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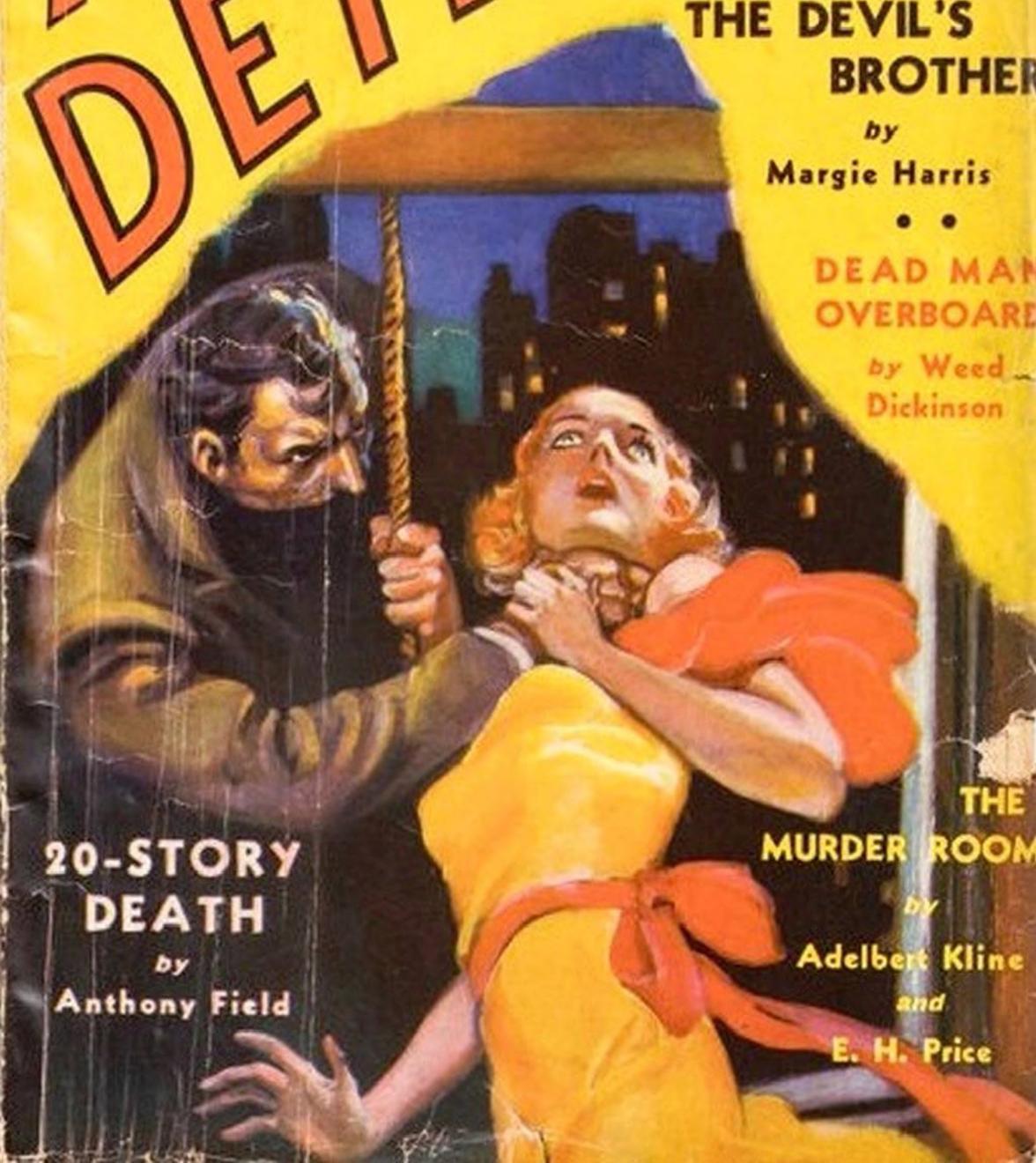
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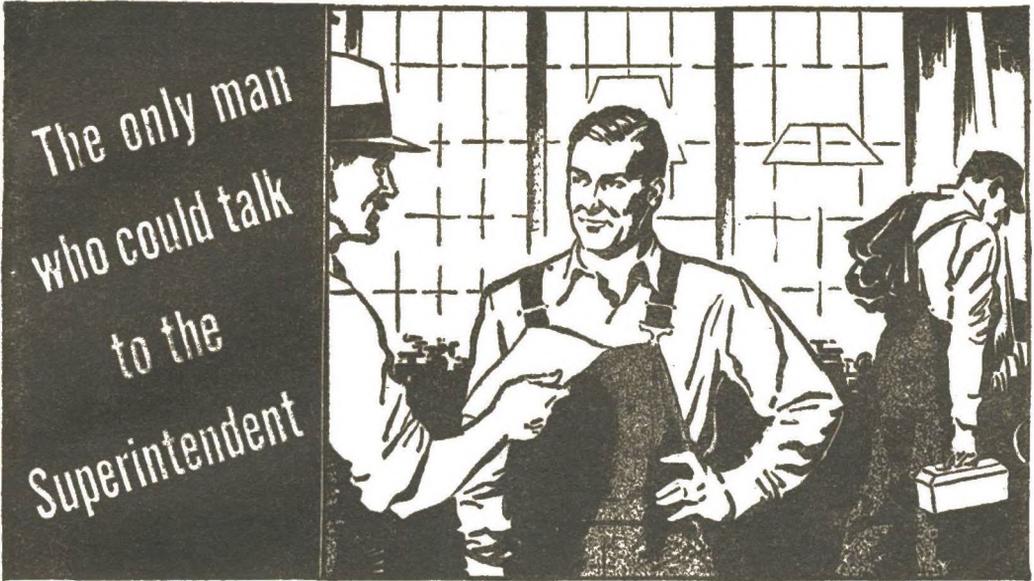
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You Can Show

