *Coronet Pictures*. A famed character actress, mostly in smart comedy roles, she had never been starred. Beautiful, accomplished, she had saved her money, and now her fortune was in *Coronet*, along with every dime Tom Kincaid could raise. She was

no starlet, with years ahead. She was nearly thirty, at the height of her beauty and talents, but ahead were the hard years if they all failed. Tom felt a great wave of sympathy and love for the staunch woman. He led her to her room and said on the threshold, "Sleep, baby. We won't fail."

She said, "I believe in you, Tom."

DOWNSTAIRS Matt was already asleep on a couch, the script of the picture beneath his head. Carriker looked helplessly at Tom and said, "We're in danger. . . ."

"Put out the lights and go to bed," said Tom. He did not offer to give the publisher a gun. He did not intend that Carriker should stand watch. It would have been a very clever scheme indeed to plant Carriker among them. It was an idea worthy of Ronnie Vesper's devious mind.

But Tom was revolving in his meticulous gambler's memory every word of the conversation between Charlie Ring and Otis Carriker upon that fateful afternoon when Charlie was killed. It was necessary to place a murderer upon the second floor of Vesper's house and it was extremely important to find a murder weapon.

He wakened Matt and said, "You couldn't see everyone in that room while you were holding a gun on the mob, could you?"

Matt came wide awake. His thin features grew thoughtful. He said, "Well, I could control 'em. It was a ticklish spot, Tom. I could see Ronnie, all right, and Maxie. Carey jittered, and I hadda threaten him. Valenti and the woman—they were over by the piano, but you know how it is."

Tom said, "Did you hear any whirring sound?"

"Naw!" said Matt. "There was so much noise outside with that party goin' on, I didn't hear a thing."

"It was there, though," muttered Tom. "Go back to sleep. And don't trust this Carriker too far. Although, on account of his story, I imagine he's on the level."

He went outside and walked around the dark house, thinking hard. This was a difficult case. In order to debar Vesper and his allies from ruining "*Gamble for Two*," he had to solve Charlie's killing and thereby scatter the enemy forces. If he could put them on the defensive, the picture could be made and released before they could rally. He had no great hopes that he could wipe out the entire gang of avid crooks. But he thought he might get one of them—the actual killer of Charlie Ring.

He had one element on his side. Vesper and Maxie were cautious. They were the leaders—the brains; they would protect themselves at all cost, throwing any other member

of their group to the wolves if they were forced into a corner.

It was up to Tom to hit upon the right person, to pin the crime upon him, and to send Vesper and Maxie into voluntary retirement while they thought up further skullduggery. It would be a long war, Tom knew, before they all were given the quietus. The mauve Vesper and the deadly Maxie were adversaries not easily to be conquered.

IT WAS noon. Facey Glower stepped out and said, "You back lookin' for it? If you come in, I'm gonna frisk you."

Tom helped Roxanne out of the car. He said, "You don't think I'd try and bring a gun past you, Facey? I want to talk."

"You got a hell of a nerve," grumbled the gunman. "We shoulda had you last night." He patted Tom expertly, gingerly ran his hands over Roxanne's trim figure while she stood motionless. He said, "You got gat strapped to your gams, Miss Queen?"

She lifted her skirts and said, "Take a good look, you low-browed thug."

He mumbled, "No offense, Miss Queen. I caught you in *'Hearts Away.'* You were swell!" he added politely.

Roxanne sighed, "Another fan! Let's go in, Tom."

Around on the other side of the estate were Matt and Jack Boodle and Carriker. It was a slim force, but Matt was resourceful and the other two determined. They drove up the winding driveway and stopped. On the terrace a breakfast party broke up and Vesper came forward, saying, "Ah! The powerful champion and his fair lady! Welcome!"

Jack Carey was even redder-faced than before. He moved protectingly nearer Leila Lynch who looked as though she needed as much sheltering as a General Sherman tank. Maxie Keystone said, "So you thought you'd take the dough, huh, Tom?"

Valenti had a light scarf around his throat. His eyes were burning coals. Facey Glower retired but remained within sight. Loney Summer and Cal Reck led a few others of the crew of guards to positions of vantage. Vesper and Maxie were taking no further chances with Tom Kincaid.

Tom said, "No. I wasn't thinking of quitting. I was anxious to have another session in that charming salon of Ronnie's. I thought I'd offer you another gamble."

Maxie said, "Ain't he the one? Always he is willing and ready to gamble us!"

Vesper said, "It is pleasant here. Say what you have to say, Kincaid. You are in great danger, I assure you. The police already know you are here."

"You can say that again," said Roxanne blithely. "They knew it before you did."

Vesper said, "I am not alarmed by police. What is it, Kincaid? We have work to do on our picture, you know."

Tom said, "You're in an awful hurry all of a sudden. What makes Carey so nervous?"

The secretary jumped as though he were pricked. He said, "Don't play the fool, Kincaid!"

Tom looked across the terrace at the pile of stone and glass which was Ronnie Vesper's house. He said, "Such a big place to live in! Although there are many of you, of course. Your house intrigues me, Ronnie. Especially that room where Matt stood you all up."

Vesper said, "You're a stubborn fellow, Kincaid."

"I'd like to make a little bet," said Tom.

"There he goes!" said Maxie. "Always bettin' people."

"If we could go inside," said Tom. He had a way of moving his big body without effort and very swiftly. Roxanne had to hasten to catch up with him. They went through the French windows before the gang could close in on them.

Roxanne sat upon one of the oddly-contrived chairs. Tom leaned against the wall and squinted at the many reflections from the mirrors of the room. The screen still stood behind the piano. Vesper, Maxie, Mrs. Lynch, Carey and Valenti faced him. Facey Glower waited just outside the windows. The other guards were crowded behind Facey, their weapons plainly displayed.

Tom said, "Carriker talked—plenty. I'd like to bet you, Vesper, that I can prove a murder on someone. I'd like to bet you that I can force you to deliver up a patsy."

Leila Lynch gasped. Her husband, recently deceased via electricity in a strapped chair, had proved a victim of Tom's reasoning not long before this.

Jack Carey burst forth, "Look out for him! He's got some scheme cooked up!"

"I'm unarmed," said Tom mildly. "Ask Facey. I just have an idea. I've been delving into your pasts, with the aid of Captain Clarke. He reports certain talents which each of you possess. For instance, we know a sharpshooter killed Charlie Ring. Three of you are crack shots."

Vesper said, "Some jealous woman shot Ring. No one will ever know which one of my many guests. . . ."

"Tell that to the cops, Ronnie," said Roxanne boredly.

Maxie said, "Me, I couldn't hit a barn door with a cannon. Anyways, Durkin had us all under that gat of his."

Tom said, "We thought he did. But he couldn't see certain of you at all. I learned that the last time I was here. Sorry about the chair I broke, Ronnie. Such a lovely room!"

He moved again, as though on bearings. He slid onto the piano-bench and spread his gambler's hands over the keys. He said, "I'm not much of a musician, but this is a great instrument."

"The guy's gone buggy!" said Maxie Keystone.

Tom's fingers improvised. In a boogie-woogie beat he played about with a familiar tune. After a moment, Carey said, his mouth working strangely, "Damn him! That's a funeral dirge."

"Chopin!" nodded Tom. "Sacrilegious, aren't I? You're a crack shot, Carey. Won medals with a pistol."

Carey said, "Damn you, I didn't kill Charlie!"

"What difference, I ask you," said Vesper in dulcet tones, "does it make who killed Charlie? The question is, does Kincaid accept our offer for Coronet Pictures?"

Tom was off the bench on the far side. He brushed the screen to one side. The wall was of a pattern with the room, but the square space was obviously bare.

Tom said, "Well, Carriker was right. The telephone wires picked up the hum of the dynamo. It is a silent job, to the ears of people in the room, or on the stairs. Hydraulic lift, working on oiled parts."

His sensitive hands worked gently, found a button. The section of the wall rolled back. An elevator cage sat empty, waiting passengers.

Tom said, "Out of sight, out of mind. But Charlie was on the phone when it was operating. Someone went up. Then they came down. Then, when it seemed we might get Charlie out of here, the murderer went up and shot Charlie. Then the murderer came down and was in the room again, like nothing happened."

THERE was ominous silence in the room. Maxie Keystone made a gesture to Facey, who stepped through the French windows. Loney Summer and Cal Reck, scar-faced, tough, followed closely. Roxanne managed to get to Tom's side and they faced the ring of dour, inimical faces.

Tom chuckled. He leaned his elbows on the piano and said, "So there is a killer among you. And a weapon. I want it. I'm going to have it. You can't harm us, because Jeff Clarke knows I am here. In about five minutes I am going to call him. If I fail, he'll be here, with the Beverly Hills cops and the L.A. county forces. You couldn't explain away the corpses of Roxanne and me. We haven't got a gun on us, characters, but the cops have you cold if you make a bad move."

Vesper said, "You haven't proved a thing. My lawyers. . . ."

"But I've proved it *could* have been done," said Tom pleasantly. "That allows them to question Jack Carey!" His arm shot out, pointing an accusing finger at the secretary.

The burly man braced himself, then leaped forward. Facey Glower stepped in front of him, knocked him against the wall. Maxie said, "Wait! Tom ain't got nothin' on nobody!"

Roxanne glided out from behind the piano. Poising her shapely body in the midst of them, she said, "I'll tell you who killed Charlie Ring. I'll tell you who is the real murderer among you. I know!"

Carey struggled to get away from Facey. The thug was perplexed and turned his head to get an order from Maxie. Tom scowled, listening with all his ears for outside sounds. Matt and Jack Boodle and Carriker could have failed to gain entrance despite the distraction of the guards.

Carey hit Facey a terrible blow on the neck. Facey fell forward. Carey grabbed for Facey's tommy gun.

Maxie said, "Hey! This ain't kosher. . . ."

They were milling about satisfactorily. Tom saw the already battered Valenti girding himself and almost smiled as he came swinging out. He got Valenti on the nose and felt the bone smash under his fist. The picture star was taking an awful beating and "*Gambling for Two*" would surely be delayed by his throat ailment and this new occurrence, Tom thought.

It would only be a matter of moments before Maxie had it back under control, he knew. He surged forward and caught Ronnie Vesper with his elbow, sending that non-warrior into a tailspin.

He grabbed Maxie with both hands and picked the little fellow screaming from the floor. Maxie's voice was shrill. "Take yer damned hands offen me! You can't touch me, Kincaid! Dammit I'll kill you! I'll boil you in oil! I'll cut out your heart an' feed it to you!"

From the window Matt Durkin said cheerily, "Well, get the damn thing straightened out! We got 'em covered and this time I can see every bloody soul in the room."

The round figure of Carriker, the lean one of Jack Boodle appeared beside Matt. The sight of levelled weapons had an immediate effect. People stopped striving, the panic subsiding on the surface at least. Tom stepped front and center and bent to pick up an object from the floor.

It was a handbag. He opened it and gingerly removed a small automatic pistol. He said, "A .22, you see? Just like the gun which killed Charlie. You were too certain of yourselves to get rid of it. Not that getting rid of a murder gun is as easy as you might believe."

"You can let her up now, Rox."

Rox was amazingly unruffled. She straightened her skirt as she arose and managed at the same time to jerk the lean and muscular Leila Lynch to her feet. She said, "I've tamed Hollywood wolves with one hand in my time, Leila, dear. You're tough, but I'm an old battler. I don't imagine you've had many passes made at you, at that. You're the tigerish type; you only attract the weak men like Jack Carey."

Tom said, "Yes, Mrs. Lynch. Carey's solicitude for you gave you away. You won the woman's pistol meet. The police almost overlooked that item. They were thinking in terms of a male killer."

Leila Lynch said throatily, "If I only had another chance . . . I should have killed you last night. . . ."

Vesper had arisen and was re-arranging his gaudy sports clothing. Maxie, his aplomb partly restored, stared at Tom. Carey moaned and the gangsters were wooden-faced.

Valenti said hoarsely, "He's still got nothing on us."

"Accomplices," said Tom impressively, "both before and after the fact. All of you."

Vesper said smoothly, "We were all watching Durkin and his gun. If Leila left the room and returned, none of us knew it, except Carey, perhaps." He threw a glance of scorn at his secretary.

Carey went ashen white and turned his face away from Leila Lynch. "I don't know anything."

"Then Leila is the victim," said Tom pleasantly. "You'll all co-operate with the police in clearing up this crime. You are all public-spirited citizens, of course!"

Vesper said, "If she committed this heinous crime, she should of course pay the penalty. We only want what is right."

Matt jerked out, "We oughta blast down the gang of 'em!"

"They *are* rats, aren't they?" said Tom. "Maybe Leila will testify against them when the time comes. Call Clarke, Rox. Tell him to come and get the murder gun and the killer."

Maxie Keystone said, "You put yer hands on me, Tom! I ain't fergettin' anyone who does that to me!"

Leila Lynch, looking from one to the other of her former allies, said, "He put hands on you! You dirty cowards! I'll put my mouth on you! I'll have you all in it with me! All right, I killed Charlie Ring. I would have killed any of you who had a hand in Morgan's death, too."

Rox hung up and said, "Lover, we got a picture to make. Before these characters recover. It's funny about Otie Carriker. He was on the level with Charlie Ring and all of us."

Tom said, "Vesper is a respected citizen. Carriker a gents' room journalist. Figure that one out, darling!"

She said, "I'd rather just make our picture. It almost got murdered and I feel tender toward the little thing!"

THE END

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**DIME
DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE**

MURDER ON THE WING

By

CYRIL PLUNKETT



Then I found
the noose dan-
gling from the
sapling....

*In Minerva's Land, with
its gloomy hills dense
with evergreens, its
marshy hollows thick
with undergrowth, lived
the melancholy owls
who hungered and
thirsted for human
blood!*

THE LAKE was kidney-shaped, with wooded islands blocking off its farther shore: and of these islands tales were told—of gloomy hills and hollows, of marshes, and the denseness of the evergreens. “Miner-

va's Land,” the islands had been called, for the Minerva of mythology, who chose the owl to typify her wisdom.

It was late in July that I resolved one day to explore those shores. I had come north for

my health, but my vigor had returned. I was bronzed now, sure of myself again; I was young, too, and weary of isolation. So I crossed the lake one afternoon, and the islands loomed no different from other northern land I had seen, until I saw smoke—from an almost hidden cabin—as I rounded Owls Island, the largest in the chain.

"Ahoj!" I called. "Hello there!"

A girl appeared—brown, slender, quite blonde. She wore skimpy orange-tan shorts and an orange-tan halter.

"We didn't expect company," she said smiling, as I beached my boat. She was very young—nineteen-twenty; her skin was smooth, like golden wine; her eyes were cobalt blue, and the whiteness of her teeth amazed me.

I introduced myself; a neighbor, Richard Wayne, I said, and her eyes sparkled as she gave me her hand.

"I am Mrs. Jennifer," she said.

There would be a husband, I thought.

"Karl is off somewhere with his traps," she said.

Traps? At this time of year? She saw that I was puzzled. "Owls," she said. "But forgive me! Come up to the cabin, Mr. Wayne. I was so surprised when I heard you call and looked out and saw you—"

Their boat was drawn up on the beach, padlocked to a tree. *Padlocked*. But I was too conscious of *her*, to weigh and wonder. She walked beside me now with long-limbed grace, and I could almost see her on a stage, a showgirl or a mannequin.

"You're an American, aren't you?" she said.

"Yes, Detroit."

"I'm from Chicago. Will you be here long?"

"Here?"

She colored a little. "Canada, I mean?"

We'd come to the cabin. There were two rooms, and this, the front, the living room-bedroom-kitchen, was dusty for midday, with a faint, queer odor—naphthalene, I think it was. Clothing was scattered about and the bunks were unmade; pots and pans needed washing; and the chairs and table stood by awkward and embarrassed, it seemed, before this disarray. But I saw one shiny new article. A galvanized pail.

It was the owls, though, at which I stared. The room was made for them. It must have been. They were on the mantle and on shelves; they swung on wire fastened to the raftered ceiling, and crouched on perches nailed to the walls. Dead—stuffed of course—but so confounded lifelike! I saw the white face disk of the marsh owl; the cat owl, with its blackish ear tufts; there were hoot owls, saw-whets, screech owls, and the Great Horned killer.

"My husband's hobby, you know," Mrs. Jennifer was saying. "He traps the owls and—and kills them. He's going to write a book, I guess." I had the feeling that her words were forced.

We talked a while, nothing of account, you know, the usual sparring people do to get acquainted, and she said, "Would you care for tea? Or perhaps wine?"

"The wine would be nice."

"And music?"

On a crude stand near the door, behind me, stood a portable phonograph. "Oh dear, how I miss the radio!" she said. "And no shows and no restaurants. . . ." She was already winding the phonograph. "Have you a radio, Richard?"

Richard, eh? Swell! I thought. I grinned. "No, I wanted to get away from all that."

She laughed at me. "But how silly! Now let's see. I haven't much of a library. This record will do though, I think. Blues. Something really very wicked." Her voice had a new, a husky sound. "Do you ever feel wicked, Richard?"

Oh-oh! I thought. "How about the wine?"

"Oh, yes! I'd forgotten!" She ran through the back room, and out a rear door. But she was back almost immediately. "Chilled—we keep the bottles in the rain barrel! Isn't that cute? Do you mind a water glass?"

"Not at all," I said.

"Isn't this wonderful?" she said. Her hand trembled as she poured the wine, its color the smooth gold of her skin; and now the record was playing and she hummed with the music.

"Let's dance, Richard," she invited.

In the sticks—in the haze of a far northern lake—on Owls Island! Her name was Gay, she said. We bumped into a chair and laughed. Then I kicked the chair aside and she made a face at it.

"You meet the queerest people," she said.

"Uh-huh," I said. "In dives."

"Uh-huh. State Street, in Chicago." She closed her eyes, sighed. And her lips were lovely, full, close to me.

I saw the door open behind her. . . .

I DON'T know why I'd visualized Karl Jennifer as blond; he just would be, I'd thought. He would be older than she by a little—perhaps six or eight years. And this interest in owls? A teacher, no doubt, at some small school in the States—somewhere near Chicago. But orange-tan shorts and a halter, Dorsey and Calloway, wine from the rain-barrel? The guy would be handsome, with shoulders broadened by football; he would like dancing, restaurants and parties.

He wasn't like that at all.

He stood in the doorway, bespectacled and

blinking, a little man with broad hips, like a woman's, a fleshy little man, with a rusty fringe of hair around a shining bald spot. Gently I disengaged Gay's arms, gently I turned her around. She didn't gasp. She giggled and said, "Karl!"

The little man came in. Strangely enough, he seemed embarrassed. "This is Richard Wayne," she said, and I felt his moist limp hand. "He has a camp across the lake," she said. She was very gay. She poured a glass of wine for him, and he blinked at it, protested. His stomach was not what it should be. The burning he had—I would know about that, no? No, I said. He seemed vaguely disappointed. And the headaches he was having. . . . He passed a lumpy hand across his eyes.

Gay laughed at him. "He worries too much." She forced the glass on him; he took it, looked dumbly at it. I began to speak; he stopped me.

"Wait—I do not hear so well. Must we have the music, Gay?"

The music stopped with a mechanical groan. Until now I'd almost forgotten the drabness, the curtainless windows—yes, and the owls. Now, suddenly, it was mean and staring and formidable again. I was conscious of a hundred scowling yellow eyes.

Karl Jennifer began rearranging the chairs. "You are here for your health?" he said.

"Yes, that's what I was saying. Too much work. I cracked up. I'm planning a book."

His faded eyes brightened. "A book? But you stand! Come, you must sit down! I must tell you of my own work. Gay, his glass is almost empty! We are neighbors, you say?"

"Yes, just across the lake."

"You knew we were here?"

"Oh no. I was poking about the islands—"

She was standing behind him. There was something in her eyes that taunted, puzzled me. *Beauty and the Beast*, I thought. Why had she married him?

KARL JENNIFER and I sat and talked in the back room, with his bottles, his soaps, his notes, his skins and his feathers. Owls, of course. He talked of little else. Their habits, their range and how they flew like shadows so silently. The Great Horned Owl—*Bubo virginianus*, he called it, the tiger among birds—was his especial interest. I had the feeling he was leading up to something. The book his wife had mentioned? He waved his lumpy hands, dismissed it. Still so very vague, he said. It was to be a study of these birds? Oh no, he said. Birds, but with relation to *people*—and legends.

Now he gestured as he talked, his eyes blinking and excited. Did I believe in megalomania, in the transmigration of souls?

I had a queer, tingling sensation as I looked at him.

"The legend goes," he said. "That an Indian brave was forced to flee his tribe. And here, in Minerva's Land, he found strange sanctuary; here he drank of owls' blood to sustain him. He brooded, and in time he wreaked revenge upon his enemies. He struck with hawklike swiftness and uncanny silence, and his victims were always beheaded. So he became known as 'The Owl,' the savage executioner, and it is said his spirit remains to this day, here, on this island named for him—"

Jennifer paused, as though to add weight to his words. "Mark you," he continued quickly, "owls' blood sustained him. And then his victims were *beheaded*, although the Indian, by custom, was given to scalping. Why did he change this characteristic of centuries? Don't you consider this detail, this change—curious?"

I said pointedly I hadn't considered it at all, but the gears in his mind were in high. Didn't I know that owls always decapitated their prey? True, the brain was an owl's tidbit, but—he waved his porky hands—that would be man's explanation, food, always the obvious one. So give way to thought and consider! Was not the brain the logical seat of the soul?

"My friend," he said, "Minerva was the goddess of all wisdom. And she had reason, surely, when she chose the owl to typify this wisdom. You follow me, no? Why did she choose the owl?"

Why, I thought. Nuts, I thought. Gay, you called the turn when you said you meet the queerest people.

"I must know *why*," he said. "I must know what Minerva saw and understood that we blind mortals do not. So I trap these creatures. I kill them, examine them. The *brain*—you see? I must know if they are wise beyond us all, if perhaps they have found the means to transmigration." Again he paused and blinked at me. "Who knows sometime what I'll find?" And he sighed then.

She came into the back room abruptly. Beautiful, her bare shoulders, her bare slender legs. She stood just inside the doorway a moment before saying, "You will stay for dinner, Richard?"

Dinner? I hadn't realized it was so late.

"We haven't much, but you're more than welcome."

Jennifer, blinking, was rubbing his hands over his stomach. "I do not feel so well now, Gay," he said. "It is the burning again. I am afraid to eat—"

"Don't worry, I'll have soup for you, Karl." But her eyes hadn't left me. "Richard, you'll stay?"

What mattered that I must go back across the lake by moonlight if I got a chance to be alone with her again? And I got the chance. Later, I walked with her to the spring. Yes, I must mention the spring. It is important that I mention the spring.

We'd eaten—not much of a meal, though it took her long to prepare it; we'd lighted cigarets, Gay and I, and the darkness fell fast, so we'd lighted a kerosene lamp. All the while, Karl Jennifer sat *listening*. I wondered at that. I wondered that with dusk his breathing had quickened. Then it was time to draw fresh water from the spring.

GAY rose abruptly from the table. It was like any routine you become aware of in a strange house—like the clock striking and the eyes of host and hostess meeting, and it's bedtime for the children. It seemed each night at dusk she took the bright pail to the spring, and I thought so little of it, then.

Of course I would go with her! Would Karl come along? He shivered his refusal.

The trail was dark and I had to hold to Gay's hand. Funny. I'd waited all evening to be alone with her, and now we walked in silence.

"He won't ever go into the woods after dark," she whispered suddenly, "It's the owls. He fears them. They know he traps and kills them, and they've become his enemy." Her fingers tightened on mine, and it came then, the plea, but not quite as I had expected. "Richard, what will I do?"

Yeah, funny. No siren after all, just a sweet, frightened kid. We stopped beside the spring, and though I couldn't see her eyes, I knew then that she looked at me.

"You may kiss me, Richard, if you wish," she said.

Still I stood there.

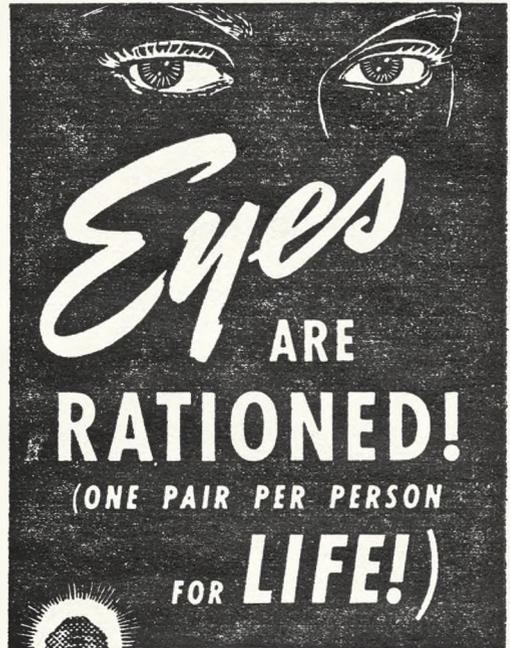
"Don't you wish?" she said.

So I kissed her, and her lips were sweet, but it wasn't what I'd first thought to find, the way she clung to me. I have never seen a change occur so swiftly. Her teeth chattered. Suddenly she was trembling all over. "Richard, I don't know what happened! One day I—I was married to him—"

"Never mind now." I said, stroking her hair.

Her fingers touched my face, my eyes, my lips and hovered there. "You'll come back and take me away?"

At that moment we heard a piercing scream. A blood-curdling sound, as if a woman were being strangled. We knew the woods, knew it was only a great horned owl, and yet—we stiffened. Our breaths caught. *Human, like a woman screaming*, I thought. A lot of words spilled around in my head. *The brain—the tidbit—seat of the soul. . . .*



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"Richard, you'll come before it's too late?"

Now understand, I didn't quite pity *him*. I pitied myself. Sure I dreamed of her, her hair, her eyes, her lips; and her slim form, brown and proud, as she walked through my mind. And I began to hate Karl Jennifer. But who was I? I haven't said too much of myself; I mean *I* wasn't important.

She was scared; she wanted escape. But she hadn't fallen in love with me. No use kidding myself. *I'd* taken the dive, but she hadn't—not in those few hours. Well then, why steal a man's wife and stick out my chin? Me, just the guy who had happened along. Just the guy she'd say thanks and goodbye too.

I went back, but only after ten long days—



Gay Jennifer

ten days that I'd fought and argued with myself—ten nights that I'd cursed the lonely darkness. And all the way over I hummed the tune she'd played. I talked to her, as though she sat with me in the boat. "Gay?" I'd say. "You chose the name yourself, didn't you? It really becomes you. Chicago, you say? North side? South side?" Hell, what would I talk about?

Soon I turned the point. Soon I saw the cabin. No smoke today. It was hot though, remember, August. And early, not yet noon. Too early for a fire in her cookstove. "Hello!" I called. I'd planned the way it should be. She'd wave her hand and from the cabin I would hear the phonograph. . . .

THERE was no music today, no glad cry, no wave of the hand. I walked up from the beach. "Hello!" I said. "Gay—?" I called. The boat was gone. The door was ajar; I pushed it in—

Stuffed owls glared at me. Everything was there—the pots, the pans, the soup; the rumbled blankets on both bunks; the table, the chairs—and the phonograph. The needle stood in the center of the record, and spread over it all was a thin coating of sand.

So days had passed. She was gone. I'd failed

her, and he hadn't. They'd gone back to Chicago. But everything was there, I've said. Everything except the bright new pail.

It was such a small thing, such a small doubt in my mind. And still . . . I walked across the room. Soup in a kettle on the stove. I swung to face the phonograph again; yes, needle in the middle of the record, where she'd never leave it, unless—I went outside and walked up to the spring. And there I found the pail.

Nothing else—just that shiny new bucket. But it was overturned, so I picked it up and held it in my hands. I put it down again. Soup on the stove—she'd been playing the record. Would he say, with dinner about to be served, "Come Gay, we'll go back now, to Chicago?"

I walked with her in my mind, swiftly from the cabin, and surely it would be dusky in this dank cathedral. She'd have wondered what had happened, why I hadn't come for her? She'd swing the pail and hum nostalgically for the shows she liked, the restaurants, the music and the people—

I began to shiver and to breathe more quickly. As her feet might, indeed, have quickened. For she'd be very near the spring, walking with sure steps the path she trod each night—My thoughts stopped like striking a wall. The scream may have been only in my mind. I really don't know if I heard it again now, or only remembered it from the other evening. But it was a frightful sound, human—as though a woman were being strangled.

I stood shaking all over and looking around. And then I found the thong, the noose dangling from a sapling. I knew the trap he'd built, not for owls this time, but to hang *her!*

Why? Because of *me?* Fantastic! I had been with her only once. I ran back to the beach, cursed him, swore I'd have my vengeance. I left the beach again and stumbled through the gloomy evergreens. I even poled the marsh that afternoon, and searched for the new, scarred ground of a grave. I stayed on Owls Island, all that day, all that night.

It was cold for August. The wind rose and found crannies through which to taunt me and to wail. I built a fire and sat before it in the cabin trying to *feel* like Karl Jennifer, to *think* like Karl Jennifer, to put myself in his fat little body. *Why?* I thought, over and over and over. . . .

He was old, she beautiful and young. But why kill her if he'd sought *life* in her body, if that was all that he'd wanted?

A flame shot up from the fire. I blinked at the red glare in the room. Yes, the motive was fear. But was such fear of isolation on an island enough? Remember, *life* was the key to all Karl Jennifer's thinking. I remembered

his hands—and a phrase, “I do not feel so well now, Gay—it is the burning again—” Suddenly I gasped. Suddenly I saw what he had come to *think*. Suddenly I rose and ran to the back room.

It was there, on a shelf, left, as were the bottles, the notes, the soaps, the skins and the feathers. The tool of all taxidermists—arsenic.

THE murder of Owls Island. . . . There may well have been another tale to tell some-day of the man who had killed owls in his search for life and souls; the man who, one day too, had killed the wife he believed had tried to poison him. But it didn't end like that. Do legends ever tell the whole truth?

For weeks I haunted Chicago's State Street restaurants—quiet rooms and smoky-loud rooms; clubs with bands to entertain; the bars selling music for a nickel in a slot. Then I walked into a place one night in September and my heart began to pound. I walked across the room to a corner table.

The blonde girl gasped and stared at me. I smiled as I sat down. “You meet the queerest people,” I said. I looked around, we were unobserved. I reached out for her hands; and they were cold until I held them.

Then I said, “It was very queer. After finding you gone, I searched the island. But I looked *down*. I searched for a grave. The next morning, shortly after dawn, I heard a dismal, long-drawn call, the loon that laughs and flies, and then it was that I looked *up*. I saw a hollow tree, a dead tree, and the wide hole of an owl's nest.”

She whispered something about him, about

owls—the music was so loud I don't know all she said. But my mind caught at a few small phrases. “I couldn't let him lie there. I hid the body from them, and put it in the lake. In life he was so pitiful—but in his way he was kind to me. . . .”

It struck me then she didn't know that Jennifer had believed she was trying to poison him. She didn't know he'd built a trap for her. She didn't know it could have sprung too soon and could have caught him by his neck. She knew only that Karl Jennifer had feared the owls, and she had been conditioned to believe and expect them to seek revenge of him some night.

I wondered if I should explain to her. Tell her, too, that arsenic, while usually found in the soft tissues, accumulates also very sensibly in the spongy tissue of bone; that its presence can always be detected in the skull; that no arsenic had been found— But kind, pitiful, she'd said.

There are times when it may be wise to let bald facts seem mystic. So I quoted this passage to her:

*“Silence, ye wolves! while Ralph to
Cynthia howls
And makes night hideous:—answer him,
ye owls.”*

And I drew a deep breath, glad the music was so lowdown, loud and brassy. “Yes, the owls answered him,” I said. And I wondered just a little now, myself, for in the rubbish of the owls' nest I had found Karl Jennifer's head. . . .



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have been on furlough, I think that the Red Cross is the most wonderful organization for servicemen there is. I think I can say that for every soldier, sailor and marine in the Southwest Pacific. I only hope that the people on the home front will continue to support the Red Cross.”



THE MAN WITH

By FRANCIS K. ALLAN



**A Novelette of Dark,
Shadowed Peril—and of
the strangely fascinating
“Duke Danube.”**

That fascinating, fabulous nonesuch, Duke Danube, had to play out his perilous cloak-and-sword drama in the shadowed streets of New York City, where a strange corpse in a lost, green-halled mansion started him on a dark errand that could end only at the electric chair—or in a grave, forever lost, forever silent. . . .

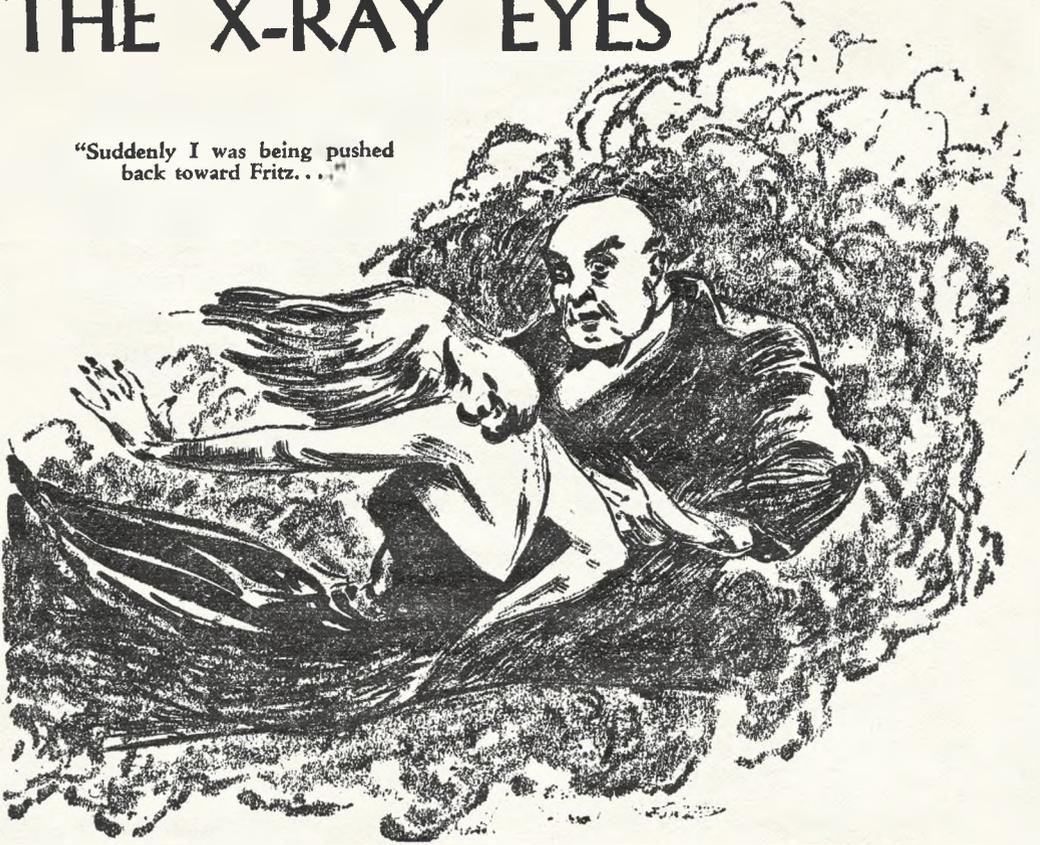
CHAPTER ONE

Web of Death

AS TINY, the three hundred pound bartender-proprietor of the Elbow Rest in Greenwich Village had frequently observed, death and taxes didn't hold a candle to the certainty of Duke Danube's ten o'clock thirst. On nights when Tiny was feeling particularly dour, he would also state quite frankly that there was about as much royal blood in the Duke as there were pearls in the pave-

THE X-RAY EYES

"Suddenly I was being pushed
back toward Fritz..."



ment of Flatbush Avenue, and that the Danube part of the name was strictly because it was a waltz the Duke started singing after his fifth martini. Finally, Tiny would remark, Duke was on the cuff for more than his weight in hard spirits, which is not bad even at Duke's weight. That was what Tiny would say sometimes.

Once in a while a stranger would have the bad taste to agree with Tiny. In such case Tiny's cigar stump would go shuttling from one corner of his mouth to the other, and he'd say: "Yeah? Who asked you?"

The stranger was likely to leave now.

It was exactly ten o'clock on this Wednesday night when Duke Danube appeared in the door of the Elbow Rest. First he stood there, peering uncertainly into the smoke-fog. He was wearing his shiny, worn swallow-tailed coat, his cane, a black bow-tie, and his usual monocle with its black ribbon. He stands just over five feet high, and a hundred pounds will more than catch him. His hair is black and won't stay combed. His eyes are dark and bright as a sparrow's.

He edged across the room and laid his battered topper on the bar, then began to polish

his monocle nervously, still glancing around as if he was expecting to find a creditor.

"I feel like a spot of Scotch tonight," he said to Tiny.

Tiny stopped mopping the bar and leaned his weight on his two hands. "Now, do tell!" His cheeks got red. "Seventy bucks on the cuff you stand, and you 'feel like a spot of Scotch,' huh?"

"Very well, we'll economize tonight. Gin and lemon juice. And kindly modify your voice," he added plaintively. "My nerves are not serene. Not at all serene, if you care to know." He kept watching the door.

Tiny glowered, then grabbed for the gin and poured a drink, not trusting himself to speak.

It wasn't much of a joint; only a low, long room with perhaps a dozen tables and a patch of worn dance floor.

"Well, there's the drink. What's the matter with you?" Tiny demanded grudgingly.

Duke mopped his face and glanced up and down the bar. "Have you ever been put to bed with a corpse?" he whispered.

"Have I ever been. . . . Huh? What was that?" Tiny exploded. "A corpse? Maybe you're drunk, huh?"

"I am as sober as a wet cat. I regret to say that such was not the case last night."

"Yeah, you were floating when you left here."

"If you wish," Duke agreed wearily. "By weary coincidence, I found myself quite befuddled by the time I had reached Eighth Street. I selected a comfortable doorway and sought Morpheus—sleep to you. And there it happened."

Again he mopped his chin with his handkerchief. "The first thing I know, I am being handled around like a dollar in a dice game," Duke whispered. "I am no longer in the dark doorway. Quite on the contrary, I am in a large room. I am being dumped on a bed. There are whispering voices about me. I see the door closing. All I remember is a fat hand, a few fingers, and a cameo-ring with the figure of a girl's head inlaid in ivory. The door closes, leaving me in the darkness. Maybe I went back to sleep."

Duke worried uncertainly. "I can't be sure. At any rate when I waked up and decided to see just where I was, I found him. The corpse," he whispered. "Right there in the bed, where I'd been!"

Tiny leaned forward. "No more gin for you," he said softly. "A lot of things I will believe, but corpses—"

"A dead man was on that bed," Duke repeated vehemently. "A tall individual, dark-haired and hatchet-faced. Furthermore, there was a bullet hole clear through his left side. There was a little blood on the bed, not to mention the blood that was on my own hands. Finally, there was a Luger in my pocket. Then, while I stood there I heard footsteps on the stairs outside."

"I am many things, but not a fool. I departed by way of the window and the fire-escape. When I reached the street, there was a police car parked at the curb. I hurried home. My fedora was missing. The cane I'd been carrying was gone; that cane has my initials on the head-band. My shirt was torn. My tie was gone. All evidence suggested a struggle."

Duke mopped his chin again. "And that is the truth. I—" He stiffened and glanced toward the door as a man entered. He sighed with relief. "I am not just pessimistic when I tell you that I am concerned. In fact—"

"What was this room like?" Tiny asked.

"Like? . . . Oh, well furnished. Blue and gold, a deep blue rug, the scent of incense and—"

"Duke, you had a gin-nightmare," Tiny stated firmly. "It's getting you." Duke glared at him and snorted. Abruptly Tiny's bright eyes widened, looking over Duke's shoulder. He sucked in a soft breath. "Is that dame crazy?" he whispered.

DUKE turned. A woman was crossing the room toward a secluded corner table. She was alone. At first glance there was little about her to attract attention. Her hair was golden, but not the gold that glitters. She was about forty, Duke guessed, yet a pattern of loveliness, calmed and subdued by years, remained on her face. She sat down and folded her hands, as though she were hopelessly weary.

"Well?" Duke asked Tiny. "What do you mean, 'Is she crazy?'"

Tiny glowered thoughtfully toward the woman's table. "Now, you don't need to go off like a pin-wheel, understand?" he warned. "I'd just like to get your slant on this." He paused again to chew the cigar. "I notice her first exactly a week ago tonight, and just after midnight. She's alone. She looks around like she's made a mistake, and my first idea is to wave her out. Then I see she's no tramp. So I smile at her friendly, and point to that empty table where she's sitting now. That seems to make up her mind. She sits down and has one glass of port wine. I get to watching her. She just sits there, staring at the glass, hardly knowing what's happening, her hands grabbing her handkerchief. Then, while I'm watching, she just pulls the handkerchief into pieces—and I don't think she ever knew she was doing it." Tiny paused. "Then she pays for the wine and slips out. That's a week ago."

"The next night she's back again at about the same time, alone. She has one glass of port and gets out. All the time she's just like she was the night before—very worried. That happens the next night, which is Friday. Then Saturday. Sunday I don't know, because I'm closed. Monday she's in again, just the same as before—never talking, always by herself, always worried. And then last night she comes in a little earlier—about eleven-twenty."

"I'm almost waiting for her, see? Curious and remembering her. I don't know why. But anyway, she comes in and she's carrying a crumpled-up newspaper. She looks like a ghost-walker—white as a shirt and trembling, too. I send over a port, but she never even sees it. She's staring at her hands and at this folded-up newspaper."

"She pulls herself together and comes up here to the bar and wants to borrow a pencil. I give her the one with the red point, and she goes back. At last she gets up and gives me back the pencil. Then I really see her face. Her eyes. . . . I've never seen anything like them. They were kind of satisfied, victorious in a way, but still they were frightened and lonely, somehow. I watch her go out, cross the street and drop that crumpled-up newspaper into the trash-container. And Duke, so help me, I heard it *bang* the bottom of the

can! As soon as she turns the corner, I hurry over there. That gimlet-eyed apple-polisher from the corner fruit stand is edging up that way, too. He goes back when he sees me. I reach into that container. What do I get?"

"What *did* you get?" Duke asked.

"A snub-nosed pearl-handled revolver that's still smelling of burnt powder," Tiny whispered. "Furthermore, there's sticky blood on it. There's a tricky little gold-inlaid coat-of-arms on the handle with the initials F. H. showing up clear. The gun is wrapped in the newspaper, and while I'm looking, out drops a note, written in red pencil—*my* pencil.

"It just says: 'Fritz, if I don't see you soon, I'll know that you have left me. I can't stand life without you. . . .' Maybe those aren't the exact words, but they're close. It's signed, Edith. Down at the bottom is an address on Avenue B."

Duke suddenly glanced toward the door as another customer entered. Then he breathed again.

"I don't get it . . ." Tiny worried. He went away to draw beer. Duke looked at the woman. She was still sitting at the table, staring at her clenched fingers. Tiny returned and leaned across the bar.

"This morning I'm having my coffee and glancing at the paper. First off I find the picture of this lean-faced black-haired guy with shiny eyes and a pointed goatee. Murdered, says the little headline. It's a guy

named Count Fritz Harlo. What he's Count of, they don't say. They hint that this Harlo was a very slick society customer, married and divorced a couple of times, always to heiresses, and always coming out with more than he went in with. He was found by cops who were summoned to investigate a disturbance—a fight in Harlo's room over in a place on Eighth. But what I start thinking is this: There was a coat-of-arms on that gun I found, and also the initials F. H. Also, the note was written to a guy named Fritz. I just— Say, what's the matter with you?"

"Have you got that newspaper?" Duke breathed. "Let me see it!"

Tiny peered toward the far end of the bar. He waddled away and returned with the newspaper.

Duke snatched the paper and stared at the picture. When he lifted his eyes and gazed at the golden-haired woman, his face wore a grayish pallor.

"That woman, in here each night," he whispered. "I haven't noticed her, but she must have seen me. Could she have planned that thing last night? Followed me until I went to sleep in that doorway, then . . ."

"What's the matter with you?" Tiny demanded. "You look sick."

Duke blinked at him glassily. He touched the newspaper with one finger. "This man—this Count Harlo—was the corpse last night," Duke breathed.

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"If she *was* instrumental in the plot, I should get out of here. She may be watching me now. There must be motives, reasons for her being here. But if the police found my cane and hat, certainly— If this woman knows anything. . . . I could be walking straight into. . . . Into what?" he asked himself blankly. "But I'm already in!"

Slowly he left the bar, crossed the room, his keen eyes fixed on the woman's bowed head. He felt the pulse hammer in his throat and heard Tiny cursing softly as he stopped at the woman's table.