You walk into an office and put down before your prospect a letter from a sales organization showing that they did work in their own office for \$11 which formerly could have cost them over \$200. A building supply corporation pays our man \$70, whereas the bill could have been for \$1,600! An automobile dealer pays our representative \$15, whereas the expense could have been over \$1,000. A department store has expense of \$88.60, possible cost if done outside the business being well over \$2,000. And so on. We could not possibly list all cases here. These are just a few of the many actual cases which we place in your hands so you can work with. Practically every line of business and every section of the country is represented by these field reports which hammer across dazzling, convincing money-saving opportunities which hardly any business man can fail to understand.

EARNINGS

One man in California earned over \$1,600 per month for three months—close to \$5,000 in 90 days' time. Another writes from Delaware—"Since I have been operating (just a little less than a month of actual selling) and not the full day at that, because I have been getting organized and had to spend at least half the day in the office; counting what I have sold outright and on trial, I have made just a little in excess of one thousand dollars profit for one month." A Georgia man made \$802.50 his first two weeks. A Connecticut man writes he has made \$55.00 in a single day's time. Texas man nets over \$300 in less than a week's time. Space does not permit mentioning here more than these few random cases. However, they are sufficient to indicate that the worthwhile future in this business is coupled with immediate earnings for the right kind of man. One man with us has already made over a thousand sales on which his earnings ran from \$5 to \$60 per sale and more. A great deal of this business was repeat business. Yet he had never done anything like this before coming with us. That is the kind of opportunity this business offers. The fact that this business has attracted to it such business men as former bankers, executives of businesses—men who demand only the highest type of opportunity and income—gives a fairly good picture of the kind of business this is. Our door is open, however, to the young man looking for the right field in which to make his start and develop his future.

Profits Typical of
the Young, Growing Industry

Going into this business is not like selling something offered in every grocery, drug or department store. For instance, when you take a \$7.50 order, as much as \$3.83 may be your share. On \$1,500 worth of business, you share may be \$1,167.00. The very least you get as your profit of every dollar's worth of business you do is 67 cents—on ten dollar's worth \$6.70, on a hundred dollar's worth \$67.00—in other words two thirds of every order you get is yours. Not only on the first order—but on repeat orders—and you have the opportunity of earning an even larger percentage.