CHAPTER TWO

The Man With the X-Ray Eyes

DUKE bowed. "Permit me, Madame. I am the Duke Danube, former director of psychic investigation at the Argoyle University of Europe. Spiritual and mystic counselor to the royalty of the East. Now I am examining various phenomena of your great land. If you will permit me the pleasure of—"

"I—I'm just leaving," she began quickly.

"Leaving? . . . Perhaps *escaping* would be the better word, Madame," he corrected softly. "Fleeing because you fear the truth that I—Duke Danube—know of all men. Am I not correct?"

Her eyes widened. "No, no! You're so wrong! I just. . . . Please, some other time," she begged. "I *must* be going."

Her anxiety, while touched with desperation, seemed to hold no deceit. Yet he had to know more. "Perhaps some other time will be too late," he said softly. He bent over. "For surely you know that death makes time move swiftly for those within its pattern. And you are caught there, yes?"

Color drained from her tired face, leaving her skin an almost transparent ivory. One hand started upward toward her throat. And while she stared at him strickenly, Duke slipped into the other chair at the table.

"Madame, I am drawn to you by your obvious distress. It charges the spheres. It resounds in my brain. My sympathy is touched. I know that you wish to speak. And I *know* that you have much to tell me."

"No, no! Of course I don't! I. . . . Oh, you are insane," she said more quietly. "I simply must be going. Now, please allow me to—"

"Madame! You must not—" Duke started sharply. His eyes narrowed on the white tablecloth in front of the woman. There were faint impressions, made by a fingernail. They formed letters, and the letters formed a name: Joan.

Duke gazed momentarily at the ceiling. His

hands settled on the sides of the table and tightened—drawing the cloth tight and obliterating the name. Then he spoke softly:

"Ah, I feel a name coming to me. . . . Yes!" He leaned forward, his eyes shining. "The name is Joan!"

"Oh, dear Lord, how could you?" the woman gasped. Then she was still, tense. She seemed scarcely to breathe.

"And what else is this I feel," Duke whispered. "Ah, yes. . . . A great dark cloud that passed last night. That cloud was—death!"

"Don't! Don't say any more!" she cried, grasping his hand. "Please, please! Don't speak!"

"But, Madame, how can I help you, then?" he asked gently.

"I don't *want* help." Her fingers tightened. "I want everything left alone. I—Oh, I don't believe in this sort of. . . . of mental thing. I—I just beg you, please leave everything alone!"

Duke frowned. The woman kept watching him miserably, silently pleading. Now he was certain that, whatever her place in death's pattern, it was one of tragedy and not of calculation. His words were torture to her, he knew. Then he thought of the corpse. He thought of himself.

"Madame, I have no control over my psychic receptions. I can't cease thinking in my own way. And surely you would not have me take my knowledge elsewhere?"

Her fingers jerked. "No! No. . . ." Her eyes looked longingly to the door. At last her words came, each wrung from her lips in a whisper:

"Once. . . . Oh, it was long ago—when I was young in New York, I met a man. A painter. He was young. I was a student at a music academy then. We planned to be married. We had no money. Time seemed so precious. We couldn't wait so long and. . . . Oh, it's such an old story." She twisted her fingers.

"You had a child, Madame," Duke supplied quietly.

"A girl. The painter went away. He never returned, and she. . . . I had to give her up. It was the only way then. She never knew—doesn't know. She must not know."

"I understand."

"I. . . . Then she—" Suddenly the woman covered her eyes and sobbed. "I won't go on! You can't read my mind! I won't be trapped into—"

"—Into telling—of Count Fritz Harlo?" Duke completed softly. With the mention of the name, the woman's cheeks turned chalky.

"You see, madam, there is no use, no hope, of concealing," Duke said.

"I just never believed. . . ." The woman swallowed. At last she continued. "The child

I could not let go completely," she whispered. "I had to see her, though I could never know her. I followed her, first to Buffalo where her foster-parents moved, then back to New York. I'd take any job to keep me near her." Again the woman paused and stared vacantly at the wall. The music echoed in the room. Glasses tinkled. Duke could scarcely draw his gaze from the eyes of this tired, lovely woman. At last she began to speak again:

"Through the years it has become all I live for. To catch a glimpse of her, follow her when she walks. You do understand? Often I pass the building where she lives. Many afternoons I'll wait there, watching the bronze revolving doors, hoping for her to come out. Just to see her.

"Exactly a week ago tonight I saw her leave the building alone. I followed. Two blocks from the house, she met a man. Instinctively I disliked and distrusted him. Though I saw him only in the shadows, I feared him."

SHE looked straight at Duke. "I followed them as they walked a few blocks. They went to a house. A queer house, someway," she said distantly. "A mansion, once. Old now. Outside it seemed lifeless, vacant. The windows were closed and tightly curtained. Nowhere was there a light or a sound. But when they knocked—and I heard him knock five times—the door was opened. I glimpsed green walls and a soft green light that was like a misty glow. Then the door closed.

"I saw other people, in twos and threes, entering that green hall. Yet there was never a sound. At last, just before midnight, my daughter reappeared with this tall thin man. They walked back toward her home. He left her before they reached it. I followed him until he entered a building on Eighth Street, not many blocks from here. I was able to learn his name, who he was."

The woman stopped and pushed back the waves of her golden hair. She half-reached for the glass of wine, then pushed it aside. "That night, after I left her, the memory of that man had a frightening effect on me. The next night I returned to watch for her. She wouldn't meet him, I was sure. It must have been a dream, I believed almost. But she did meet him that next night. They returned to that same red brick house. I waited in the dark doorway across the street until they came out, and again he left her before they reached her home.

"Each night this was repeated. Each night I became more worried, for a reason I couldn't understand. It was something about the—the spirit, the atmosphere of that house they went to. It haunted me.

"The first night I'd been worried, too wor-

ried to go home to bed. I'd come in here—I don't know why; perhaps to keep from being alone. Each night thereafter I'd come in, trying to think, to understand. And then, finally, they. . . ." She stopped.

Duke waited, not breathing, feeling the tense anguish of the woman whose eyes held his.

She whispered: "Last night she met him again. They went to that house, into that hall. And as I waited, I could feel something impending, hanging in the darkness. And then. . . . Then I heard the sound of a gunshot from that house; or maybe there were two. A door opened at the rear of a side passageway. In the dim light, I saw a man fall, try to rise, then lie there. There was a girl's scream. I saw her—my daughter! She ran from that alley, her golden hair bare, her coat half-off. . . .

"I ran after her. She didn't see or hear me. When I saw her drop something into the gutter, I picked it up. It was a gun," the woman whispered brokenly. "A gun with blood on it. I—I didn't know what to do. I couldn't think. I tried and tried. I just. . . couldn't.

"At last. . . . Oh, I wrapped it in a newspaper," she recalled wearily. "I came here, still trying to think. I knew she couldn't have murdered a man. There was a reason—for anything she did. I sat here, trying to think. And I knew what I had to do. The police must not find her, ever know of her. I knew that. But unless there was someone else, the danger was so great. So I—I held the gun in my hands. I wrote a note, hid it with the gun. The note bore my address, my name. I let myself be seen as I hid the gun. And now I am waiting."

She was looking at Duke in mute appeal. Her fingers went out to touch his hand.

"Now you know everything. You understand why I don't want help. Please, I beg of you, leave things just as they are. I never intended to tell anyone. Oh, I wish I had never seen you!"

DUKE glanced at her face, and suddenly, strangely for him, the glib gift of his speech was lost. He swallowed. "Madame, I only wish. . . ." he began heavily. Then he stopped and searched for a drink he did not have. He glanced about for a waiter but his eyes sought the outer door.

In the entrance stood the stoop-shouldered figure of the man from the corner fruit market. His beady eyes raked the room, then brightened as they passed beyond Duke and focused on the woman. He raised his arm and pointed a bony finger. Behind him in the half darkness loomed two bulky figures.

Duke's breath caught in his throat. He gripped the edge of the table, crept backward

until he reached the wall, then he began to tip-toe toward the bar. The men were crossing the room now, their eyes locked on the woman.

Duke reached the door into the back storage room. His eyes met Tiny's. "Forget where I am," he breathed.

He closed the door and struck a match. There was a trap door that led down to the basement where the beer was kept.

He hesitated and peered back through the crack of the door. He heard a deliberate voice speaking: "You. . . . Hey, are you the boss around here?"

"That would be me," Tiny's voice answered.

"Ever see this cane before?"

Duke cursed Perspiration popped out across his forehead.

"Can't say I have. Can't say I'd have remembered," Tiny answered. "Any reason why I should?"

"It's got a gold band here, see? And initials. . . . The funny thing is, we found another cane with a band and initials just like these at a certain place last night." There was a moment of heavy silence. "A little guy with a monocle just hustled away from that table over there. Where did he go and who was he?"

"I can't say I remember. I keep busy up here."

"But you wouldn't mind if we climbed around a little?" the voice was ironic.

Swiftly Duke scampered down the wooden stairs into the moist cool darkness. At the front of the cellar was another set of stairs, opening onto the sidewalk at the front of the Elbow Rest. Slowly he loosened the bolt of the overhead door, and pushed it open. The street was dark and empty, the music was stilled inside the bar.

He climbed out, closed the door, and hurried away. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Red Threads of Murder

IT WAS midnight when he hurried up the steps of a once-elegant brownstone building and entered the dim-lit and musty-scented hall. Delicately he tip-toed past the apartment door which bore the penciled sign, Manager. At the back of the hall were narrow stairs, covered with a faded and worn rose carpet.

He climbed up and moved along the third floor hall. From behind a closed door came the radio music, a tango. On a battered table stood a few letters, an unopened magazine, and a littered ash-tray. Duke found one letter to himself. A bill. Delicately he tore it in half and dropped it in a waste basket. He

touched the tarnished knob of the front door.

At that moment the faint creaking of a loose stair tread reached his ears. It came from the stairs behind him. The second creaking—that of the board going back into place—came after at least five seconds. Someone was climbing those stairs very slowly, stealthily.

Duke hesitated, then tip-toed to the bathroom, closing the door to a crack. He heard regular breathing pass outside; caught the sweetish scent of lotion or powder. He heard the door knob of his own room turning. Cautiously he peered out.

A fleshy hand, a manicured hand with pink nails and white half-moons glistening, was on the knob. On one finger was a cameo ring with the profile of a girl. Then he saw the man, his face pale and fleshy, his dull eyes sunk deep in pillows of flesh. His smile showed yellowed teeth between the parted lips as he vanished into Duke's room.

"Well, now we—" a dreamy voice began softly from Duke's room. It stopped abruptly. "Where is he?" The voice was sharp now.

"Where is he?" another voice, dry and flat, echoed. "He ain't come in yet. I've been waiting since nine o'clock, right here."

"He came in just this very minute, you damned fool! I spotted him from the corner. He's up here now!"

"But I swear nobody's come in here. I've been—"

"That little rat-face is in this building! Up on this floor! Damn you, I *saw* him! He should have been killed *last* night. He should have been framed for a double killing before any strings came untied. Now—"

Duke's fingers were wet as he edged open the door. He started tip-toeing toward the stairs, and as he touched the railing, the latch clicked at his door. He ducked and plunged toward the landing. A thick furious curse rasped through the hall. Steps pounded along the floor.

HE SWUNG around the landing, took one leap to the second floor, spun again, and plunged down. Double footsteps hammered after him. Doors began to slam. As he raced along the main hall toward the front door, the door of the manager's apartment opened and a buxom round-faced woman in a faded bathrobe peered out.

"Hah, and Mr. Danube," she exclaimed. "It is the rent I am asking about! When—"

"Later, my good woman. Much later!" he panted. He plunged past her, threw open the door, and raced along the dark street. He ducked around the corner into Sixth Avenue and sprinted on, his monocle dancing loosely at the end of its ribbon, his long coat tails snapping in the breeze.

"To think," he panted, "to think that I—"

Duke Danube—would submit to this! Someone will pay, mark my words!” His speed did not diminish until he had covered the three blocks to the Elbow Rest. He noted with relief that the police car was gone. He entered a narrow dark doorway at the left of the Elbow Rest, climbed a flight of creaking dark stairs, and arrived at a wooden door. He entered Tiny’s flat and closed the door behind him.

It was a huge and crowded room that Duke found most offensive to his artistic sensibilities. The walls were adorned with signed photographs of crouching wrestlers, toothy prizefighters, and girls in bathing suits. In one of the two sag-bottomed chairs slept an ancient toothless dog of indeterminate ancestry. There was an ash stand in the form of a mermaid with her hand out-stretched to receive the ashes. There was a soiled shirt on a couch, and a pair of shoes on the floor.

Duke studied all this with distaste, then paused in front of a cracked mirror and adjusted his bow tie. He settled his monocle over his eye, brushed his mustache, looked himself squarely in the eye, and gave a defiant growl. He strode back to the tiny kitchen, searched until he found Tiny’s bottle of Scotch, and returned to the front room. He poured a drink and sat down to think. . . .

Later, the pounding on the door awoke him. He got up and surprisingly found himself moving sideways. He collided with a table, focused his eyes until he saw only one front door, then walked carefully in that direction. “Who knocks?” he demanded with thick-voiced dignity.

“Open up, damn you,” Tiny’s furious whisper ordered.

Duke turned the lock. Tiny waddled in, took one look at Duke, then saw the empty bottle. Duke collapsed into the nearest chair and waved a weary hand. “Kindly spare me such abuse. Oh, yes. The police. What did they say?”

Tiny finished talking to himself, then glared at Duke. “They got your name. Slim was drunk downstairs. He heard ’em asking around, and he squalled without thinking. They want you plenty, and so what do you do? A million places in New York, and you got to pick me to hide behind!”

Duke swayed to his feet. “You will live to regret those words, my dear sir. I—”

Tiny sighed and mopped his sagging jowls. “What I’m telling you is, this is serious, see? Those dicks have got you tied into that murder job last night. And you sit up here and get drunk—”

“I have been thinking. You wouldn’t understand the process.” He sat down limply again. “The truth is, Tiny,” he said, “certain characters, for certain reasons unknown to me, are

very eager to arrange my funeral. I am bedeviled on all sides. My temper is rising.” He pounded his fist into the palm of his hand. “They have fired my fury! Aroused the Danube dander and I—I—” He sagged back.

A moment later his eyes closed and he slept. . . .

CONTRARY to all precedent, Duke awoke at ten o’clock the next morning. He groaned, swayed to his feet, and took a cold shower.

He found that Tiny was sleeping thunderously in the bedroom, and, without waking him, Duke extracted a five-spot from the pants hanging on the bed post. He left an I.O.U., took a tent-like gray raincoat from the closet, and tip-toed onto the street, one of Tiny’s hats setting down around his ears and the huge raincoat trailing to his ankles and completely enclosing his hands. He blinked against the brittle morning sunlight.

The woman, he mused, had said that the man and her daughter had walked only a few blocks. Then the woman had returned past the Elbow Rest. . . . So it shouldn’t be too far from here.

He searched from the east to the west side and back again, from Eighth Avenue to Third Avenue. At twelve-thirty he stopped. He was on a cross street just west of Fifth Avenue. He was standing in front of a small shoe-repair shop. Across the street was a naked-looking house of flat red brick. To one side was a narrow dead-end passageway. All windows of the house were tightly curtained and closed. The door was closed. There was no sound, no sign of any life about the house.

Duke fingered his tiny mustache nervously as he studied the windows. At last, very slowly, he crossed the street and paused at the passageway entrance. Again he listened, studying each curtained window. Slowly he tip-toed into the passageway. At the back was a narrow door, tightly closed.

Abruptly he stopped. His eyes widened and began to gleam. A few feet from the door there was a large and very clean patch of concrete. Elsewhere the passage was dirty, dusty, soiled. This place, Duke knew, had been scrubbed recently.

Perhaps to remove blood? he wondered.

He held his breath. Cautiously he looked up, first to the door, then to the windows. Was the curtain swaying? He couldn’t be certain. Had he been seen? He didn’t know. The curtain moved no more, if it had moved at all. The same unbroken hush cloaked the house. Quietly he tip-toed from the passage. When he had gone a block, he looked back. Here and there were people along the walks. None seemed to be following. . . .

He walked south and took up his methodical

search again. There was a sidewalk cafe across the street from the daughter's home, he remembered. And the building where she lived had bronze revolving doors. Thus it was probably a large place. . . .

IT WAS after three-thirty when he found it, a tall brown-brick building on Tenth near Sixth Avenue. Duke removed the coat, settled his monocle, and sauntered into the small, indirectly lighted lobby. He entered the office with the switchboard. A girl ceased typing and looked up.

Duke smiled apologetically. "I am Monsieur Danube, the designer. I have an appointment with a mademoiselle. This address I remember, but the mademoiselle's card I have misplaced. Stupid." He smiled again. "But I describe her, yes! Young—twenty, perhaps. Golden hair and . . . Ah, her name returns almost! It is Joan . . ."

"Oh, you mean Miss Joan Marchant," the girl said. "That's apartment 8-E. If you'd like me to announce—"

"*Merci*, but I am expected." Duke smiled again and bowed himself out.

He left the elevator and stopped before a heavy dark door at the end of the wide silent hall. He pressed the bell and waited, humming softly. The door was opened and in the shadows the girl's figure was barely discernible. Her hair seemed almost silver rather than gold. Her face was an ivory blur above a white sweater. "Yes?" she asked. The one word was low, faintly breathless.

"My apologies for this intrusion, Miss Marchant. Permit me: I am the Duke Danube. It you will grant me a few minutes of your time . . ."

"But I don't know you?" she asked uncertainly.

"But I know you," he said softly. "Please, the subject is delicate. Most delicate. Need I say more?"

The girl did not answer, but with Duke's gentle pressure, she let the door swing inward.

He followed her around a bend of the hall and into a large corner room. The light revealed cream plaster walls, a brilliant blue rug, a long orderly bookcase filled with best-sellers. On an end table were three worn books: *Techniques of Salesmanship*, *Insurance—Why and How*, the *Insurance Executive's Handbook*.

Duke frowned lightly. There was something brittle and chill about the room. Something that lacked life or the spirit of warmth. It was, somehow, a new room; a room that hadn't been lived in. Then he looked at the girl. She was watching him intently, one hand still on the light switch.

She wore a simple gray skirt and white

sweater. She was a slender girl with slight, graceful curves. In the lamplight her hair was pale gold, a little disordered now, and her eyes were gray, slightly shadowed with doubt. . . . Or was it worry? She was still a child, Duke thought, a child whose shy, quiet beauty was just awakening. And her eyes, as they moved up and down his clothes, became puzzled.

"What do you want?" she asked.

Duke laid aside his hat and began to polish his monocle. He saw a newspaper on the couch, folded to a page. He saw the small headline: *Suspect Confesses Harlo Murder!*

He nodded to an open door. "It is best that our conversation be private."

She hesitated, then silently closed the door. Duke sat down and fitted his monocle.

"You wonder what brought me here, unknown to you. Why should I, a man you've never seen, knock at your door?" He smiled patiently. "Actually our paths have crossed, unknown to you." He leaned forward. "Tell me, were you not passing along the street outside at eleven o'clock in the evening, night before last? Were you not, in fact, running?"

The girl became rigid as stone. Only the pulse in the hollow of her throat moved. Then her lips parted. "Why do you ask?"

"I should explain first that I am the Duke Danube, former director of psychic investigation at the Argoyle University in Europe, and psychic counsellor to the royalty of the East.

"You see, my child, I was passing along this same street at that time, night before last. I did not see you clearly; it was dark. But you were extremely disturbed. Ah, yes; do not dispute me. You were so alarmed and frightened that the impulses from your mind were like an electric current filling the street. I could not help but receive them, be stunned at their force—and then, be gravely concerned. So." He leaned forward. "I have come here in an effort to help you."

"But I—I think you're insane!" she said sharply, rising quickly. "I must ask you to go at once! Please, if you—"

DUKE arose. He held up one finger. "But understand, my child, it is useless for you simply to banish me from your physical presence. My mind, by now, has become so attuned to yours that your thoughts are in constant transit to me, as if I were a radio tuned to your frequency."

"I ask you to go at once!" the girl repeated, her voice rising.

"Simply because you are afraid," Duke said calmly. "Your fear is like threads stretching, guiding you. And I follow them. One thread leads the way to the green-lit hall of a somber house on Fourteenth Street. Some lead into a dark alley. Some touch a man who— But I

shall not say it. Others tangle in the fear and conflict of your mind, in a sense of guilt and remorse, in a knowledge that someone, somewhere may be in trouble for something that you—"

"Stop!" the girl cried. She slipped limply down on the couch. "You are from the police?" she breathed.

"Believe me, I have nothing to do with the police."

"Then why are you here? Tell me the truth!"

"I couldn't resist coming, any more than I can prevent myself from thinking. You may not have faith in my talents, but they exist despite your doubts. It is best to use them, my child. Listen:

"I see the image of a tall thin man, dark and attractive to you. I see many secret meetings. And I see a final meeting where a door is opening. There is a misty, green-lit hall, which you enter with this man. It was night before last. And this man. . . ? Ah, yes," Duke whispered. "I have his name! It was Count Fritz Harlo!"

The girl was deathly pale, still as stone as Duke continued, looking steadily in her shadowed eyes.

"I see a gun, small and shining. Blood is on that gun. That gun is in your hand! You are fleeing along a dark street, fleeing from an alley. Then you are hiding the gun. . . . No, you are dropping it in a gutter; you're too frightened to think. You are coming home. And now. . . . Now you are thinking of another woman."

Slowly the girl's fingers crept toward her throat. Her eyes grew wider. He spoke swiftly, softly:

"You are thinking of this woman who has been arrested. You are wondering who she is, what she looks like. You wonder who may love her, who may be grieving now. You wonder why she has confessed to a crime that you know she did not commit. And as you think, you remember the hardness of the gun in your hand, and you keep thinking—"

"Don't . . . Don't make me think of—" the girl cried. She stumbled from the couch and sank down at Duke's feet, clutching his knees, sobbing, her body shaking. At last she lifted her eyes.

"I can't—can't help her," she breathed. "Oh, yes, I think all those things, and more! I can't sleep, and the thoughts burn like fire inside me, but I can't speak. I can't because I—I—Because I don't know what happened!"

Duke's brows jerked upward. Yet, as he looked at her, the truth of her denial was etched in the agony of her young face; in the depths of her eyes.

"Then you must tell me everything you possibly can."

"I know I must tell someone," she whispered. "I can't take it alone any longer. I can't tell them here." She gestured wearily about the room, "because my father and mother here wouldn't understand, but . . ." She stopped, drawing a deep, tired breath, and concentrated a moment.