This Business Has
Nothing to Do With
House to House Canvassing

Nor do you have to know anything about high-pressure selling. "Selling" is unnecessary in the ordinary sense of the word. Instead of hammering away at the customer and trying to "force" a sale, you make a dignified, business-like call, leave the installation—whatever else the customer says he will accept—as our risk, let the customer sell himself after the device is in and working. This does away with the need for pressure on the customer—it eliminates the hardship of trying to get the money before the customer has really convinced himself 100%. You simply tell what you offer, showing proof of success in that customer's particular line of business. Then leave the invention without a dollar down. It starts working at once. In a few short days, the installation has actually produced enough cash money to pay for the deal, with profits above the investment coming in at the same time. You then call back, collect your money. Nothing is so convincing as our offer to let results speak for themselves without resort to the customer! While others fail to get even a hearing, our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They have received the attention of the largest firms in the country, and sold to the smallest business by the thousands.

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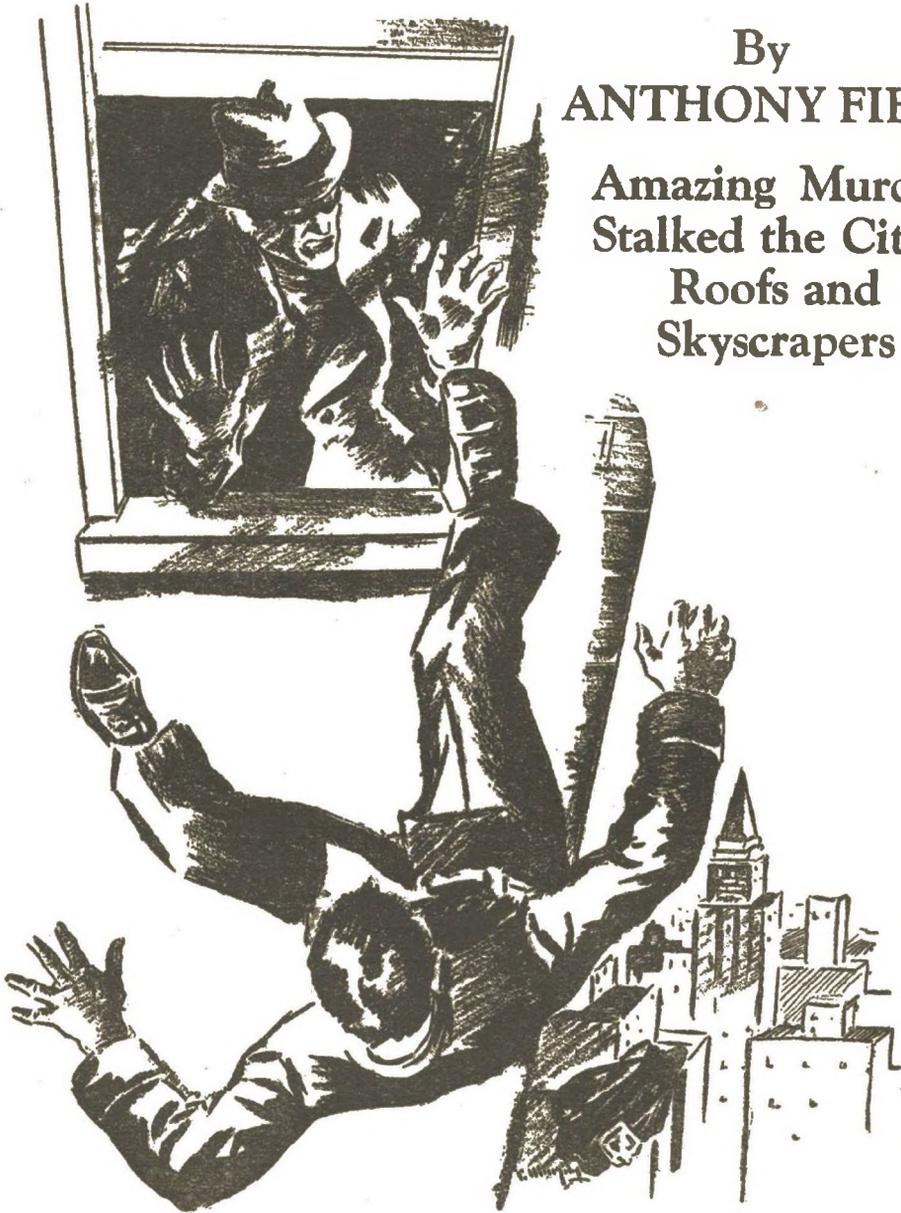
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TWENTY-STORY DEATH