And Duke waited for what he knew would be the truth, and the only hope.

CHAPTER FOUR

The House With the Green Hall

SHE began slowly. "I met him at a cocktail party—some people I scarcely knew. Something about him was so different from. . . . Oh, all this," she said wearily. "Rates on policies and pep-letters and old jokes and men from out of town, and. . . . I wanted something different, don't you see? But I knew I could never bring him to my home, so I met him elsewhere. After a few times I went with him into that—that ghastly green hall, into that strange warm silence. I remember it only so hazily, as if I'd never really seen it except in a dream, and yet . . . yet things about it are terribly clear, too.

"I remember the man that opens the door—a little flat-faced man. And along the hall are great dark doors—the kind that slide back into the walls, instead of just opening. They were always closed. And at the rear of the hall there are long curving stairs with a black railing and a green carpet that hushes your footsteps.

"We went up those stairs into a huge room, really a beautiful room. The walls are soft ivory; the lights are low, there must be at least fifteen deep soft chairs with a little ivory table by each one. There is music—a violin playing soft and lonely and haunting. Other people are there—men and women. Most of them are well-dressed, sometimes in evening clothes.

"And then, sometimes, you leave this room and go along the hall into a smaller room—with no windows. But the music is still there, and they bring you the . . . the little pipe things that you smoke, and—"

Suddenly she covered her eyes. Her body shook and her sobs twisted at her throat. Duke leaned forward. He found his lungs thirsting for air. He touched the strands of her hair, touched her trembling shoulders.

"I know, I know," he said quietly. "You don't have to talk of that part."

"Oh, I knew what it was. I knew what I was doing," she breathed jerkily. "But once I started, it . . . nothing seemed to matter. It was like a horrible spell of hypnosis. I tried and tried to fight it back, but I'd find myself counting the minutes until I'd meet Fritz. . . ."

"I know." Duke laid aside his monocle and fingered a cigarette. He laid it aside, too. "But that last night. . . . Tell me everything you can possibly remember. Leave out nothing."

"THAT last night," she said slowly, "we walked swiftly to the green hall, climbed the stairs, and to the ivory room. Fritz rose and moved around the room once or twice; he frequently did that, looking at the other people. We—we went into a little room. . . .

"Then a man was at the door. A large man, with a white round face, with sunken eyes. He was smiling, I think, and his teeth were yellowed. I think he spoke to Fritz and . . . Yes, Fritz went away with him. For a moment I couldn't remember where I was, why I was there. Then I saw that room; saw it as I'd never been able to see it before. Suddenly the music was like something crawling beneath my flesh. Fritz, I suddenly hated, despised! I was afraid.

"I ran into the hall. There a little man caught me. I tried to fight. He took me into another room where Fritz was. And there was the large white-faced man with the bald head. He and Fritz were talking. Their voices were low, and—Oh! I'm not sure—but it was something about letters.

"I wanted to go. I begged Fritz to take me home. He paid no attention to me. I—I think the big man laughed. I tried to open the door. Then everything seemed to happen at once. I think Fritz seized me—threw me toward the desk where the big man was standing. I was stumbling, falling, and then I saw a gun in Fritz's hand. I fell against the big man, and suddenly I was being pushed back toward Fritz. Things tangled. I—there was an explosion. I fell against Fritz. Something hit me, and then the door was opened.

"I got up from the floor where I'd fallen and ran. Everyone seemed to be running. I don't remember where I went, which way. But I found a door just as there was another explosion. . . . You see, I can't remember all of it. I—I just know that I got to an open door, and the light was streaming down on the dark concrete, and Fritz was lying there.

"His arms were outstretched, and a little dark leathery box was there beside him. There was blood and—and I realized I had a gun in my hand. I don't know where I got it or what I'd done with it. Then I ran.

"Someone seemed to follow for a few steps, but I think he fell. I heard a heavy grunt and a bump. Somewhere I threw the gun away. I got home and . . . and that's everything."

"They tried to catch you when you ran?" Duke asked suddenly. "Did they know your name at that place with the green hall?"

"I don't know. I—I don't suppose so," she said.

"But they didn't want you to get away," he murmured. Suddenly he rose. He paced the length of the room, twirling his monocle furiously, knitting his brows intensely. "Letters. . . . They were talking of letters. . . . And there was a dark leather box near Fritz's body."

He stopped and looked out the window. Now the earlier mist had deepened into a blue-black haze of evening. At last he turned and gazed at Joan Marchant.

The room was dark save for the pyramid of light flowing down from the lamp. In the half-shadowed region, the girl's face was very young, very tired. As her eyes clung to his, a feeling of fraud, a guilt of deceit strayed through him. He blinked and walked slowly away.

At a side table he picked up a yellowed gardenia tied with a thin gold ribbon. He toyed with it absently. Its scent was still sweet. He tossed it about in the palm of his hand. At last he faced the girl again.

"They tried to follow you. You escaped them, presumably. But there is every chance that they are trying to trace you, locate you. You must not leave this building. Do not be seen on the street. Remember that. I will contact you in the very near future."

"But that woman who's been arrested?" Joan protested. "I can't get her out of my mind. They say she's confessed, but she won't explain why she did it, or how. And they say there's another suspect—"

"Don't worry about such things tonight, my child." He picked up the hat and coat and turned toward the hall. The girl rose wearily and pushed the loose waves back from her forehead.

"It all seems so ghastly, and so—so impossibly unreal," she worried. "I ask and ask myself why I ever went there. I can't get an answer. Oh, sometimes I was lonely here, but if I ever—"

"I understand. Each of us, somewhere in life, records his chapter of remorse. We must close yours."

Softly, he left her standing in the shadows of the hall.

CHAPTER FIVE

Death's Bright Pattern

WHEN Duke reached the dark walk outside the building, he had donned Tiny's tentlike raincoat and over-large hat again. He gazed up and down the street, while his fingers twirled the wilted gardenia distractedly.

"I know now all that I'm going to know until. . . ." he murmured. "The talking is finished. The time has come. . . ." He let the gardenia fall. Something in his small body

was cold and restless and indescribably lonely.

He turned slowly and began to walk. At the corner he paused to let a line of cabs stream by. He glanced back toward the building where Joan Marchant lived. In the near-dark, he saw a figure bending down, then straightening and moving away. The cabs passed. Duke walked on, thinking restlessly.

He edged open the door of the Elbow Rest and peered in. At a back table Luigi and Benno, the waiters, were eating. Tiny was polishing glasses at the bar. The only customer was a thin shabby man drinking beer.

Duke rolled up the collar of the coat and hurried across the bar toward the door into the rear store room. Tiny stared at him. His jaw sagged, as Duke jerked a thumb toward the store room and vanished therein. A few moments later Tiny squeezed his three hundred pounds through the doorway.

"Where have *you* been?" he whispered thunderously. "Dicks have been in and outta here like I was running a subway turnstile. They've been up to your room, too. They got the old landlady over there so excited she let her canary get loose." He lowered his hedge-like brows. "And it says in the paper that lady admitted she done it," he added. "How do you tie that?"

"What do the dicks say about *me*?" Duke asked.

"I hear straight from McCoy that the gun what killed this count has your prints all over it. They know for sure that's your hat and cane they found in his room. They found a bloodstained towel in your room, too. Blood checks, too. They think the woman's lying."

Duke paced the small littered room, clasping and unclasping his hands behind him. "Letters. . . . And a dark leather box," he murmured. "He must have dropped it as he died. It was important, because he was running away with it."

"I don't get the picture," Tiny muttered.

Suddenly Duke jerked erect. His monocle slipped from his eye. He caught it deftly. "Picture! Of course, a picture!" he gasped. "And that little box was a tiny camera. I see the whole thing now. The entire pattern of the—"

"Say, have you got delerium-precoxi or something? You—"

"In that large ivory room! Harlo got up and walked around, looking at the other people. He was snapping pictures of them with a concealed camera! Then . . . Ah, and then came the blackmail letters, threatening to show pictures of them in that place. The people are wealthy, fashionable, perhaps important. So what did they do? They took the letters to the large bald man who apparently runs the place. The same man who's after me. He became watchful. Harlo played his

game once too often. The man observed him. He called Harlo into the office, confronted him with the blackmail letters. He intended to shake Harlo down for the camera. Harlo knew he was trapped. So . . ."

Duke paused and frowned savagely. He snapped his fingers. "Yes! And when Joan created the disturbance by trying to open the door, Harlo seized his only chance. He pushed her into the big man and drew his gun. The big man hurled her back toward Harlo. In the struggle Harlo was shot. He dropped his gun; he'd gotten blood on it. Joan was on the floor, and grasped it instinctively. Harlo tried to flee. Joan ran, too. At the rear door, Harlo fell into the passageway and died. Joan escaped. Then. . . ." Again he paused and his eyes shone brightly at Tiny.

"The rest is perfectly simple, perfectly logical. Harlo's body had to be removed, otherwise it would draw investigation to that house. So the killers took Harlo's body to the room where he'd lived on Eighth Street. Probably they intended setting up some kind of a suicide scene. But they found me asleep in the doorway, obviously a trifle inebriated. Here, they say, is the murderer. So I am taken upstairs with Harlo's body.

"The death gun is put in my pocket. Things are generally messed up to suggest a fight. The killers leave. But they failed to consider the Danube stamina! I pulled myself together. When the dicks arrived, obviously in answer to an anonymous tip from the killer, I departed. And now what happens? . . ." he asked swiftly. Again he frowned thoughtfully.

"The killer, or killers, learn that I had escaped their trap. They fear that I may not have been as unconscious as I seemed. They must cancel me off before I say queer things to the police. They had noted my address in my pocketbook, and later they try to get me at my room. I outwit them, naturally. . . ." He tweaked his mustache and massaged his palms together vigorously as he strode up and down the room.

"That covers the whole pattern—if that was a camera. Perhaps Joan would remember if I refreshed her mind slightly. Then, if the blackmail letters could be found and Harlo's writing analyzed. . . ."

Duke snapped his fingers and peered into the front room. It was still empty save for the one beer customer. He hurried to the telephone booth, looked up the Marchant number, and dialed.

"No, my daughter is not in just now," a woman's nervous voice answered Duke's question.

"Not in? Where did she go? When?" he asked sharply.

"Why, I—I don't know. I heard the bell

ring, and then a man's voice spoke and. . . Hello? Who is this? Is anything wrong?"

"That was the man who was following me," he whispered. "Joan must have been wearing that gardenia that last night when she ran away. . . . He recognized it, knew she lived there. He decided to find her first. He did and—" His words vanished, and into his mind leaped the thought of the police. He sought for another coin.

"They'll *have* to believe me!" he breathed. "I can't let her—" He held the coin poised between sweating thumb and forefinger. "But didn't the man who called for her take her back to that house? Aren't they questioning her, trying to learn how much I know, how dangerous I may be? Of course she's there! But would she survive if the police raided the place? Wouldn't she be the first to die?" He rose and stalked back to the rear room. Tiny looked at him. His eyes widened.

"Cat of torment, what happened to you out there! You look—"

"Take off that apron. Luigi's handling the bar for a while," Duke demanded.

"Are you crazy? Me leave, and the rush just ready to—"

"Hurry! Get the gun from the bar! A girl can be killed while you stand there and prattle!"

Half a minute later Tiny joined Duke on the dark sidewalk outside the Elbow Rest.

"Hurry," Duke snapped. He paused and entered a small hardware store. When he reappeared, Tiny said:

"Hey, that's a glass-cutter you got. I don't like—"

"That makes two of us that don't like it," Duke snapped.

LESS than ten minutes later, Duke clutched Tiny's arm. "That house over there," he whispered. "We've got to get in there without being observed. Once we're in, we must act swiftly. A girl is being held there. She is to be murdered, undoubtedly. Once we've secured her, the police can be summoned, but not until she is safe. And please be cautious. These people are deadly."

The huge man grunted gently. He followed Duke across the street and into the depth of the dark passageway. They passed the rear door and Duke stopped at a narrow window at the rear of the house. He motioned for Tiny to kneel, then he crawled up on the broad back.

First he struck a match and located the window lock. He used the glass-cutter, and tapped gently. The glass split along the groove. A moment later, Duke pulled himself up and into utter darkness. Tiny grasped the sill and tried to climb in. Duke seized his shoulders and pulled. Their breaths grew harsh.

"Just can't—can't make it," Tiny panted at last.

Duke listened. Sweat was salty on his lips. "Give me the gun," he whispered. "Go to that rear door. I'll try to open it. If you don't hear from me in ten minutes, kindly break in."

Tiny handed up the stubby revolver, and Duke tip-toed across the darkness to a wall. He located a door knob. The door opened into a narrow hall that curved from the front of the house. A misty green light filtered around the curve from the front.

No sound invaded the warm thick silence. The rear of the hall terminated at a closed door. As he touched the knob, he heard a sigh and a creaking sound from within.

He stiffened. A guard at the back door?

Before he could think, a long-drawn metallic whine filled the hall. He twisted around. The door he had entered was swinging lazily inward, the hinges crying. Duke felt a cold sweep of air from the open window. He started to move. He heard a footstep.

The guard had heard the hinge, he realized. He hesitated, his fingers tightening on the gun. But it was too soon, he thought. A disturbance now might be fatal. He hurried around the curve of hall that led toward the misty green light. He heard the click of a latch behind him. Quietly, stealthily, he edged forward until the entire main hall opened up before him, and he was standing beneath the curve of the rising stairway.

Beyond, the walls were bare and green. The floor was heavily carpeted; and not a sound disturbed the frozen stillness. At the main door at the front stood a flat-faced, short man with a wrinkled forehead, his flesh inhumanly green in the dim light.

All this Duke saw in an instant as he listened to the sounds behind him. He heard a muffled curse, heard the rear window lower, and swift footfalls. And then suddenly Duke knew. . . .

He started up the stairs, his feet sinking silently into the thick carpet. The flat-faced man still stood motionless, half-facing the front door. Duke turned the curve of stairs and looked into the second floor hall.

It, too, was green and desolately empty. Closed doors—six on each side—ranged along the wall. For the first time his ears found the weird and lonely music of a solitary violin.

Now footsteps pattered in the hall below, and the pulse throbbed in his temples. Time was growing short, his mind chanted. And which door. . . ?

The little rooms were at the front, Joan had said. Duke remembered that. One of these nearer doors would lead into the ivory room. The office must be toward the front, also. He tip-toed forward, his damp hot fingers clenched on the gun in his pocket.

As steps started softly up the stairs behind him, Duke seized a doorknob and peered into a tiny shadowed room. The dim figure of a man drowsed on a couch. Thick sweetish smoke filled the room, and the man seemed not to notice Duke. Duke closed the door hastily and tried the next. This was another room, identical to the first, except that it was unoccupied. He entered, closing the door behind him.

Now the haunting music played softly all about him and the sweet, musty aroma lingered here. And as Duke listened, he heard a door open nearby.

"... found a hole cut in the back window, Mr. Selvid," a voice said swiftly. "The window was open when I found it."

"A hole? The window open?" a throaty deep voice echoed. Duke's muscles tensed.

"... haven't been able to find anyone in here yet. Morosci says he didn't see anybody come into the downstairs hall, but I—"

The deep voice said harshly, "Have the servants tell the guests to leave at once. The doors, all windows are to be watched. Search carefully, quickly. Clear the supply room. The opium goes to the sub-basement. In event of extreme difficulty—you understand what I mean—the plans for fire are to be carried out instantly. Send Morosci up here at once."

"Yes, sir," the voice answered. The door opened and closed, the deep voice spoke lazily:

"I fear our conversation must end, Miss Marchant. You have, I suspect, that little fool with the monocle to thank for this."

"But I— Please, please! I promise I won't—"

"I must ask you to rise." The voice was deathly cold.

CHAPTER SIX

Duke Stops in Hell

DUKE felt something cold clutch at his stomach. He drew the gun from his pocket, looked at it. Sweat beaded his forehead, and glistened on his cheeks. But his footsteps were carrying him toward the hall door.

When he peered out, many doors were open. Music had ceased. A murmur of voices and

confusion was spreading through the green hall. A man and a woman in evening dress hurried to the stairs.

Duke abandoned his caution. Straight to the adjacent door he moved, twisted the knob, and threw the door open, and kicked it shut behind him.

"Get your hands up!" he ordered.

Across the room a large, loose-featured man spun around. His bald head glistened. His pale eyes widened in their pallets of flesh. Joan Marchant gave a soft cry.

"G-get your hands up, d-damn you!" Duke ordered again, his voice shaking uncontrollably. One moment the big man stared at the gun, then lifted his metallic eyes again.

"You alcoholic little idiot, you have no chance!" he breathed.

"Get your hands up! I swear I'll shoot you!"

The lips twitched again. Slowly the arms went up. The fingers twitched in the air. He moved forward one pace. "You still have no—"

From somewhere below came a choked shout, and footsteps pounded up the stairs. Duke saw the light glinting on the girl's face of his cameo ring. Wood splintered. Into the turmoil broke startled screams from men and women alike. Many feet raced through the room and halls. Duke gasped with relief. It was Tiny, coming with help. . . .

"You prying little rat!" the man roared savagely. His arms swung downward toward the lamp on the desk. Joan screamed. Duke jerked the gun and its roaring thunder burst upon the walls. The lamp crashed to the floor. In the darkness, a thick groan broke from the lips of the big man.

"This way! This way, Joan!" Duke cried as the room was suddenly filled with movement and sound. Duke stumbled toward Joan. There was a violent thrashing sound from the desk. He found the girl's slender wrist. "This way! Hurry," he breathed.

"The fire!" Duke cried. "Hurry!" He half-pulled, half-dragged Joan toward the stairs. Curling wisps of gray smoke were fuming from the doors.

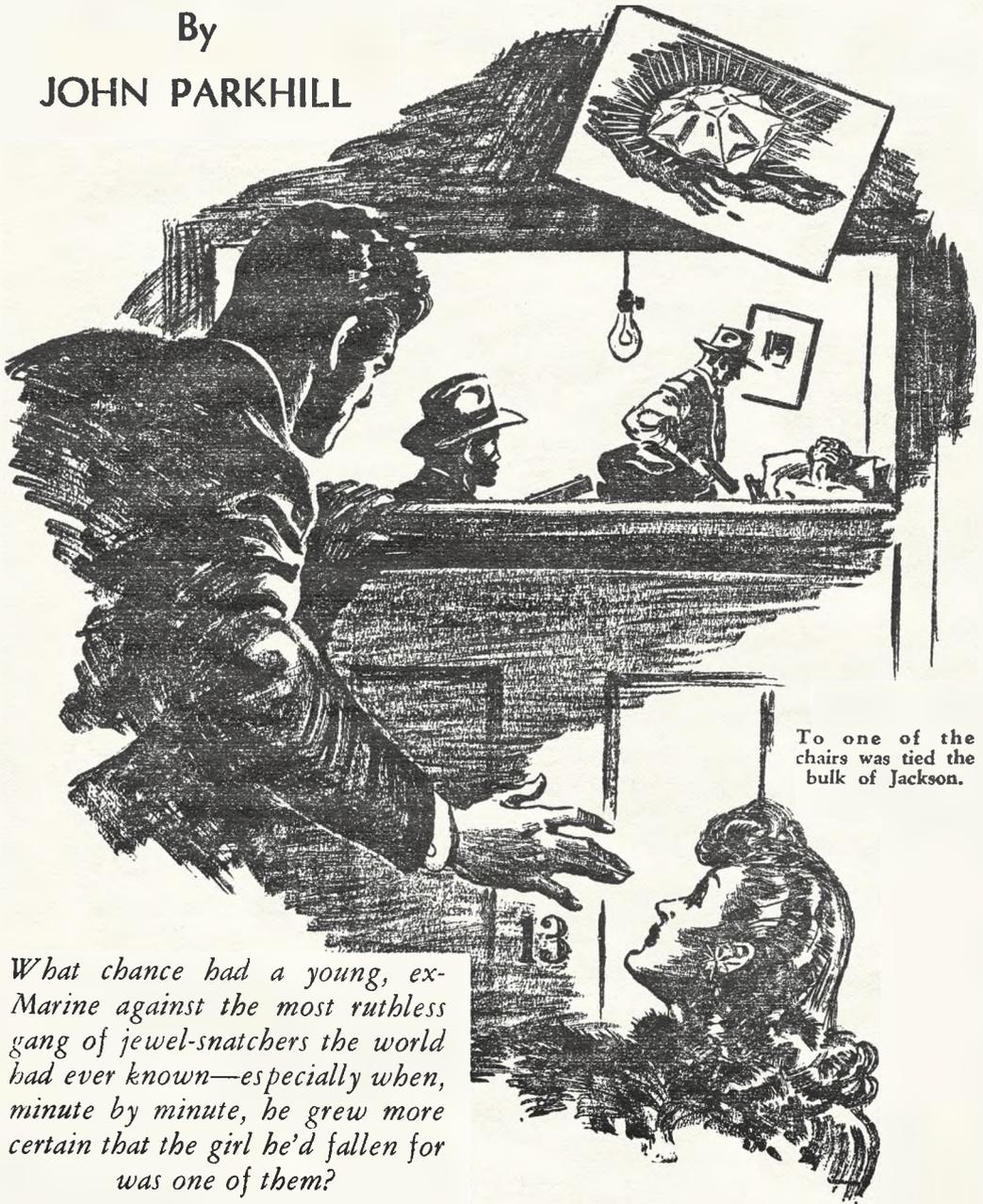
He paused at the inert figure of the uncon-
(Please turn to page 95)

To Our Subscribers:

YOUR COPY MAY BE LATE

Because of the exigencies of wartime transportation, your magazine may be late sometimes in reaching you. If it does not arrive on time, please do not write complaining of the delay. This delay occurs after it leaves our offices and is caused by conditions beyond our control.

By
JOHN PARKHILL



To one of the
chairs was tied the
bulk of Jackson.

What chance had a young, ex-Marine against the most ruthless gang of jewel-snatchers the world had ever known—especially when, minute by minute, he grew more certain that the girl he'd fallen for was one of them?

SLIPS THAT PASS IN THE NIGHT

IT WAS the terrible feeling of strangeness and loneliness that got him into trouble. He had a bullet in him and the malaria had weakened something inside him, the doctors said, and they discharged him—but he hadn't wanted that. He felt fine, he told them.

There were things left undone—he could scarcely remember when he hadn't been a Marine—and what the hell was he to do?

But they turned him loose and he took his savings and went out on the town. He changed from the uniform they had denied him to a

cheap wartime suit, a slouch felt hat and a bright necktie. He tried hard to enjoy himself, but he only got plastered.

It began to rain and he had no confidence in the clothing he wore so uneasily, so he went into this place in Chelsea, downtown. He was pretty drunk, but he would have gone in anyway because it was one of those little side-alley places and he was sick of the big clubs with their crowds of people spending too much money.

He saw the girl at once, sitting with a little man who had a large bald head and peered owl-like through thick eyeglasses. She was very pale and very frightened.

He knew all about fear. He had lain in a slimy jungle with Japs all around him and thought that the odor of his fear would tip off his position. Sudden sweat came to his armpits now, watching the girl, recognizing her fear.

The little man seemed calm enough. Dick took a table near them, against the wall. There were few tables in this strange place, and even fewer customers. It was very late, Dick remembered. He had begun the trip back to his hotel when the rain started and he saw the neon sign saying "Club Fantastic" and walked in.

Dick ordered a drink. The waiter said, "Bourbon or rum. 'At's all we got." He was a big man, with arms which hung low and swung easy—a tough man, Dick thought.

Dick said, "Rum. With water." The waiter made a face and went away. Dick returned to studying the small man. He felt soberer, watching, but actually he was pretty drunk. He had to close one eye to see really well.

The little man was looking slowly around the room. He cocked a glance at the exit, then he turned to the girl and said something and she turned paler than before.

Dick turned his attention to the customers, suddenly aware that *he* was being watched, too. He saw that there were only two tables occupied beside his own and that a tall man with slanting eyes, not a Jap, not a Chinese, was talking with the hulking waiter. The waiter jerked his shoulders resignedly and started back toward Dick with the drink on a small tray.

The club was very small. The four walls were hung with sleazy purple drapes, unrelieved by a design, the dance floor was tiny, and the band was gone, their instruments covered for the night. The waiter brought Dick's drink, slopped it on the table and said, "Jernt's closed, y'know. That'll be two bucks."

Dick said, "For what?"

"The drink," said the waiter. "And that's all, brother."

Dick said, "You know what you can do with your damned drink."

The waiter leaned the backs of his hands on the table. Over by the wall was a dark woman with bangs, and a narrow-faced, tuxedoed Romeo. A very thin man sat behind Dick, with a tough blond. The tall Oriental stood watching the situation. The little man was suddenly quite still, as immobile as a statue, watching Dick, whose voice had risen as his resentment soared.

The waiter said, almost crooning, "You wanta make somethin' out of it, fella, step inna alley. No fightin' in here, but inna alley you c'n be obliged."

Dick said, "You big ape—I'm not paying two bucks for any drink without seeing a show or hearing a band. And you can have anything you like right now."

The waiter hesitated. His mental processes were slow; he had made the speech which usually frightened drunks and he was not quite sure of his next line.

So Dick got up, pushing the table a little, getting his back to the wall. He said, "I'm getting out of here and anyone who tries to stop me will catch a little hell." He felt drunk and restless now. He saw the waiter still wavering and shoved past him, pausing at the table where the little man and the pale girl sat. On a sudden impulse he said, "How about going somewhere else with me? I'm just out of the Marines and on the town. . . ."

The little man said drily, "An excellent idea! Myra—get your wrap."

The girl was wearing a green evening dress. She had a smooth, shapely body, Dick saw, putting the wrap around her, and if she had not been so scared she would have been pretty gorgeous. The little man got up and Dick noticed that he was slightly lame. He had a thick cane upon which he leaned.

The waiter came charging over, roaring, "You'll pay fer dat drink, you wise guy."

DICK turned and waited. When the waiter was almost upon him he stepped forward, one hand on the giant's right wrist, the other on his elbow. He spun, and the waiter spun with him. He let go, then cracked the edge of his hand sharply against the waiter's jugular as he staggered off-balance.

The big man went down on his face and lay utterly still. Dick said sharply, "I won't be clipped in a joint. Anyone else want anything?"

The Oriental started forward, then checked himself. The other customers stared. The man in the tuxedo seemed to be reaching for an inside pocket. The very thin man put his cigarette carefully upon an ash tray and turned in his chair, but did not arise. The dark girl and the blond seemed disinterested.

The pale girl said, "Oh! Now you've done it. You've hurt Jackson!"

"Never mind!" said the little man sharply. "Let's try to get out. Hurry!"

He started for the exit, limping badly. The girl followed, and Dick brought up the rear. The hat-check girl was gone, but Dick's new hat was on the hook. He opened the half-door into the small check room and reached for it.

He heard the girl's small scream, heard the little man say, "No! You fool!"

Then something happened to all the lights in the place, as if someone had thrown the light switch, and Dick was in total darkness. But instinct left over from jungle warfare had thrown him flat on his face and the remembered sound of gunfire neither surprised nor frightened him. He reached for his rifle and of course it was not there.

But he got through the door and his hand touched something sticky and warm. He whispered the girl's name, as he had heard the little man speak it—"Myra!"

A small moan answered him to his left, near the exit. He slid over, dragging her down, whispering, "Crawl. If they shoot, they'll be aiming too high."

He dragged her along. She made no other sound and her flesh was soft, but firm beneath the wrap. He found the door by instinct and worked at the knob; it was not locked. Of course there could be someone waiting outside, but he had to chance that. He said, "Get your feet under you. When I open the door, dash out."

"Osbert!" she whispered back, frantically. "We can't leave him! He's got it on him—he always would carry it on him."

Dick said, "You'll have these characters on you! Umbriago! Git!" He opened the door and shoved her.

The bullets lanced at them. The girl got out, and the door closed behind her. A sing-song voice cried, "Outside! After them!"

Feet scuffed on the floor. Dick's eyes were fast becoming accustomed to the dark. He made out the bulk of someone and rose from the floor. Using the man as a screen, he whirled, backed to the knob, swung it. No one fired. His hand covered the man's mouth. He gave a twist, snapped the man away from him into the darkness. He slammed the door, and ran up the street, where the retreating figure of the girl hurried.

He came up to her and the lipstick was like a gash in her white face so that at first he thought she was wounded. "They've killed Osbert!" she said. "He should never have gone there. I told him it was a trap but he was determined to get the other one."

Dick said, "If you have any ideas about getting away from these characters, let me have them quick! We can notify the cops and come back. But first we've got to get out of here."

They turned a corner and she got hold

of herself, at least partially, he thought. She said more calmly, "I have a small coupé across the street—see?" Her hands trembled so that she could hardly give him her car key.

As he was opening the door, the first man came around the corner, knelt and began firing. On a New York street at four in the morning a man was shooting at him! He pulled the girl down low just as a hole appeared in the windshield.

HE STRAIGHTENED up then and headed downtown, as fast as he could make the little car go. He'd almost reached the police station when Myra said, "Don't! Not the police!"

He pulled over to the curb before an all-night drug store, the friendly gleam from its lights on the wet sidewalk partly restoring him to normalcy.

He sensed a difference in the girl and looked carefully at her. A bit of color had returned to her cheeks and her voice was steadier, full of a peculiar, vibrant timbre. She said earnestly, "You have blundered into something and you have harmed us. Tell me who you are."

Mechanically he told her. When he had finished, she said, "A Marine? You are not afraid—of things."

He said, "This whole thing is whacky. I was plastered and wanted another drink. A waiter started a fight—you looked scared. Now a guy is killed. Why not the cops?"

She said, "My name is Myra Glenn. My father was an explorer. He came back from Tibet the last time and died. Explorers make little money, but father had brought out a pair of matched rubies as large as hen eggs. Do you know what *that* means?"

"Lots of dough," nodded Dick.

"For one of them, thousands. For both, a lot more," she said. "You cannot imagine the difference between one—and the matched pair. I had them, but I had to sell them. Father had not registered them, because they were stolen from a temple."

Dick said, "Now wait a minute. I read this story one time."

"You've got to believe me!" she cried. "Osbert Twill, the man who was shot back there, was the only person who could dispose of these jewels. I was sent to him by Jackson, who had been my father's man. Twill was making arrangements to sell them when one was stolen!"

Dick said, "Why only *one*?"

"He did not carry them together, of course," she said scornfully. "Nor loose in his pocket! They stole one from his shoe—the one with the thick sole. He was lame, you remember?"

Dick said, "Now wait—who stole the ruby?"

"Fan Tan and his gang," she said impatiently. "Fan Tan is the man you saw in that place. The very thin man was Sonergard, a famed jewel thief. The one in the tuxedo was Beeswax, a gunman. The women were accomplished smugglers and con women—all part of a gang of jewel thieves.

After they stole the one ruby they offered it back, at a high price, if we would go to the Fantastic Club tonight. I protested, but it meant a fortune to both Osbert and me. Osbert had the money to pay them off. We went to the trouble of planting Jackson."

"Who is Jackson?" demanded Dick. His head was spinning—the strangeness, the loneliness of the town was gone. Here he was listening to this beautiful girl tell amazing lies and enjoying it. Almost like being back and listening to the boys shoot the bull after a scout.

"Jackson," she was saying, "was the waiter. He is not a bright man. But he managed to get in with the gang because he had known father and pretended to welch on us. We had entered the place only a moment or two before you staggered in. Jackson had left the door open, against their orders. You complicated the matter. Jackson could have protected us if things went wrong. Fan Tan had double-crossed us. I think Fan Tan knew Osbert always carried the ruby—it was a phobia with Osbert. I don't think Osbert is too reliable, either. Oh, I don't know what to think! My rubies are gone and I'm broke!"

She said, "I've been thinking. They might not have found the ruby this time. Osbert was so clever about hiding them. They may not ever have discovered yet that Jackson is our man; but I fear for Jackson. Fan Tan told him to ease you out and he started a fight deliberately. I wonder if Jackson knew they planned to double-cross us. I suppose he did. You were right about that, I've decided. They wouldn't have shot Osbert, even when we started out, unless they meant to steal the other ruby."

He said, "Your mind works fine when you get over being scared—quicker than mine. Why were you so frightened?"

She said absently, "Fan Tan is an accomplished torturer. He knows things your Occidental mind could not imagine. Would you dare go back to that place for the rubies?"

Compelled by her glance, he answered, "Sure! Why not?"

She said, "If we can get in—and they don't discover us—and we can get a weapon—"

Dick said, "The cops?"

"The rubies," she said, "were undeclared. The police would have confiscated them. Fan Tan and his gang would never expect us back. There are only the three of them—the women don't count. Fan Tan, Sonergard and Bees-

wax Jones. If we could only surprise them."

Dick said, "Now wait, you were so scared before and now you're anxious to go back."

"I've had time to reflect," she said, completely cool. "I have two alternatives: I can face the world empty-handed and allow those criminals to have my property; or I can fight and maybe die to get back what is mine."

Dick said, "You can fight and I can die, too. This is a hell of a thing, Myra. I mean, you're very lovely and I trust you and all that. But if we get the rubies, it will be over several dead bodies. Now, you may not want cops, but cops are always very interested in dead bodies. I have had to kill people like flies—Japs. I don't object to killing a couple of criminals. But those cops!"

"YOU mean you won't do it?" Myra asked.

He said, "I'll tell you, Myra. I just can't stand going back to my lonely hotel room and leaving this thing as it is. I know perfectly well that is what I should do; but I can't. And don't think you've bamboozled me into it, either. It's just that New York seemed lousy and cold and miserable to me, and now, in spite of the rain, it's warm and exciting and crazy and I love it. Can you understand that?"

For a moment she did not answer. He turned into Chelsea with the lights of the car off, slid to a stop and parked. There was no other vehicle in sight. The fog was swirling down as he opened the door of the car and she breathed in his ear, "I understand. I've never been a Marine, but I know exactly what you mean. And you won't lose me, Dick Boylston, because I don't like you to be lonely, I find . . ." She kissed him once, very swiftly, competently and warmly.

When they came to the door of the Fantastic Club, the neon sign had disappeared; the building was as blank as a wall.

Myra went a step ahead, boldly, now, trying the door. "Damn," she said, forcefully. "It's locked."

Dick whispered, "Hush. They may be about. Let me try."

"Wait," she murmured, "I have a hairpin."

He had always heard that a woman could do anything with a hairpin, but when the door opened, he was astonished. She went swiftly inside, almost as though she were not waiting for him.

It was at that moment his brain began to work; the drunkenness left him entirely. The spirit of daring and wildness was gone, possibly because he could no longer see the beautiful girl. He was not, after all, on an island in the South Pacific; he was in a New York building.

She found his hand and said, "Here's a stairway."

They went up, he leading, she following so close her breath was on his neck. There was a door ahead, on the landing, and from beneath it an ill-fitting sill let out a sliver of light. She whispered in his ear, "If they're in there—"

"They have guns," he pointed out.

"The next room," she suggested. They found it open.

There was a transom, and a rickety chair came to his hand. He placed it against the door and she steadied it. His brain was racing now and a warning was ringing deep within him . . . He balanced on the chair and peered cautiously over the edge of the transom.

There was a flat, plain wooden table without a cover. A single light hung from the ceiling of a room long disused. There were straight chairs of the kitchen variety, and a cot in the corner. Osbert Twill lay upon the cot, naked, except for his drawers, and there was a nasty wound in his right shoulder.

Fan Tan, the Eurasian, sat at the table; Beeswax Jones and the man called Sonegard stood with their backs to Dick. Osbert's clothing lay scattered about, ripped to shreds with some sharp instrument. In the center of the table, in a small box, lay a gleaming red stone.

Dick almost rubbed his eyes. There *was* actually at least one ruby! His common sense again threatened to desert him.

To one of the chairs was tied the bulk of Jackson, the belligerent waiter. Every detail pointed to the truth of the amazing story the girl had told him.

He hung to the transom and looked carefully—no gun or other weapon in sight. Osbert seemed unconscious. The men were absorbed in the jewel and their own thoughts. He heard Fan Tan say in his peculiar voice, "The girl has the other stone. She fooled us. I cannot believe it, but it is so. We have searched and Osbert does not have it!"

Dick's eyes fell upon Osbert Twill's heavy stick. It was leaning against the wall, very close to the door between him and the room into which he was gazing. He let himself down carefully and set the chair aside.

He put his lips close to the girl's ear and breathed, "I beg your pardon, my dear. Tell you later. If that door is unlocked, yank it toward you. It opens into this room. I want a clear path and I want it quick."

"You'd dash in there, unarmed?"

"I have an idea," he returned. "Snatch that door!"

SHE leaned forward and he crouched. He knew a thing or two about surprise and its value in attack. The other-world dreaminess of it all had returned at sight of the precious

ruby upon the table beyond the dark door. He got himself set, and he knew he was wound up like a clock, but it was all right. She was a hell of a beautiful girl.

She acted promptly and efficiently. The door made little noise, amazingly. He was through it before they knew what had happened. He made a grab and the heavy stick came into his hand. Jabbing it into the back of the man nearest him, Sondegard, he knocked him across the room.

Beeswax Jones, the gunman, swiveled, drawing a weapon as though by magic. Dick had expected just such a maneuver. He thrust the ferrule of the stick upward, catching Beeswax under the chin. Dick hit the table as hard as he could with his shoulder. The table fell onto Fan Tan.

Beeswax's revolver fell to the floor. Dick picked it up, thrust the walking stick under his arm and leaned against the wall, watching the mad scramble. Myra walked through the door, patting at her hair, smiling. From the nerveless hand of Fan Tan, she took a knife blade with an exquisitely carved grip, and severed the rope which bound the big man on the chair. She picked up the ruby.

Dick said, "All right, none of you are badly hurt. Line up on the chairs and keep your hands steady. I won medals for using one of these babies *before* I went overseas!"

They staggered onto the chairs. Fan Tan was more stunned than hurt; he regained complete consciousness first. Jackson stretched himself, rubbed his wrists and turned an admiring gaze upon Dick. He said, "Little Perzon! Geez, Myra. Where'd ya git him? Whyn'tcha tell a guy about 'im?"

Fan Tan said imperturbably, "Myra takes none of us into her confidence. She is too clever—a traitor to everyone."

Dick said, "What was that, my friend?"

Myra interrupted impatiently, "Where is the other ruby?"

"Ask your partner," said Fan Tan satirically, "if you can awaken him. Ask the eminent Osbert Twill!"

Myra said, "You tortured him!"

"Nonsense, my dear," purred Fan Tan. He seemed neither frightened nor even discomposed. Beeswax and Sonegard were fidgeting, now but the Oriental was smooth as silk. Dick watched them all, his mind working again.

Myra was a fury. Turning upon them, she said, "Jackson will get it out of you! The other ruby is in the room. I mean to have it."

She seemed to have grown in stature, to become another person now, different from the girl Dick had seen. Far from scared, she had no need for pleading; she was in the open, like a lioness, fighting.

Fan Tan said, "You are the cleverest girl crook in the world, Myra. But when you took Osbert in, you made a mistake. Osbert sold us one jewel, promised us the other. . . ."

"I know that!" snapped the girl. "I knew it when he brought me here and you were all around the place and he sat there, doing nothing. I knew it when I looked for my gun, and he had taken it from my bag. You had me then—except for Jackson."

Fan Tan's eyebrows, plucked to a thin line, jumped high on his bland forehead. He said with quickening interest, "Then this young man was a happy accident? That is something!"

The almond eyes surveyed Dick from head to foot. Fan Tan said to him directly, "I will give you ten thousand dollars to walk out of here and forget you saw anything."

Dick said, "But you took a shot at me, remember?"

Fan Tan said, "You Americans! Come, fifteen thousand!"

Dick said, "I like the girl. She's got something."

"It is spelt *m-u-r-d-e-r*," nodded Fan Tan calmly.

Myra said sharply, "Enough of that nonsense! I want that jewel! I am going to turn Jackson loose upon you in ten seconds!"

Jackson said, "I watched 'em, Myra. Dey never took it from Osbert."

She turned toward the cot, holding the other ruby in her hand. Dick, against the wall, watched the three men on their chairs. He said warningly, "Don't move!"

HE NEVER saw Osbert move on the cot.

But the man stood up, threw Myra aside. Jackson roared, but Dick caught Myra and sent her sprawling through the door into the next room. Then he saw Osbert pointing a fountain pen at him. Vaguely he knew what that meant. He gulped a deep breath and shot at the single light in the ceiling.

Beeswax already had another gun out. An acrid, overpowering odor filled the room. Jackson bawled, "Damned tear gas!"

Dick grabbed Jackson and sent him after Myra. Kneeling for a moment, his head close to the ground, a handkerchief over his eyes, he found the edge of the door and slammed it. He even tipped the transom back.

Then he ran into the hall. He put a bullet into that door, too. He found the head of the stairs, ran down them. He was sick of rubies, now, sick of violent men and smooth Eurasians. He meant to get Myra and tell her one ruby was enough and that he had a good job waiting back in Ohio, and what the hell?"

He hit the street unharmed. He started

through the rain and fog for the car, shouting, "Myra, it's all right"

He didn't find the car. He didn't find anything but a fading wet track on the street—no sight of Myra nor of Jackson. . . . He began running in the direction the car had taken, sure they would be waiting for him around the corner. . . .

He stopped when his heart began to pound. A cruising taxi stopped and said, "Wanta ride?" He got in numbly.

The walking stick almost threw him. That was the first he realized he still held onto Osbert's cane.

He went up to the hotel room and stared at himself in the glass. He looked at the revolver he had taken from Beeswax. He put the cane down on the bed and stared at it.

Then he said, "Of course! All those smart damned people!" He was still in the grip of the dream. He grabbed the stick, twisted at the round knob on its end.

It came apart. The ruby lay in his hand! He put back his head and laughed.

Then he put the ruby under his pillow, took a bath, fell into bed and slept twelve hours.

The phone wakened him; he leaped to answer it. The voice which now seemed something completely out of a dream said, "Dick? This is the fiftieth hotel I've phoned!"

He said, "How's my little jewel thief today?"

"I'm not!" she cried. "You can look up my father in the museum. Everyone knows Frank Glenn!"

Dick rubbed at his head. He said, "Frank Glenn? He's your—he was your father?"

"I told you," she said plaintively. "Look, Dick. I have a birth certificate and everything. I did tie up with those people, trying to sell the jewel. Osbert double-crossed me and I got Jackson and went after them. Jackson worked for my father for years. Honest, Dick—but to heck with the jewels. I had to call you, Dick. I want to see you."

He said, "Now wait, baby. Where are you?"

"Downstairs," she said humbly. "When I found out your hotel I came over."

He said, "I'll be right down, baby. Right down!"

He showered and dressed in a jiffy, took the ruby from under the pillow and admired the sheer, lovely texture of it and stuck it back into its hiding place. He twirled the cane, adjusted his hat at a jaunty angle and strode through the door whistling happily.

Still, he never really believed it until he saw her waiting for him in the lobby, unbelievably real and beautiful. . . .

It was screwy as hell, but there she was!



The Madman In The Moon

By JOE KENT

The one thing that would make Kathy happy, Eddie Corwin could not promise her. But before that terror-filled night of madness had passed, when he discovered blood on his hands and murder on his doorstep, he knew he would make that pledge—if he had to die to keep it!

BLUE MOON



CHAPTER ONE

Farewell to Madness



"You're lying, Doc!"
Eddie exploded.

IT WAS midnight in the living room of the tiny cream-walled apartment on East 79th Street—silent after the radio station signed-off. Eddie Corwin watched his sister bite off the thread on the sweater she'd been mending. She yawned and smiled at him sleepily.

"You see before you a girl who has to work tomorrow," she announced lazily. She rose, and the lamplight spun threads of gold through her brown hair. Eddie got up and mashed out his cigarette. He moved slowly toward her and touched the tip of her up-turned nose.

"Have you ever been in love, sis?" he asked quietly.

"In love? That's a funny question for you to ask," she said.

"I just wondered, when you said you had to work. That's the part about you I always think of—work." His brown eyes were suddenly serious. "What have you gotten out of it?"

"I've gotten a lot. We've eaten and lived for twelve years. I'm the sole-owner, manager, floor-walker, and char-gal at Katherine's Gift Shop. And I've had fun," she added firmly—as though to assure herself, Eddie thought.

"Oh, hell, Kathy," he said, "you know what I'm trying to say." He pushed back his crisp waves of red hair. "You've been working since you were fourteen, but when I wanted to rustle a shoe-shine box, it was no-go with you. You got sore when I wanted that driver's job at the Mart. Always high-school, or it was business-school for me. And what did you get out of it?"

"Did I have to get something, Eddie?" she asked slowly.