By
ANTHONY FIELD

Amazing Murder
Stalked the City's
Roofs and
Skyscrapers



Chapter I

THE SUICIDE MURDERS

THE last eulogy had been said. The crescendo notes of the organ filled the tiny chapel, then died away. Silence—a moment's sorrowful silence. Then the somber roll of a drum

beat out the rhythm of Martin Oakes' last march to the grave.

Martin Oakes—a man first, an officer second—a gentleman, always. And they were giving him an Inspector's funeral!

Six sturdy officers, solemn and brave in burnished uniforms, picked up the simple casket from its bier. The drums rolled

again, a woman sobbed, and to a measured tread, the procession quitted the tiny cemetery chapel.

Immediately behind the casket, in the rôle of chief mourner, marched John Oakes, a Detective Inspector like his father before him. He had been elevated from a captaincy, at the death of the old man a few days before. And though his hair was raven black, though his high-bridged nose and arrogant mouth bespoke the vitality of youth, he looked remarkably like the man in the coffin.

John Oakes was his father's son, a chip off the old block. The old man had lent dignity, honesty and a ruthless integrity to his police work, and John was glad to follow in his glorious tradition. If only . . .

Bitter thoughts assailed him for a moment. Then, impatiently he swept them aside. His father was dead. He had a job to do. He would do it alone!

Rain slanted down from a gray sky as the cortege came to a halt before the open grave. Swiftly, with military precision as old man Oakes would have loved, the casket was placed on the webbing that spanned the grave. The minister bowed his head, intoned the last prayer for the dead.

Slowly the casket began to sink from view.

"Wait!"

One word—electric, startling, in its simple, direct command. The coffin stopped in its descent. The mourners, ringed round the open grave, stirred, turned. Then hard and brittle police eyes lost the momentary softness that had masked them, narrowed to a suspicion, tinged with resentment.

The tall, lithe figure of a man strode swiftly toward the yawning grave. He was dressed in a nondescript khaki uniform, oil and mud bespattered. No hat covered his head. And though his wide-set eyes were tearless, a great sorrow dwelled in their depths.

By his side marched a short, squat, bull-necked individual, with ears that had been cauliflowered by an artist.

A few feet from the grave, the tall one of the two stopped abruptly, stooped and broke off a spring-green sprig of hawthorn. Stepping to the edge of the grave, with a

simple gesture, he dropped his peace offering onto the casket.

And then, for the first time in years, young Steve Oakes, the brother of John Oakes and the son of Inspector Oakes, communed with his father—communed with his dead.

It was simple. It went something like this:

"I've been a rotten son, dad. I've raised hell—I've come near to breaking your heart more times than one. For that I'm sorry. We just didn't see things the same way. You couldn't understand that I wasn't a cop. And I couldn't understand why you didn't see that I wasn't. We've had words. The ones you gave me, I had coming to me.

"But now you know that I loved you. Good-bye, Old Man."

He turned abruptly from the grave. Once more the casket started its descent. The drums rolled and a shovelful of earth rattled hollowly against the coffin.

AN hour later, in his brother's office at headquarters, Steve Oakes lolled back in the one easy chair the shabby room afforded. Somber-eyed, he puffed moodily at a cigarette. Ashes sprayed down on his soiled khaki jacket, but he didn't mind. From quizzical, speculative eyes he followed the broad back of his brother as the new Inspector pounded the width of his office.