"Then why did you keep giving yourself such a beating?" he continued. "And after that thing that happened at the Blue Moon—"

"Eddie!" The word was sharp. He stopped.

For a moment the room was filled with a brittle silence, then Kathy shook her head slowly. "That was something we were going to forget—forever. Now, please."

Kathy touched his square jaw with a cool hand, looked into his eyes. "I think I know what you're trying to say. You don't have to explain. All that other—it's gone." Then she smiled. "Don't you see? I'm trying to make a rich business man out of you, Eddie, so someday you can buy me ermine and pearls and cars." She smiled again and yawned. "I'll see you in the morning, Eddie. Good-night."

"Good-night, Kathy." He watched the bedroom door close behind. A feeling of angry futility filled him. The ermine and pearls—sure, she might have been kidding. But someday he . . .

EDDIE'S mind slipped back toward a dark hard magnet of the past. He closed his eyes, and for the thousandth time he heard the knock on the door—he saw the great bony figure of the cop, walking into this very room. He heard Kathy's soft sharp cry, remembered the dusty heat of the courtroom, and finally, the queer breathless sensation in the top of his stomach when he was sentenced—and suspended.

Three years ago, that was, but the memory was as vivid and raw as yesterday. His fingers were claws digging into his palms; his jaws were an aching vise. He looked at the clock—twelve-twenty. He listened toward the bedroom.

Silently he slipped into the coat of a paratrooper sergeant. He brushed down his rebellious hair and put on his cap. And silently he tip-toed toward the door and closed it behind him as he stepped into the narrow hallway. A pang of remorse crept through him, but he knew he couldn't tell Kathy. He had promised her that he would never go back to the Blue Moon. But he was on his way.

The street was dark and curiously empty when he left the small apartment-building, walking east. The Third Avenue El rumbled by and faded away.

The door of the professional-suite of the adjoining building opened. A tall shadowy figure stepped out and closed the door. When the man turned, the faint mist of moonlight was reflected in his thick glasses.

"Hello, Dr. Wing," Eddie greeted. He stepped closer. "Maybe you remember me—Eddie Corwin."

"Corwin?" The man bent over until the glasses were scarcely an inch from Eddie's face, and his breath bore the scent of garlic and onions. "Indeed I do," he repeated in his dry, restless voice. "You've been away?" he wondered.

"In the army. I'm just here for a few days on a furlough." Eddie nodded along the street. "You going this way?"

"I had in mind a bit of brandy and soda. And you?"

"I'm going to have a beer in the Blue Moon."

"Ah, yes, the Blue Moon." Dr. Wing's step faltered slightly. He glanced sideways at Eddie. "An interesting place," he murmured distantly. Again there was a pause. "I don't want to intrude in your affairs, Eddie, but wasn't there some trouble?"

"Three years ago. But I did not steal that man's bank roll," Eddie said curtly. "Marcello Dalin took the money. I said so in court. Why shouldn't I? Marcello planted it on me. He tried to make me the fall-guy."

"And Marcello was given two years, as I recall." Dr. Wing paused again to look at Eddie, his eyes invisible behind the moon-lit glasses. "Marcello is back, Eddie. He is often at the Blue Moon. I've heard him mention you."

"You're trying to tell me to duck the place, aren't you, Doc?" Eddie supplied quietly. "You're telling me that Marcello's sore."

Eddie fingered the coins in his pocket and watched the dark street ahead. "I can't explain the reason I want to go there," he said slowly. "I don't want a beer. I don't want to go back to the Blue Moon. I *have* to. Once I almost lived there. And Marcello—I wanted to be like him, smooth and soft-talking. It was like a drug. I couldn't stay away. Now I want to see it just once more—see it for what it is. I want to prove to myself that I don't want ever to go back again."

"A farewell to madness." Dr. Wing smiled. "Then perhaps it isn't so bad. We shall leave shortly."

"Only one beer," Eddie promised. They walked on, and the moon painted angular shadows of black and silver across the dirty concrete. Somewhere on the river a boat-whistle moaned again and again. A strange tugging chill found its way into Eddie's throat as he wondered if Marcello Dalin would be there tonight.

IT MIGHT have been one of a thousand places in New York—a brew of smoke, lights and shadows, of murmuring voices and tinkling glasses, of low ceiling and brown walls, chrome-legged chairs and glistening tables.

Eddie saw a few faces that he remembered—faces with the vague half-identity of a long-forgotten dream. He saw the huge blue neon moon above the bar, its dim glow playing sal-low tricks on the faces nearby. Even the music from the nickelodeon was haunted by overtones of the past. He and Dr. Wing leaned against the bar.

A withered stoop-shouldered man, thin-haired and gray-faced came mopping his way down the counter toward them. "What'll it be?" He half-raised the lids of his pale eyes; then the lids jerked upward. The hand stopped mopping. "Hey, you—you're Eddie Corwin!" he exclaimed.

"Hello, Vince," Eddie said quietly. "A beer and a brandy. I've been in the Army for a couple of years." Eddie lit a cigarette and turned around to look at the room again. Dr. Wing's bony fingers gnawed into his coat sleeve.

"There's Marcello now," he whispered. "In that corner."

Through the shifting mist of cigarette-smoke, Eddie saw the moon-like face and gleaming black hair of Marcello Dalin, hunched over the table, his hand on a glass. His lips were twitching, his eyes blinking in swift rhythm to his speech, and his other hand gestured with hard forceful jabs, as he spoke to his companion. Then, as though the impact of Eddie's stare had finally reached him, he looked around, his dark eyes widening. The hand ceased moving: the lips stilled, half-parted. A curious statuesque rigidity congealed the face. And then he rose, slowly and deliberately.

Eddie felt a strange coolness ripple up his spine, felt his fingers grow stiff as the man came toward him.

"Hello, kid." The words were sing-song, mocking.

"Hello, Marcello."

"Got yourself a new suit, haven't you?"

"You don't like it?"

"Just thinking. I was wearing a different suit for a couple of years, too, only mine was gray—with numbers." The lips twitched, and the eyes danced brightly. "Or maybe you forget too easy."

"I just don't give a damn, Marcello," Eddie said quietly.

"You just don't give a damn," Marcello mimicked in a whisper. "But I'm the guy that did that stretch. I done it because you sang to save your own little skin, see? And I'm not a forgetful kind of a guy, Eddie."

"So?" Eddie's throat was dry, his tongue thick.

"So I'm going to look you up very soon and settle a —"

"Marcello," a swift voice said. The man who had been at the table with Marcello pulled him aside and whispered furiously. Eddie saw a glaze of fury spread into the black eyes. The mouth tightened. Marcello started toward the door, then turned back momentarily.

"I'll see you, kid. And it *will* make a damn that time." Then he was gone. Eddie sucked in a thin breath. Dr. Wing mopped his bony

brown forehead and gulped down his brandy.

"WELL, old Eddie Corwin! Damned if it's not!" a booming voice announced. A heavy hand pounded down on his shoulder. Eddie turned. Beside him stood an immense frog-like man, with great thick shoulders and stick-like legs. His head was utterly bald and shiny; his eyes were blue and tiny; and his jowls cascaded over the soiled collar of his checked red sport-shirt. "Now don't tell me you've forgotten old Archie? Archie's, where you used to shoot pool on Amsterdam?" he rumbled.

"Oh, sure! How're you, Archie?" Eddie held out his hand. It was enveloped in a mass of warm moist flesh. Archie waved at Vince.

"Set 'em up once here!" he boomed. "Old Eddie—and medals, too!" He mopped his nose and blew furiously. "Gosh, how much I think of all you kids what used to shoot pool with me. Fact is, I got a board hanging up in my place with the names of all you kids what used to shoot pool at my place. Yessir." He blew his nose again and mopped a tear from his eye. The scent of rye was strong in Eddie's nostrils. Vince set up the new drinks. Dr. Wing frowned anxiously.

"We should leave after this," he said softly. "I'm nervous."

"Sure. Right after this one," Eddie said. Suddenly his voice rang hollow and over-loud in his ears. Above the bar the great blue moon shimmered and seemed to revolve in a lazy circle. Vince's face grew indistinct. He closed his eyes, and a dancing lightness rippled through his stomach. He started to laugh. He knew he wasn't drunk—not on one beer. But the laughter would not rise. A strange indefinable suspense played through his mind. And into his memory strayed vaguely remembered words: A farewell to madness.

PERHAPS it was the soft whimpering or the cool dampness of the dog's tongue on his cheek that waked Eddie. He opened his eyes. Above him was a slice of moonlit sky, enclosed by the dark walls of two buildings. The dog whimpered again, lonesomely; it was the only sound in a night that was suddenly vast and cold and strangely unreal.

Eddie touched the cold concrete on which he lay, pushed himself half-erect. With the movement, a wave of curdling nausea swelled through his stomach. A blinding pain shot across his temples; he swallowed, and a hot dry thirst filled his throat and mouth. The little dog crawled over him, whimpering and licking frenziedly at his face.

He knew he was awake, yet a part of him seemed still to sleep. His brain struggled against a huge shadowy barrier that seemed to fill the confines of his skull.

"Sick," he gasped. "Crazy place to be sleeping—wonder how. . ." Again the little dog whined and cried softly. "Something matter with you?" Eddie whispered. He pushed the dog away and rose unsteadily. He leaned against a wall, and his body was wrecked with a chill. At last he stumbled toward the mouth of the narrow alley, into the wider street.

All the shops were closed. The street was deserted. A crumpled newspaper swirled along on the crest of the cold wind. The buildings were old, narrow, most of them three-story with bare fronts, hollow-like windows. And as Eddie stared about him, a slow half-recognition of the neighborhood curled through his foggy mind. He had been here before! The bend of the street was familiar; these buildings were familiar—particularly the one beside which he was standing.

"Marcello's!" he whispered suddenly. "Marcello Dalin used to live up there—on that top-floor. He used to— But what am I doing down here?" he wondered abruptly. "The Blue Moon. I was drinking beer and then—" There his memory halted against the great shadowy barrier. He swallowed again, and the same thick nausea hugged his throat. His head still ached. His teeth chattered as the cold wind drove through his clothes. He focused his mind on the street, the direction homeward. This was Mannon Street in the Bowery, he remembered. The subway was West.

He turned and stumbled across a street. Passing a dimly lit bar, he paused to look in. If I had a drink, he started to think. And then, by the dim light from the window, he saw the dark stain that covered his right hand and fingers.

It was blood! And he was searching his hand for the cut. There was no cut. But the blood-stain was on the sleeve of his uniform, too; it was on the leg of his pants.

He thrust his hand into his pocket for matches. And then he touched the bone handle of his knife. It felt like a fresh bar of sticky candy. His fingers froze around it, drawing the bloody knife from his pocket.

As he stood there, unaware of things about him, he could feel the shadowy mist draining from a corner of his brain; he could feel his mind focusing itself into a cruel lens through which he was trying to see himself.

Blood on his hand, on his knife. A fight? With Marcello? What had happened?

His eyes turned back along the street he had come, now filled with the mist of moonlight, like the vapor of a dream-scene. Then he was moving faster, faster until he was racing against the fear that was rising like a torrent in his heart.

"I hated and feared him so much, Oh, God! What have I done?"

CHAPTER TWO

The Doctor Deals With Death

THE dark stairway was heavy with the scent of ancient dust, of rancid grease, of fish cooked many hours ago. The board whined beneath Eddie's feet as he felt his way upward to the door of the third floor flat. Beneath the door shone a slim margin of light from within. There was no sound save his own hard breathing. He touched the knob, then stopped.

Slowly, he opened the door into the silent room. He saw the faded flowery rug, the lumpy couch, the pile of racing-forms on the floor. The scent of whiskey was faint in the stale room. Still there was no sound.

He crept in. Now he was hot, and his fingers were damp. He stood still, looking down the passage of the dark hall of the flat at the dead body of Marcello Dalin.

The glistening black hair was disordered. The fat lips were open, showing the gold of teeth; the eyes stared blankly at the ceiling. The shirt was torn and stained.

His eyes raked the room, searching for any sort of evidence. What should he do? He tried to think, and his mind simply tangled in a maze of haste. He knew he had to get out. He knew—

With the first solid steps on the stairs below, every nerve and muscle in him strained. On came the steps with a heavy ominous cadence.

Turning wildly, he stepped over the body and hurried down the hall to the bed-room. Here dresser-drawers were open; a half-packed grip lay on the bed; clothes were strewn about. He snapped out the light and opened another door to a small littered kitchen: bottles ranged along the wall. A skillet, streaked with old egg, lay on the two-burner stove. Coffee-grounds were in the sink. A window was half-open, through which he could see the steel skeleton of a fire-escape, silhouetted by the pale moonlight outside.

Eddie was crawling through the window as the first hard knocking echoed from the front door. Down and down he crept, into that same narrow alley where he had waked. As he dropped to the concrete, a sharp bark rose from the darkness.

"Hush! Damn it, don't—" He grasped the trembling pup and muzzled its mouth, glancing upward, then ran from the alley, past the police-coupe at the curb and on East. He lost count of the blocks and direction, stopping only when he could run no more. He leaned, panting against a building.

Suddenly he started, fingers clenched. "That police car! How did the police *know* something was wrong at Marcello's flat?

How did they know unless they were tipped to investigate? They *had* to be tipped!" Then his brain jerked down another path.

"Marcello had been packing his grip to go somewhere. At the Blue Moon—I remember now—that stranger whispered something to him—something that cleared Marcello out of the Blue Moon in a hurry. But do those little parts fit into a pattern? Do they mean anything?"

Passing a neon-lighted clock, he saw that it was almost four o'clock. He estimated that three hours had passed since the beer at the Blue Moon. He found a cabby dozing in his cab.

"Archie? Dr. Wing? Or Vince?" he wondered silently. He picked Dr. Wing and gave the address.

He left the cab. He glanced upward at the dark windows of Kathy's apartment where she was sleeping. Sleeping and thinking that he was sleeping too, while actually his fingers were stained with blood and a man lay dead. . .

He turned abruptly and pressed the bell of the professional-suite. Dr. Wing came to the door, his face strangely naked and old without the thick glasses. A faded, purple bathrobe hung from his gaunt shoulders.

"It's me—Eddie Corwin," Eddie said swiftly, softly. He started in. Dr. Wing grunted bluntly and held the door firmly.

"I have retired, Corwin. I also have no interest in drunkards. If you will excuse me, I—"

"No, wait, Doc! Listen, I've got to talk to you."

"You said enough to me at the Blue Moon. I don't care—"

"Please, Doc, wait! Whatever I did at the Blue Moon, I don't remember. If I said something, I didn't mean it. I've *got* to talk to you, please." He pushed at the door. Dr. Wing reluctantly released it. Eddie entered the small shabby reception room and closed the door behind him. The doctor felt his way to the desk and took his glasses from the top-drawer.

"Very well," he prompted bleakly. "What have you to say?"

"Listen, Doc, you're sore at me about something I did or said at the Blue Moon. But I swear I don't remember it. I *swear* that, understand? And I've got to know what happened there. How long did I stay there? When did I leave? Did anybody go with me?"

Dr. Wing blinked. He advanced slowly, passed a foot from Eddie, and bent to peer closely into his eyes. "You mean to say you were *that* drunk?"

"I don't know. Something else must have happened, see. I was doped with something, Doc! I know it! It had to be that. I felt funny after that very first beer."

Dr. Wing started to speak, then peered at Eddie's face again. "You don't remember anything?" He frowned. "I tried to get you to come home, remember? You told me to go to hell. You were drinking with Archie. You were quite drunk. I left about one-thirty. I don't know how long you stayed there."

"And that's all you know?" Eddie asked harshly. Dr. Wing nodded. "You don't know anything about—Marcello Dalin?" he asked.

"Marcello?" Dr. Wing's brows lifted. "No. Should I?"

Eddie said slowly. "No, I was just asking. I'd better go talk to Archie." He turned toward the door.

"Young man, there's something on your mind—something much more serious than a few drinks." Wing's bony fingers gripped his arm. "What is it? Are you in some trouble?"

"No, I'm all right, Doc. Just worried." He opened the door. At that moment a police-coupe was drawing to the curb before Kathy's apartment-building. Two men climbed out and vanished into the building. Eddie's breath drained from his throat.

"What was that?" Dr. Wing shrilled. "Those men were officers! What's the matter with you, Eddie?"

"For God's sake, don't scream!" Eddie urged. He slammed the door and leaned back against it, panting heavily. Dr. Wing's features grew gray and tight. Behind the thick lens of the glasses, his eyes grew huge and bottomless. They were locked on Eddie's right hand, on the blood-stained fingers.

The room was deathly still. Backward, slowly, Dr. Wing retreated. He seemed not to breathe. His talon-like fingers found the desk and slipped along the edge toward the drawer.

"Stop! Don't get a gun!" Eddie cried. "Doc, listen, don't—" He saw the first gleaming metal sliding from the drawer. Now the aged frightened face was harsh with purpose. Eddie leaped—straight for the bony hand and the gun it held. Dr. Wing screamed. Eddie's hard fingers locked on the wrist and twisted. Again Wing screamed. The gun hit the floor. An instant later it was in Eddie's hand, while his left hand still gripped the frightened doctor's wrist. Their eyes met. Eddie felt the fast garlic-scented breath of the man fanning his face; he could hear a dry rattle in the Doctor's throat.

"You made me do it," Eddie whispered savagely. "I wasn't going to hurt you. I just wanted help, that was all. I—"

"That's blood. . . You've done something!"

"Shut up! Leave me alone! Don't make any noise!" Eddie fingered the gun.

He looked at Wing. "Now listen: I'm not going to hurt you. You've got me in a spot. I can't let you go now—not for a while. You're going to dress and come with me."

CHAPTER THREE

Labyrinth of the Unremembered

"WE'RE going to Archie's," he said softly to Wing. "We'll get a cab. You'll keep quiet. When we get to Archie's, I'll keep the gun in my pocket. Don't let him know I have it. I've got to find out what I did tonight."

It was a narrow two-story building on Amsterdam Avenue, above 96th Street. The first floor housed the pool-room. The wide window and door was dark now. To the side was a narrow door. Eddie followed Dr. Wing into this doorway and up the dark stairs to the door of the second floor. He found the bell in the darkness, and heard the ringing in the depths of the apartment. At last padding steps came in answer. A light waked beneath the door. The door opened. There stood the frog-like figure of Archie, his massive shoulders bowed forward, his bald head shining, and his tiny bright eyes blinking. A huge soiled robe fell to his small fat feet.

"Oh, old Eddie! Yeah, and Doc Wing," he recognized sleepily. "What's up? Come on in, take a load off your corns." He gestured widely. Eddie followed the gaunt doctor into a large and unbelievably dirty room. Cigar-ashes and great liquid stains covered a worn-out rug. Here and there was a soiled shirt hanging from a chair. The padding was bulging from the sofa-cushions. The walls were covered with out-of-date calendars, all bearing huge pictures of beautiful girls drinking beer in bathing-suits. The air was musty with the scent of discarded cigar-butts. "Well, what gives at four-thirty in the morning?" Archie wondered comfortably. "Want a drink?"

"No, thanks, Archie. We just want to find out something," Eddie said carefully. He glanced at Wing. The man was watching him relentlessly. "When did you leave the Blue Moon tonight?" Eddie asked Archie.

"Ummm, say about three o'clock," he answered.

"Where was I then?"

"Why, I wouldn't know, kid. I guessed you'd gone home. You hauled out of there about two, I'd say. Kind of loaded, too," he said with a chuckle. His sack-like jowls wobbled.

"Did I leave with anybody?"

"Nope. Just staggered out."

"Did Marcello come back to the Blue Moon?" Eddie asked.

"Marcello? Can't say he did. I—" Archie's eyes centered on Eddie's pants. He moved forward one step, blinked, then peered back into Eddie's eyes.

"What about you and Marcello? And that blood," he said softly. His great fleshy face was suddenly intense. He waited. Eddie wet

his lip. The eyes kept boring into him. His fingers were wet and hot on the gun in his pocket. Archie's brow twitched slightly. His eyes darted along Eddie's hand, down to the pocket. For less than a moment the frog-like man looked at the pocket. His eyes snapped back to Eddie's.

"What's the rod for, kid?" he whispered. "You better tell Archie."

Eddie sidled against the wall and edged to the left where he could watch both men. "Take it easy, Archie. I'm just trying to find out something. Something about me and Marcello."

"Did Marcello get checked-out?" Archie asked softly. "Yeah, that's it. I can see it in your face. What about it, kid?"

"I'm trying to find out who did it," Eddie said with a rush. "Whether I did it or not, see? I don't think I did."

"Slow down and talk straight," Archie said bluntly. "How come you even *think* you murdered Marcello Dalin?"

"I woke up in the alley outside his place in the Bowery. I don't know how I got there. I felt crazy; I still can't think clear. Everything's foggy and fuzzy inside my head. And there was blood on my hand—blood on my pocket-knife. When I saw that, I got a hunch. That's what makes me scared, see? I got a hunch Marcello was dead. Maybe I remembered something, see? I don't know. Maybe I just hated him so much that . . . Anyway, I went up to his old flat. He was lying there on the hall floor, stabbed to death. Then the cops came and I slipped out."

"Oh, the cops came, did they?" Archie said softly.

"And they tied me up with the murder, someway. They went to my sister's apartment where I live, too.

"I don't remember anything after I had that first beer you bought," Eddie said flatly. "I just *can't* remember." He pushed his fingers angrily through his red hair. Suddenly he winced as his fingers touched a hard knot at the back of the skull. It was lightly crusted with blood, painful to the touch. "Funny," he whispered. "That wasn't. . ." He stopped. Something clicked in his mind—just a fragment of chaotic recollection. Darkness, and a blast of pain on his skull. . .

"LISTEN! Listen!" he exclaimed. His eyes darted from the aged gray face of Dr. Wing to the moon-like face of Archie. "I didn't kill Marcello! I can't prove it to anybody, but I *know*! I remember getting slugged on the head. It was in the darkness. Don't you get it? I was slugged when I left the Blue Moon! Somebody slugged me, took me to Marcello's, dumped me in that alley, and used my knife to murder him. They

planted blood and the knife on me, then left and tipped the cops. That little pup was all that saved me—the way he waked me, licking my face, see? And the cops were supposed to think I'd killed Marcello while I was drunk, then passed out before I got away."

"Yeah, yeah, keep going," Archie said tensely. "Keep remembering. What else? Who slugged you? Think hard."

"I . . . I . . . I can't," Eddie said heavily. Archie's brows arched upward. "You can't guess?" he asked. His bright eyes shifted to Dr. Wing. "You should know the answer to that. Remember the talk that was floating around the Blue Moon last night?"

"Talk?" Wing echoed huskily. "Oh! That!" he gasped.

"And it panned out," Archie continued swiftly. "A dick dropped into the Moon about three, looking for Marcello. Rossi had talked."

"What're you talking about?" Eddie asked.

"It's like this, kid," Archie said. "Since Marcello got out of stir, he's been working the dope racket. Him and a Brooklyn guy named Joe Rossi cased a cocaine hide-out in the Bronx. One Sunday night about midnight, they cracked the place—a pawn-shop. They knocked off the guy out there and stole a hell of a lot of coke. They've been peddling it ever since, using the Moon as a kind of contact-joint. You wonder how I know this?" He grinned archly.

"Yes, how *do* you know it?" Eddie wondered.

"Rossi got plastered in the pool-room and shot off his mouth. Marcello heard about it and slipped him a thirty-two slug about three days ago. Rossi kept his mouth shut until tonight. Then he knew he was dying. He sang on Marcello; he gave the names of some of the outlets him and Marcello had been supplying. So tonight sometime after midnight the cops start working the town to bring in Marcello. They came by the Moon. They—"

"Wait a minute! That was why Marcello was packing," Eddie realized swiftly. "And that was what cleared him out of the Moon!"

"Don't you see? There could have been a dozen people who would have been hurt when Marcello talked—people who'd been getting the coke from Marcello and re-selling it. They wanted to silence him before he was arrested. They heard us having an argument with him. Maybe some of 'em knew about the trouble we'd had before."

"Say, doc, you'd been hanging around the Moon regular. I've seen you talking to Marcello and Rossi. Maybe you know something?"

"No! I swear I don't!" Dr. Wing shrieked highly. His bony hands fluttered in a defensive gesture.

"**YOU'RE** lying, Doc!" he exploded. "I can see it! You know what was happening around that place! You knew about me and Marcello and—"

"Get away from me!" Wing screamed wildly.

He half-sagged to his knees, his face streaming with perspiration. "I'll tell! Listen to me, and I'll tell the truth! I swear I didn't kill Marcello! I wanted to, understand? He'd been selling me heroin and cocaine. I'd been selling it again to patients who wanted it. I knew Rossi was dying. I was afraid he'd talk. I called Marcello about it. He told me he was the only one who knew I was on his list. He said he'd cover for me, no matter what happened, only I had to pay him five grand in cash. It had to be paid last night. I was on my way when I met you."

"I'll admit I was trying to think of some way to get out of it, but I didn't kill him! I doped your first glass of beer, but then I couldn't go through with it, see? You understand?" he begged harshly. "I couldn't go through with it! I just didn't have the guts to murder a man! I left the Blue Moon and went to his flat in the Bowery where I paid him the money—a roll of bills tied with a piece of red string. He was alive, packing to get out of town when—"

"You're lying!" Eddie insisted, advancing
(Please turn to page 97)

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

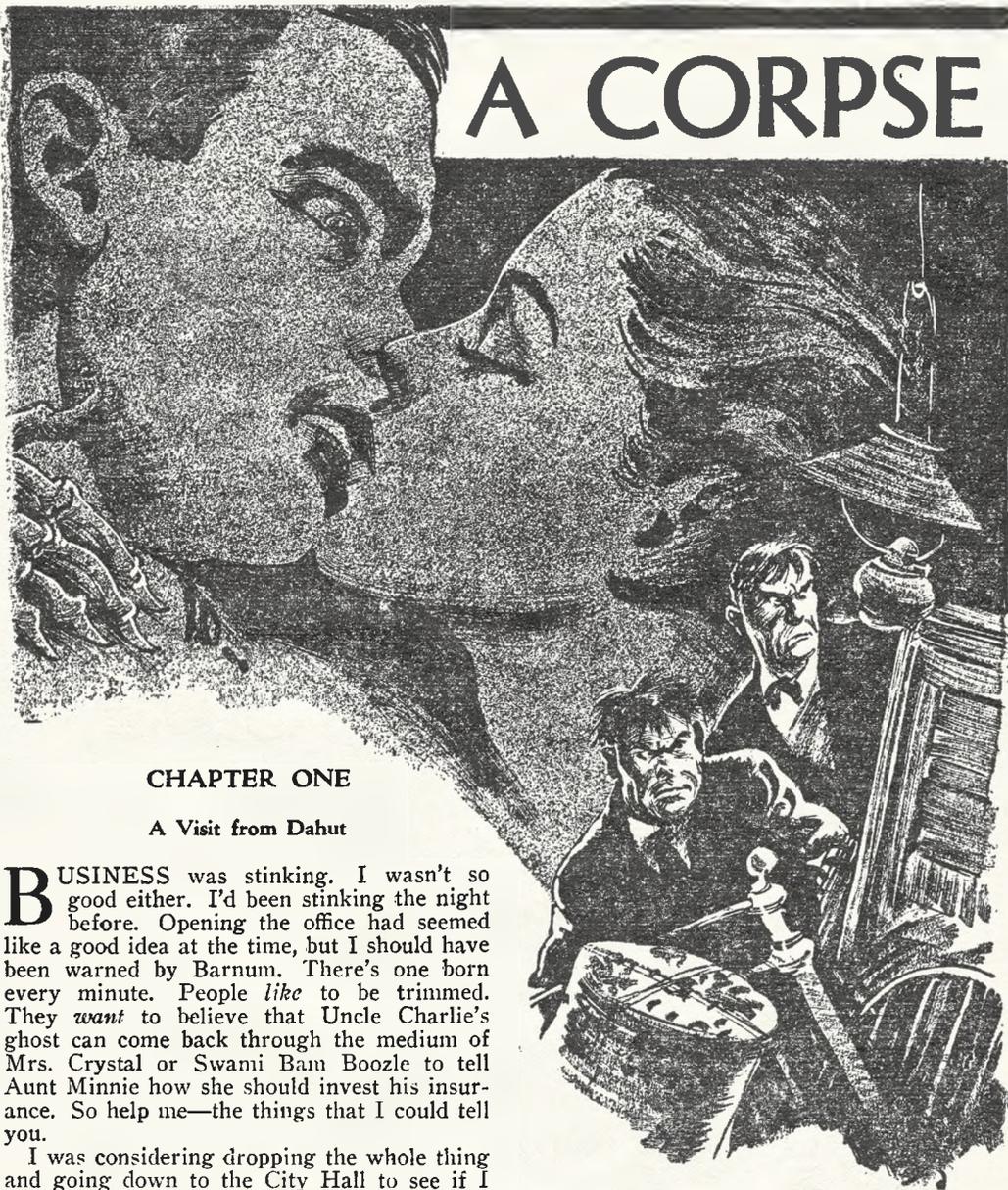
The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up

nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

A CORPSE



CHAPTER ONE

A Visit from Dahut

BUSINESS was stinking. I wasn't so good either. I'd been stinking the night before. Opening the office had seemed like a good idea at the time, but I should have been warned by Barnum. There's one born every minute. People *like* to be trimmed. They *want* to believe that Uncle Charlie's ghost can come back through the medium of Mrs. Crystal or Swami Bam Boozle to tell Aunt Minnie how she should invest his insurance. So help me—the things that I could tell you.

I was considering dropping the whole thing and going down to the City Hall to see if I could promote a renewal of my old license without greasing too many palms when Mitzie Faber walked into the office.

Even with a hangover I knew her. She looked just like her picture—only more so. A vivid, pint-sized, brunette with big black eyes, she has what it takes, and all of it in the right places.

I didn't know the old hag with her. She looked like a witch to me. And if the weight that was sagging her reticule wasn't a rod, my name wasn't Tommy Martin.

I got up and offered them chairs. If I'd had

some rose petals I'd have sprinkled them on the floor. It was the closest that I had ever been to sixty million dollars.

"Imagine meeting you," I smiled. "Where's the pumpkin coach and six white mice?"

She smiled, but it was wan. "I don't feel much like Cinderella," she admitted. "You are Tommy Martin?"

I admitted that.

The old hag sniffed and dusted off her chair before she sat on it. That was all right with me, it needed dusting. I *didn't* like the

FOR CINDERELLA

By DAY KEENE

Unique Novelette of Mysterious Death

Ordinarily, this Kiss-of-Death stuff doesn't go over with me. But after I'd seen Mitzi Faber calmly kiss her fiancé a moment before he dropped dead, and after I'd been beaten and buried alive by two rod-carrying "dead" spirits—I had to revise my opinions fast, or join the spirit world forever!

way she hauled her reticule around and sat with one hand in it, the muzzle of her gun pointing at my middle.

Miss Faber introduced us. "Auntie, dear, Mr. Martin. Mr. Martin, my aunt, Miss Tabatha White."

Auntie dear said, "Hmph."

I said, "Hello."

You've heard of Mitzie Faber. At least you've read about her. She's the kid that was dealing them off the arm in a Sixth Avenue hash-house when they unraveled old man Faber's will and discovered that she was his dead ne'er-do-well brother's child and sole heir to only Morgenthau knows how many millions. Even after death taxes had been paid, she still had sixty million clear. So far as I could see they hadn't spoiled her any.

"You wanted to see me?" I asked. "Perhaps a skeleton in your closet?"

I mean it to be funny. It wasn't. Her black eyes flooded with tears. "I've lots of them," she said quietly. "You see, I have reasons to think I'm a killer. That's why I've come to you. You *must* help me."

I felt my pulse—normal. It must be the hangover, I thought; maybe I only imagine she's here.

Auntie dear sniffed, "Stuff!" she pointed her witch's nose at me. "It's all her imagination. And I want you to tell her so." She added dryly, "Although I must admit that I



A pair of bony arms wrapped themselves around my neck. . . .

see no reason to pay out good money to a charlatan when Doctor Morris has assured us—”

The girl stopped crying. “Damn Doctor Morris. Can he explain the dog I killed? Can he explain the skeletons?”

I shook my head to clear it. It was a mistake. When the office came right side up again, I said, “You’d better tell me the story.”

“THERE are two men,” she told me, “a tall man and a short man with no nose at all. I always see them first. They are Dahut’s guards.” She stopped to dry her tears on the handkerchief I offered her. “I have come to the right office? You are Tommy Martin, the former private investigator, who debunks spiritual fakers—for a fee?”

I admitted that was the general idea of my practice, such as it was.

She took a sheaf of bills from her purse and laid them on my blotter. The top bill was a fifty.

“I’m haunted and I’m cursed,” she told me flatly.

Auntie dear admitted, “I found the curse in an old book on Druids in the library.” Her thin lips tightened. “I had a mind to burn it then. I wish now that I had.”

Mitzie began to cry again. “That wouldn’t have helped me,” she sobbed. “Don’t you understand, Dahut’s taken possession of my body. And she’s evil. She killed the kitten. She kissed the dog that died!”

“It was a cocker spaniel,” she told me. “Jim gave it to me shortly after Auntie found the curse.” She began to cry as if her heart would break. “And when I kissed it on its little nose, it died.”

That was enough for me. I pushed the bills back against the desk and poured myself the last inch of rye in the bottle without offering them a drink. I needed it worse than they did.

Auntie dear sniffed, “A drinking man. *Hmph*. I knew it.”

Mitzie pleaded, “I know that it sounds fantastic. But you must believe me. Don’t you understand? I want to marry Jim. And as things stand, I don’t even dare kiss him!”

Auntie dear’s thin lips formed a smug line. “That’s one blessing. John would never rest easy in his grave if he knew that his granddaughter was even contemplating marrying a common Broadway gambler.”

“You wouldn’t mean Jim Ryan?” I asked.

Mitzie nodded.

I pulled the bills back again and put them in my top desk drawer. Ryan had been a friend of mine for years. As gamblers go, he was square. Once in a while he even gave a sucker a break.

“That’s different,” I told Mitzie. “Let’s start over. Who’s this Dahut? You don’t

mean Dahut The White, the wicked princess of Ys?”

She said that she didn’t know. This is the story as she told it. Two hundred years before, one of the early Fabers had married a woman named Dahut. Legend had it that she was as beautiful as she was fickle. Her husband had finally killed her in a fit of righteous anger. But before the woman had died she had confessed she was really a witch and cursed the house of Faber. The curse had taken the form of a threat that once in every generation, she would inhabit the body of a Faber woman, and that all whom that woman loved—all whom she kissed would die.

It sounded cockeyed to me. I said so.

Mitzie continued. Shortly after Auntie had found the legend of the curse, a cat whom Mitzie had loved had died. Then a parade of skeletons had begun to haunt her dreams. Each night they paraded her bedroom, pointing bony, accusing fingers, muzzling her with cold noses from which the flesh had long since rotted. Next had come the dog episode.

I told her I thought I could help her. Hell, I had the whole picture right then. “You run along home,” I told her. “I’ll throw a few things in a bag and drive up in a few hours.”

When they had gone, I considered the case. It looked fairly simple from where I sat. Someone wanted money and they wanted it damn bad. I reached for the phone to call Ryan and the office door opened again. I didn’t know either man, but Mitzie had described them. One was tall with a vacant stare. The other one was a dwarf with a fold of flesh where his nose should have been.

“YOU’RE Martin?” the dwarf asked. His voice sounded like a rusty file rasping over steel.

I said that I was.

The tall lad crossed the office and sat down on one corner of my desk. There was no expression in his eyes or in his voice. “About those women who just left.” I asked what about them, sharply, and he leaned over mechanically and tapped my chest. “You are not to take the case, understand? Dahut does not will it so.”

I tried to get up and the dwarf pushed me back in my chair. “You will be well paid.” He laid a sheaf of bills on my desk.

I looked at the spot where his nose should have been and shuddered. There were only two slits in the flesh. “Look,” I gimmicked. “Enough is enough. What’s the gimmick? Who’s in back of this freak show?”

The dwarf hit me then, not hard, but hard enough. Then he pulled back his coat lapel and showed me the handle of a gun. “You see that?”

I’m not blind. I told him what he could do

with it. "I don't know who the hell you are, or what this is all about," I stormed, "but—" And that was as far as I got.

The tall lad reached across the desk and slugged me with a fist like a ten pound sledge. It sent me sprawling to the floor. Before I could get to my feet, the dwarf kicked me in the belly, then slugged me with his gun barrel, while the tall lad came from behind my desk and informed me in his monotone:

"This is just a warning. See? The next time you will die!"

This wasn't real. It couldn't be. I got to my knees and said, "Boo!"

Then the dwarf's gun barrel landed again and all three of us exploded in a tangled mess of bony arms, legs, and skulls, that suddenly flew and became jabbering skeletons that ringed me in a circle.

I tried to break through and couldn't. A scantily dressed woman who looked a lot like Mitzie except that she was blond, was clinging to my arm.

"I am Dahut," she whispered. "Remember me, darling? Kiss me!"

I could feel her breath hot on my cheeks, her lips searching for mine—then everything blacked out. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Kiss of Death

IT WAS cold on the floor of my office. It was also hard. I got up and looked at myself in the mirror. Real or fancied, the noseless dwarf and the tall lad had done a job on me. One of my eyes was completely closed; the other was narrowed to a slit. My nose would never look the same.

The sheaf of bills on my desk was gone. So was the sheaf that I had slipped into my drawer. That made me feel some better. When a lad plays with the supernatural as much as I do, he sometimes gets screwy ideas. But the lads who had slugged me were flesh; spirits haven't much use for money.

I got Ryan on the phone. "This is Martin," I told him. "How do you stand with Mitzie Faber?"

He wanted to know what I meant by how did he stand and I laid as much as I knew on the line, including a description of the two lads.

Even over the phone, his voice sounded strange. "Look. I'm headed up there tonight," he said. "Why don't I stop by for you, Tommy? Say, in about thirty minutes?"

That was fine with me. I wanted to talk to him before I saw Mitzie again. I spent most of the thirty minutes in the back room of the little drug store downstairs. When Benny got through with the arnica and plaster, I looked almost as bad as the dwarf.

Ryan pulled up with the first of the rain. A big man in his early forties, gray at the temples, with a wisp of mustache, he looked more like an old stock heavy than a big-time Broadway gambler.

He greeted me glumly. "This is one hell of a mess."

I asked if he was telling me. He pointed the car up the Hudson toward the old gray stone heap near Crum Elbow that old Israel Faber had built in 1880. I rolled up the window on my side of the car as it started to rain harder.

After we had passed Yonkers, traffic began to thin out. I described the dwarf and the tall lad and asked him if he could place them.

He told me no, then added, "I mean, I don't know their names or who they're hooding for. But they dropped in on me one night about two months ago and spent almost half an hour telling me what would happen if I persisted in marrying Mitzie."

"They mentioned this Dahut?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yeah. But that's a lot of bunk as far as I'm concerned. And so is this kiss of death stuff. But it puts me on a spot."

I asked him what he meant.

"I like the kid," he told me. "Maybe I even love her. I don't know. I liked her when she was slinging hash in a greasy spoon." He sighed. "But this marriage is all her idea. And she only thinks she loves me. I can tell. She likes to have me around because she knows that she can depend on me, because she knows that I don't give a damn if she has sixty million dollars or minus sixty cents."

That was something to chew over.

"What she really needs," Ryan concluded, "is some husky young punk like you. Hell. I'm ten years too old for her. And as soon as I can get her squared around so that she isn't afraid of her shadow, I'm going to tell her so."

I chewed on that for another five miles.

He broke the silence. "About this kiss-of-death stuff. And those skeletons that she sees. How do you explain that?"

I told him that I didn't, that I'd have to know more about the show before I could go to work. The first thing I wanted to know was who controlled her money.

"She does," he said flatly.

"And her will leaves it to whom?"

"Me," he told me tight-lipped.

I SAID, "I see." I did, with reservations. That changed the whole picture again. There *could* be some good reason why he couldn't marry her. And few men with an in like that could bring themselves to kick sixty million dollars in the nose.

"And after you?" I asked.

"Her Aunt Tabatha," he told me. "She was her mother's sister. And from what I

hear, she took it hard when all the money went to Mitzie."

I remembered a name that Auntie dear had mentioned. "And this Doctor Morris?"

Ryan chuckled. I was to know why later. "He's been with the family for years," he dismissed him. "He was old Faber's doctor. I wouldn't let him lance a boil, but I like him."

I said, "Now this puppy you gave her?" "There wasn't a mark on it," he said tight lipped. "A moment before it had been raising hell like puppies do. Then Mitzie kissed it on the nose and it died."

I looked sideways at him. His forehead was wet with sweat.

"I saw it happen," he said quietly. "There was no one near the dog. She kissed it, put it back on the floor, and it died."

I jeered, "Don't give me that. You said yourself that this kiss-of-death was bunk."

"I like to think so," he said. "But I don't like anything that I can't figure out."

He had me there, so I shut up.

RAIN was falling in torrents and a high wind had sprung up to twist and lash the naked branches of the trees by the time that we swung off the highway into the Faber lane. The house itself, a little gray stone shack of some forty or fifty rooms, had been built on a high bank overlooking the Hudson. Turrets, and towers and battlements loomed.

The butler who met us at the door was almost as old as the house. He looked like a walking corpse and his skin was the color of parchment. "I was with Mr. Faber for many years," he told me grimly.

I didn't doubt that in the least.

Ryan led the way into the living room and introduced me to Morris. I liked the little fat man on sight. He might have been straight out of Dickens, with his tight stand-up wing collar and stock. Only thing modern about him was a long, ebony cigarette holder and his breezy conversation.

He shook my hand as if I'd just carried a message to Eisenhower. "This is a pleasure, Martin. Positively. I've read of you, of course. And you're doing a splendid work—splendid. Ghosts! Spirits! Bah! When a man's dead, he's dead, and that's an end to it."

"Even to Dahut?" I grinned

Even to Dahut," he agreed. He poured cocktails from a frosted shaker. "But for heavens sake snap Mitzie out of it before the child goes mad."

Ryan said, "But the puppy—"

"Tut—tush. And also tish!" the little fat doctor snorted. "Puppies die every day. It is all in her head, I tell you. If Tabatha hadn't found that fool curse, none of this would have happened. The whole thing is imagination."

I doubted that. The dwarf without any nose

and the tall zombie who had slugged me weren't the products of anyone's mind. I asked if he happened to have a copy of the alleged curse, and he got the original from a drawer.

It was written much as Mitzie had told it, in a fine Spencerian hand. The paper was properly aged and yellowed. It was either authentic or well-faked.

"If only Tabatha hadn't found it," Morris moaned.

He got to his feet and I saw that Auntie dear and Mitzie were coming down the stairs. Mitzie looked like a dream in sea-green chiffon. But evening clothes failed to improve Auntie. Her dress was black and so was her face when she saw me and Ryan. She simpered like a school girl, though, when Morris told her that she looked charming.

Mitzie came straight to me and fingered the tape on my face. "They hurt you. They came to you after we left?"

"Who came?" the old lady asked sharply.

"Dahut's guards," Mitzie told her bleakly.

"Stuff!" The old lady sniffed. "There are no such persons. Likely he fell over a bottle."

I told her I'd done that, too, but that if these were bottles, both of them had legs, also automatics. "But they weren't spooks," I assured Mitzie. "They looked like a pair of freaks who'd escaped from some sideshow."

She said, "Oh," as if she wanted to believe me, then rested her hand on Ryan's arm, and smiled, "Hello, Jim."

I could see what Ryan meant. She liked him—trusted him. She thought she was in love with him, but she wasn't. He was just a sturdy oak against which she had grown accustomed to leaning.

She started to turn away and Ryan caught her arm. I give the guy credit for nerve. Sweat was beading his forehead. He didn't know. His hunch was all against it. But he was spreading his cards for a showdown, not for his sake, but hers.

"Look, little honey," he told her. "Don't be like that. We're settling this kiss-of-death stuff once and for all, right now."

She fought against him. "No!"

He said, "Yes," and pulled her to him. Then he tilted her chin with one hand and kissed her soundly on the lips. Her arms slid over his shoulders and she returned his kiss hungrily.

For some reason I felt jealous. And I wasn't thinking of her money.

When Ryan released her, her face was flushed and she was half-laughing, half-crying. "I guess that proves it," he grinned.

"Yes, sir," Doctor Morris beamed.

Mitzie turned to me, still flushed, as the old butler announced from the doorway that dinner was served. "I guess that you and Jim,"

(Please turn to page 86)

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DAY KEENE

(Continued from page 84)

she smiled, "will have to take me in together. I—" She stopped short at the look on my face and swung back to Jim Ryan.

He didn't look right to me. Sweat was standing on his forehead in big drops. His jaws were working. He hunched his shoulders.