Young Steve sighed ponderously. He hadn't seen his brother for years, but he knew from bitter past experiences what these little sessions meant. He was in for it.

John ceased his pacing at last, turned and confronted his brother squarely. His eyes were hard, unyielding, his mouth bitter. With a passionate gesture he indicated Steve's soiled clothes.

"What's the idea of coming to your father's funeral in that outfit?" he demanded.

Steve shrugged, ground out his cigarette in an ash-tray. "I just arrived. Flew in from the Coast. Got here as soon as I could. I left ten minutes after getting your wire, didn't wait to change at either end, or I'd have been too late."

The Inspector snorted contemptuously, ran a hard fist over his iron jaw. "And who was that rough-neck you brought along with you?"

"Rough-neck?" asked Steve mildly.

"Yeah—the gorilla with the cauliflowered ears and ape arms."

Steve selected a cigarette with great care, lit up slowly. A smile played about his lips for a moment, then was gone. "That was Quinn—Jack Quinn—a pal of mine," he said quietly.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. He'd go through hell for me."

The Inspector's snort was eloquent. "I thought he looked dumb!" For a few bitter moments he mouthed the mangled stub of his cigar. Then ponderously, as a man who has made a difficult decision but is determined to carry it out, he crossed the room to his desk. He kicked out his chair, hitched it over and sat down facing his brother. "Listen, Steve," he began earnestly. "The Old Man's dead—and buried. Maybe we can get together."

Steve pursed his lips in a soundless whistle, nodded his head. "Maybe," he said softly. "Get together—how?"

Inspector Oakes was an excellent police officer, but he was no diplomat. He tossed his shaggy head impatiently. "When are you going to cut out this hell raising?" he demanded bluntly.

Steve's brows met in a tiny frown. With steady eyes he met the arrogant gaze of his brother. His lips tightened; the line of his jaw from ear to chin stood out clean and strong. And thus, confronting each other, level-eyed, lean-limbed, the dynamite of conflict between them, they were *both* the sons of their father.

"What hell raising?" murmured Steve. "I've had a job for two years and you know it."

"Bah!" The Inspector made an impatient gesture, snatched a fresh cigar from his vest and jammed it between his teeth. "Do you call that a *job*?"

"Well," said Steve judiciously, "it pays—almost as well as an Inspector."

John brushed the argument aside as if it were of no importance. "A movie double!" The scorn in his voice was magnificent.

"Easy pickings, Steve. You're living on someone else. An actor! It's a soft job, Steve, and you know it."

"Not as soft as some," answered the other. "Three crushed ribs, a broken leg, a minor contusion, to say nothing of the general wear and tear in the past two years."

The Inspector snorted, leaned forward and prodded his brother in the stomach with a lean forefinger. "But what does it get you? Nothing!"

"A little excitement—and beans and buns."

"If you get a kick out of risking your neck, why don't you—"

"Be a cop, eh?" finished Steve for him. He shook his head, straightened slowly. "Listen, John, you're a swell guy; but you're just like the Old Man. You've got no sense of humor, no imagination. You like this police stuff—the routine—the discipline." He shrugged helplessly. "Me—I'm different. I can't take orders."

"Can you give 'em?"

"I'm not so hot at that either," admitted the other ruefully. "I like to work alone. When I'm in a spot, I like to get out of it myself."

The Inspector was moved by an overwhelming desire to pull his hair. With a mighty effort he controlled the impulse. He fought his voice, made it hard, brutal.

"Speaking of spots, the Old Man got you out of a few. But I'll be damned if . . ."

Steve rose wearily, yawned, stretched. "Same old John. Can't forget you're a cop." He punched his brother affectionately in the ribs with a long left, smiled wryly. "Don't worry, old boy, I'll never ask you to compromise your official duty." He reached for his hat. "I better blow, now, let you get back to work."

"Sit down!" snapped the Inspector. "I'm just beginning."

With a helpless shrug Steve salled his hat back onto the desk, sank back into the chair. Inspector Oakes raised a peremptory finger and was on the point of launching into a new verbal attack, when a soft knock sounded on the door.