Mitzie clapped the back of her hand to her mouth. Then she screamed.

It was an effort for Ryan to talk. "I will be damned," he muttered, took one step toward the girl, and crumpled slowly to the carpet.

* * *

Doctor Morris straightened from his study of the body and stuffed a cigarette into his long ebony holder with fingers that shook slightly. "It's beyond me," he admitted. "The man can't be dead. But he is."

I looked across the hall to where Mitzie sat sobbing in a chair. She had kissed Ryan. None of the rest of us had been within ten feet of him. Maybe this Dahut had something!

Ragan, the old butler, read my mind. "She's evil," he told me. "Evil. She carries death like a typhoid carrier. The dead dance for her every night. I've heard them."

"There's some logical explanation," Doctor Morris insisted.

"There has to be," I told him. I asked him to call the police and went in to talk to Mitzie. The old witch in the black evening gown sat glowering beside her.

"Well—?" she demanded of me.

I told her that Ryan was dead.

"I killed him," Mitzie wailed.

I told her that I doubted that very much. But I wondered what I'd tell the law. They seldom believe in the supernatural. And if a post-mortem proved that Ryan had been poisoned, the timing had been perfect.

I thought of something that I had meant to ask before. "Who was with you when the puppy died?"

She told me Ryan, her Aunt Tabatha, Doctor Morris, and Ragan.

"And who fed the puppy?" I asked.

Auntie dear snapped, "I did. But don't think you can prove that I poisoned him."

I asked, "Do you trust Ragan?"

"Implicitly," Mitzie sobbed.

Auntie dear changed her tune. "It was Dahut who killed the puppy," she told me with conviction. "It was Dahut who killed Mr. Ryan." She sniffed. "And if you're going to earn your fee, you had better drive her out of Mitzie before one of the rest of us dies."

I could see a jury rolling over that one.

Mitzie sank deeper in her chair. "I can't stand it anymore. I wish that I were dead."

I started to pull her to her feet and shake

(Please turn to page 88)

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DAY KEENE

(Continued from page 86)

some sense into her, then changed my mind. Her 'I wish that I were dead' had rung a bell. If my original line of reasoning was correct, someone else wished it, too. But whoever wanted her out of the way couldn't kill her. There is a law against such self-help. You can't profit by the estate of anyone whom you have murdered.

I walked back into the hall. Doctor Morris, his face florid, was still shouting 'Operator' into the phone. He turned to me, worried. "I can't get the operator. Either the storm has blown down the wire, or else it has been cut."

I said it probably had been cut and asked him if he had a gun that he could lend me. He said that he had and went upstairs. When he came down again he had a pearl-gripped, gold-inlaid, .45 Colt in his hand. I stuck it into my belt.

"If anything should happen to Mitzie," I asked him, "who gets the Faber money?"

"Tabatha," he answered promptly.

"And if anything should happen to her—?"

That stumped him. "I really wouldn't know," he told me, "unless it would be her two half-brothers." He puckered his forehead in a frown. "And that brings up a legal point. Can the insane inherit?"

I said, "Insane?" and he told me that although she seldom mentioned them, he believed they were in a New Hampshire asylum. I asked him to describe them. He said that he was sorry but he hadn't the least idea what they looked like.

I thought of the noseless dwarf and the tall zombie and shuddered. If they weren't crazy, I was. "You stay with Mitzie," I told him. "Get her to bed and give her an opiate."

"You're going for the law?"

"Not in this storm," I told him. "I'm just going to see if the wire is cut. If it is, we're in for more murder. This is the showdown."

THE STORM was worse than I thought. It swept me off the porch into some dripping bushes. I used them to pull myself hand-over-hand back to the house wall.

I paused to get my breath. Through a crack in the shutter I could see the dynamic little doctor talking earnestly to Mitzie. She objected but went with him, leaning heavily on his arm. Auntie dear sat where she was.

I studied her features for some trace of a resemblance to the two hoods who had slugged me in my office, but could find none. Still, Morris had said they were half-brothers and she had openly objected to Mitzie coming to me. More, now that Ryan was dead, if anything happened to Mitzie, the Faber millions came to her.

A CORPSE FOR CINDERELLA

She got up and left the room. I plowed on through the wet underbrush to the end of the phone wire. It had been cut.

I found the loose end of the wire and followed it back to the house. Even by pulling it as taut as I could, a ten-foot gap of wire was missing. What was done to stop this little murder-chain, I would have to do myself.

It was then the light flashed over my head as a shutter banged open in the wind and was promptly pulled in again. I leaned out from the house and looked up. A faint light was showing in a room on the top floor. Whether it was an attic room or not, I couldn't tell because of the false battlements and towers. But I knew—or thought that I knew—all that I needed to know.

I made my way back to the front door and fought it open. Ragan hadn't moved. "What was that," I asked him, "that you told me about the dead dancing in the attic?"

"It happens almost every night, sir," he assured me. "That's why the staff left. You see, they're afraid of the dead. I'm not."

The second floor was dark but light showed under a door. As I reached the stairhead, Doctor Morris came out of the room.

"You stay with Mitzie," I told him. "The wire was cut and I'm going on up to the attic."

I admired the man's nerve. "You'd better take a torch. Wait. I'll get you Mitzie's."

He pressed it into my hand and I climbed another flight. Eight doors led off a hall. I opened them one by one. What I wanted wasn't there. This was the deserted staff-quarters.

Then I saw the door I did want, set back in an alcove, up one stair. I picked the lock.

A rush of stale, damp air swept out. The stairs were covered with dust but the dust had been recently disturbed. Here and there I could see a drop of water.

I kicked off my shoes and walked up. Old fashioned camel-humped trunks and outworn furniture stood desolately against the eaves. At the far end of the attic, around one of the numerous bends caused by the turrets and towers, I could see a faint light.

I cocked the Colt and walked toward it. All of my cases ended the same. The spiritual manifestations all turned out to be humans with a financial axe to grind. Something rolled underneath my foot. I stooped and felt it. It was the leg bone of a skeleton. More, the skeleton was intact.

I walked on slowly and a pair of bony arms reached out of the dark and wrapped themselves around my neck. I fought back an impulse to scream. The skeleton was wired. The boys were putting on a good show.

Then I rounded the bend and saw them,

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DAY KEENE

both staring blankly into the dark behind me. "Hold it just as you are, boys," I called. Neither one moved a muscle.

The noseless dwarf walked slowly towards me now. "It's Martin," he whispered to the zombie. "Dahut has sent him to us. It must be that she wants to kiss him."

The tall zombie kept pace with him. "Let's take him to her," he droned. "He can dance with the others tonight."

They kept coming and I fired. At that distance, I couldn't miss; I didn't. I saw the slug dust the left breast of the noseless dwarf but it didn't even slow him.

"You can't kill us, Martin!" he said wearily. "We're dead," the tall zombie intoned.

I shot again and again, watching each slug as it smacked. But for all the good that they did, I might have been throwing confetti instead of .45's. Both men kept right on coming, their hands reaching for me now. A sudden stench of the grave rose rank and rotten around me.

Someone screamed. I wondered who it was. I screamed again and knew. Cold hands reached for my throat. I tried to fight them off, and couldn't. Then something solid smashed out of the dark and Dahut was whispering in my ear and trying to kiss me. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Out of the Grave

I WAS cold and wet. It was difficult to breathe. I tried to raise my hand to brush away whatever was pressing against my mouth and couldn't. A weight seemed to seal my eyes. Then I smelled the wet earth.

The noseless dwarf and the tall zombie had buried me alive.

I lay fighting panic. *This was it.* Then I heard the beat of rain over my head. A trickle of water ran into my mouth, gagging me. I choked and the earth moved slightly. They hadn't buried me very deep and the rain soaked clods of earth with which I had been covered were allowing enough air to seep through to keep me from being smothered.

I tensed my muscles and heaved. The dirt gave some but not much. In blind panic I tried again and popped through the surface.

I had been left for dead. Dahut was slipping.

A hundred yards from the main house, the old carriage house loomed against the night.

There were three cars, including Ryan's, in the converted stalls. The second floor, as I had hoped, was still half-filled with musty hay. I forked some down the stairs to form a train to the gas tank of Ryan's car. Then

A CORPSE FOR CINDERELLA

I lit of wisp with my lighter and tossed it into a corner. On my way out I kicked the feedline lose from Ryan's tank.

Sure it was arson. So what? I was up against a killer and a smart one. Those few minutes in the grave had worked wonders with my brain. The whole thing was so clear now I could have drawn a blueprint.

Outside again, I studied Mitzie's window. There was a small false balcony outside of one of the windows and the wall was covered with ivy. It wouldn't hold me, but a near-by downspout would.

Through the shutters, I could see the bed. One bare arm thrown over her head, Mitzie was asleep, her lips twitching nervously. Auntie dear sat in a rocker in the shadows.

Under the bed, I could see the pumps that Mitzie had been wearing with the sea-green chiffon. The sole of one of them was wet and stained with mud. I was willing to bet that somewhere in a tool shed was a muddy shovel with her fingerprints on the handle.

I opened the shutter with my pen-knife and started to raise the window when the noseless dwarf walked into the room. He tip-toed toward the night stand by the bed and laid down three objects I couldn't distinguish.

He beckoned toward the door. The tall lad came in with a wire that became taut when he fastened the loose end in his hand on a hook screwed into the wall. The other end was out of sight in the hall.

He flipped a long black cord along the floor as if to make certain that it was clear, then both men took up stations, one on each side of the bed. I slid up the window gently.

Auntie dear still sat in the shadows. I couldn't see her face. Noseless shook Mitzie.

She sat up, drugged, and clapped the back of her hand to her mouth, her face contorted with fear. She had seen these men before.

"No!" she pleaded. "No!"

"They come, Dahut." the tall lad said in his monotone. "They come to do you honor, the dead whom you have killed."

She screamed, "Tommy! Mr. Martin!"

"You forget, Dahut," the dwarf whispered respectfully, "that Mr. Martin is dead." He picked up her wet slipper and showed her the muddy sole. "Don't you remember—you killed him. We helped you to bury him."

She moaned, "Oh, no. No!"

Then the skeletons came in. To the half drugged, frightened girl it must have been impressive. From where I sat it was funny. The wired skeletons ran on a pulley, manipulated by the cords that the tall lad held in his hands. They bowed and and scraped and jibbered. There were two men, two women, and a dog. Then Jim Ryan's skeleton—wear-

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DAY KEENE

ing Ryan's clothes—came into the room. Mitzie screamed and fainted.

THE tall lad gathered the skeletons in one arm, unhooked the wire and disappeared into the hall, grinning at Noseless, "That ought to do it."

The old witch in the chair didn't stir. The dwarf poured water in Mitzie's face, then chafed her wrists until she sat up and moaned.

"At your command, Dahut," he said. "I have brought you the things you asked for." He pointed to the night table. I could see what the objects were now. They were a vial marked poison, a straight-edged razor and a gun. "Come to us, Dahut," he pleaded. "Flee from the law that will pound on the door."

He strode from the room and closed the door. As I watched, the bolt slid shut, worked by the old pin hole and string trick. Either way, they couldn't lose. They had her now.

Whimpering like a frightened child, Mitzie studied the objects on the table, then reached for the vial of poison. Then I came in.

"Put that back and don't be frightened," I called softly. "This is Tommy Martin."

She turned her big eyes on me. "You're dead. They told me that you were dead."

"They've told you a lot of things." I said. I dropped the vial of poison and the razor in my pocket and thumbed the safety off the gun. "If you killed yourself, that was fine. If you didn't, you were still framed for murder. And once you trotted out Dahut and the dancing skeletons, any sane jury would send you to the chair for *pretending* you were crazy."

"What are you doing in Mitzie's room?"

It was Auntie dear's voice from the shadows. As I turned a .32 slug burned my ear. I'd forgotten she carried a rod. The old lady shot again before I could cross the room and slap the gun out of her hand.

The small slug burning through my shoulder, I unbolted the door and stepped into the hall. Noseless and the tall lad were standing at the head of the stairs.

"You boys ready for the next rubber?" I called.

The tall lad's face wasn't blank now. "You're dead!" he screamed. "We buried you."

"But not deep enough," I told him.

Noseless went into his act. He walked towards me slowly, rasping, "Put down that gun. You can't kill us. We're dead!"

He slipped his own gun from his holster and I let him have it right between the eyes. "You're damn right, you are," I told him.

These slugs weren't confetti. They slapped him into the wall, his brains dribbling down.

The tall lad said, "Oh, God!" and let one fly that creased my cheek.

A CORPSE FOR CINDERELLA

I gave him the remaining three slugs. He took off backwards down the stairs.

Ragan called, "Fire!" from the floor above. "Fire!" The carriage house is on fire!"

A door down the hallway opened and Doctor Morris popped out, rubbing his eyes. "What were those shots? And where in the world did you go to?"

"Hell," I told him shortly. I motioned him into Mitzie's room. "Get in there and stay with Auntie until the law gets here."

He was wearing an old-fashioned, long white night gown stuffed into a pair of pants. "The law?" he repeated blankly. "I thought that the wires were down."

I told him I'd fixed that. Just then the fire reached Ryan's tank and the car blew up with a dull boom that blasted the carriage house windows. I hoped that it wouldn't be long.

Morris walked briskly into the room and his face lighted in comprehension. "Tabatha. You." He pointed an accusing finger. "How could you, Tabatha? It's been you behind this all. You and your insane brothers!"

THE old lady looked as if he had slapped her. Tears leaped to her eyes. "Oh, Doctor—Vincent—how could you?"

"You have two brothers?" I asked Auntie. She nodded, her eyes wet with tears. "But it isn't true what Vincent says. Both boys have been dead for years."

"And still are," I assured her. "I don't know where Morris got his freaks. That can come out at his trial. I do know that he was gambling for sixty million."

The fat little man's face turned purple. "You're crazy! I have no interest in the Faber estate. I am only a salaried retainer."

I told him what I thought of that. Ragan poked his head in the door. "There are two dead men in the hall," he whispered. I whispered back, "I killed 'em."

I told the story as I saw it, Mitzie listening wide-eyed. "Dahut was all Doc's idea," I told her. "So were the skeletons. He filled you up with dope, under the pretense of giving you a sedative, every time he wanted to stage a séance. Then his stooges did the rest. He didn't want you to marry Ryan. That would have cost him money. That's why he invented this kiss-of-death stuff. That's why his stooges tried to buy me off. He knew that a blind man would see through his scheme, and I did. It was Doc who killed both the puppy and Ryan."

A second car exploded in the carriage house. In the distance a fire siren wailed faintly.

The little man was certain of himself. "And I suppose," he sneered, "that you can tell us *how* I killed them." He was fumbling with

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DAY KEENE

his cigarette holder as he spoke. When he had finished he put it in his lips.

I slapped it out of his mouth. "Sure I can. But not if you puff one of those darts into me." I picked up the ebony tube. It was a cleverly constructed miniature blow gun with a needle-sized dart inserted. "You were the first to reach the dog; you were the first to reach Ryan. And you didn't want to feel their pulses. *You knew they were dead. You wanted to recover your dart.* I can't name the poison you used but there are several that would work. We'll know after the post-mortem."

Auntie dear wiped at her eyes. "I can't believe it."

"You should," I said. "Because if anything went wrong, he planned to blame the whole thing on you. He drugged you the same as Mitzie, only heavier. That's why you never saw Mopey or Dopey or the skeletons."

Mitzie had shaken off some of the effects of the drugs. "But why should Doctor Morris want me to die?" she puzzled. "If I did, the Faber millions wouldn't go to him. They would go to Aunt Tabatha."

I said, "Exactly. And Doc had Auntie dear wound right around his finger. I asked her if that wasn't right and so help me, the old witch blushed.

"We—er—had an 'understanding'," she admitted.

Heavy fists began to bang the downstairs door. I told Ragan to admit the law. They could carry it on from here.

"But how did you know?" Morris asked.

"I should have known," I told him, "when I saw you kiss Auntie dear's hand and tell her she looked charming."

The old witch looked at me blackly. "I wish I'd shot you through the head," she said. Then she began to cry.

"But I really knew," I told Morris, "when slugs from a Colt .45 wouldn't stop those hoods up in the attic. *You wanted me to get it, so you loaded the gun with blanks.*"

By now I'd lost a lot of blood. I sat down on the bed and Mitzie sobbed. "You're wounded."

I told her that I had been shot worse and lived and that if she would pay me the rest of my fee that I would write off Auntie dear's mistaken slug to profit and loss.

She said, "Oh," tight-lipped, and picked up a checkbook. "And just how much more?"

I told her one kiss like the one she'd given Ryan, and she said "Oh," again, and kissed me. But it wasn't like Ryan's.

All in all, it turned out pretty well. Getting a girl like Mitzie was a pretty big fee for what I'd done. It's even worth being related to Auntie!

THE END

THE MAN WITH THE X-RAY EYES

(Continued from page 65)

scious servant, then seized the man's heels and lifted them. From the man's pockets dropped a roll of green bills. Duke said, "Tut, tut." An instant later the bills were in his pocket.

He started on, hesitated again, then returned to grasp the man's arms, and dragged his figure down the steps.

The lower hall was a shambles. Smoke was a thick, choking fog everywhere. The front door had been broken down. In the doorway the barrel-like Tiny held the flat-faced door-man in one hand.

"Round 'em up! Flush 'em out of there," a voice was shouting from the street. The cops plunged into the hall, and Tiny's face broke into a grin as he saw Duke. Then the smile froze.

"Duke! Watch it! Behind you—" he yelled.

With chaotic intuition, Duke sensed the danger. With one hand he gave a push that sent Joan Marchant stumbling toward the door. He dove. An instant later the crash of a gun erupted from the stairs. Lead smacked angrily on wood. Duke hit the rug and rolled. When he stopped, he looked back.

At the landing of the stairs stood the big bald man, trying to bring up his gun again. He started to sink to his knees. His shirt was dark with blood. He reeled, staggered, then crawled back up the stairs and out of sight.

The cops halted, then retreated coughing. Duke scrambled to his feet and seized the servant again. Tiny helped Joan Marchant up, then lifted the flat-faced man. They hurried out as the racing flames burst along the hall, and police, followed by Duke, the girl and Tiny made their way blindly outside.

There was a shattering of glass, and Duke looked up. At an upper window appeared the face and shoulders of the big man, silhouetted by the fire-glow behind him. He struggled as a cry twisted from his lips. Slowly, very slowly, his shoulders slid from sight. His head vanished. The talon-like fingers remained, clutching the flaming window frame. . . .

AT TEN o'clock the next morning Duke ushered into the large and shabby office Detective Captain Hallwood.

"I have a great deal to explain, I imagine," Duke began.

"A great deal, Mr. Danube."

"Well, of course you're interested in my connection with the death of Count Fritz Harlo. I shall explain that. But first, I must ask you to understand that I must respect a certain—shall I say, confidence?" He looked at Hallwood steadily. "It will explain why a

(Please turn to page 96)

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FRANCIS K. ALLAN

(Continued from page 95)

certain lady confessed to a murder of which she was innocent. It was a lie; a gallant lie, Captain. Her motive, and her secret must not leave this room. You understand?"

* * *

It was noon when Duke left the office.

"Oh, Mr. Danube, wait!" a voice called.

Duke and Tiny turned. Joan Marchant hurried toward them. "I hoped I'd find you here," she said breathlessly. "I lost you last night in all that confusion, but I want to thank you so very much for everything." She hesitated. "I mean, not just thank you with words, but. . . Please don't be offended, but if I could pay—"

"My dear child," Duke said, turning his back on Tiny. "I am touched by your gratitude. I understand the pleasure that comes of giving, rather than receiving."

He stopped, looking down the steps. From a side door of the building a woman had appeared. Her hair was golden. Her once-beautiful face was subdued by years. He watched as she moved away and was lost in the crowds.

"You wished to do something for me," he said slowly. He looked at her. "I know what I would like. You remember that you spoke of being lonely, sometimes."

"I have met this woman who, for some unexplained reason, tried to confess to the murder of Fritz Harlo. Her reasons I do not know. We should not ask those things. But she, too, seems lonely. Perhaps she needs someone. If you would pay me, then, pay me this way: Visit her only once—I have her address. Then, if you wish, go back."

"I . . . Yes, I will," she said slowly.

"Good-bye," he said. He watched her hurry away into the crowds and the sunlight.

"Nuts," said Tiny. "You're just a shade tougher than a custard pie. Let's have a drink."

"An excellent idea," said Duke. "And on you, of course. Make mine Scotch."

THE END

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(Continued)

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THE MADMAN IN THE MOON

(Continued from page 79)

on the terrified man. "You didn't pay him! You killed him and framed me for the murder!"

Dr. Wing screamed, "I didn't!" His bony fingers clawed at the table, trying to push it between himself and the slow-stalking Eddie. The huge china vase tilted, hesitated an instant, then plunged to the floor, shattering into countless bits.

For only a moment Eddie paused in his pursuit of the fleeing man. For only a moment his eyes darted to the floor. Then he froze. He could feel his eye-balls widen, feel his muscles tremble, his breath slide over his dry lips. Amid the shattered bits of china lay a thick roll of bills, bound by a thin red string.

Dr. Wing ceased to move. There was not a sound in the room for one static instant, then came a broken choking curse. Eddie spun around. The huge frog-shape of Archie was edging backward, feeling for the hall-door. Eddie's hand moved with the gun.

"Don't!" Archie screamed. He twisted and tried to leap. His match-stick legs doubled beneath him and he sprawled face-forward on the floor.

"Say it, now! Tell the truth! You killed him! You stole Doc's money nad planted the murder on me! You'd been getting the dope, too! You wouldn't pay off, would you?"

"Don't choke me! I'll tell. I did it! I couldn't pay and—"

Heavy steps sounded on the stairs; a knock came at the door. Dr. Wing stumbled across the room and turned the knob. Into the room came a cop, then a smaller man.

"We'd like to ask a few—" The cop's words vanished. His jaw sagged. Then his fingers pawed down at his gun.

"You won't need that," Eddie said quickly. "All the answers are right there on the floor. And I think Archie's ready to talk."

IT WAS in the dull grayness of dawn that Eddie went home. The blood was washed from his hand, and the cold wind was gone from the streets. He turned a block out of his way to look at the naked front of the Blue Moon.

Then the first long gleams of morning sunlight came slicing out of the east. They penetrated the gray fog of dawn, and the mist curled upward. And as he watched, Eddie felt the same thing happening within him. His fingers loosened in his pockets and a tired smile crossed his lips.

He turned his back on the Blue Moon, and his feet were hurrying home. . .

THE END

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