He jerked up his head impatiently, "Come," he barked.

IN response to the summons the portal swung inward and a pretty young girl swung across the threshold. In one hand she held a sheaf of official looking documents.

Steve appraised her swiftly as she crossed to the Inspector's desk, and found her good to look at. Level gray eyes beneath a cool brow—a demure nose that had the faintest suspicion of a saucy tilt to it—a warm, red mouth that was a trifle too large.

He had seen her before—that day—that afternoon . . . Then he had it. She had driven away with his brother from his father's funeral. That was one angle of an Inspector's job he hadn't looked into, he mused. Maybe he better reconsider.

The girl laid the papers on the Inspector's blotter. Then she was speaking, and Steve found a strange fascination in the slightly husky timbre of her voice.

"Mr. Devin and Mr. Paulding are outside."

Steve rose again. As far as he was concerned, the interview was at an end. This looked like as plausible an excuse as any, to make a graceful exit. "Maybe I better . . ." he began hopefully. But he was not to escape as easily as that.

John shook his head. "Wait. That's part of what I want to speak to you about." Then to the girl: "Have them come in."

Steve groaned inwardly. He was in no humor for the second chapter of his brother's sermon. However, he summoned all the fortitude at his command and followed the girl with appreciative eyes as she crossed the room. There was a lithe loveliness to her body when she walked that pleased him; a suggestion of hidden power and reserve.

"Nice girl," he murmured when the door had closed behind her. "What's her name?"

John scowled at him from beneath shaggy brows. "Nice, is right," he growled, with significant emphasis on the word. "Nice and hard working. Her name is Nancy Muir. Let her alone."

Steve was about to assure him that his intentions were nothing if not honorable, when the door opened once more. A tall, rugged mountain of a man with a thatch of unruly red hair hurried into the room. He was followed by a younger man whose ex-

remely thin face was notable for its peculiar, wax-like pallor.

The Inspector went into the introductions briefly. "Mr. Devin—" indicating the red-haired one—"Mr. Paulding: this is my brother, Steve."

Devin nodded curtly, Paulding favored young Steve Oakes with a sidelong glance from averted eyes. For his part, Steve inclined his head slightly, showed two even rows of teeth in a wooden smile.

He was interested, but just mildly so, in the possible connection between what these two visitors had to say and the matter his brother wanted to take up with him. He received an inkling of the clue a moment later as Devin broke forth into heated, vitriolic words.

"Damn it all, Inspector, you've got to give me action in this matter!" He assaulted the desk with a sledge hammer fist. "Action—an arrest!" Whipping a silk handkerchief from the breast pocket of his coat, he mopped at his perspiring brow. "Damn it all, man, I'm going mad! This series of robberies has cost my company a million and a half." He smote the desk again. "A cool million and a half!" Abruptly, with an effort, he regained control of himself. His voice fell two octaves to a normal bass. "Sorry to go off the handle like that, Inspector, but damn it all, it's either an arrest or my job."

John nodded his head gravely, pushed a box of cigars across his desk. "We're doing all we can, Mr. Devin. But you know, we still have no positive evidence that a crime has been committed."

"Bosh!" stated Devin flatly. "Tommyrot! It's ridiculous, Inspector. You know damn well those deaths weren't accidental—or suicidal. They . . ."

Watching him, Steve saw the eyes of his brother turn suddenly bleak. His nostrils dilated slightly and for ten seconds a pulse beat violently in his left temple.

"I'm inclined to agree with you," said the Inspector in a heavy voice. "Very inclined. If you're right, and my hunch is correct, you'll get action—and plenty of it!"

"A million and a half," said Devin in an awed voice, as if he really didn't believe there was that much money in the world.

He mopped at his brow again, jerked out his watch, glanced at it, then rose. "I've got to go. We've got an appointment with the District Attorney. Just dropped in to find out whether there are any new developments in the Graham affair."

"I'm working on it," answered the Inspector. "It looks bad for Graham, but we've nothing definite on him—yet. I'll let you know as soon as anything breaks."

As agitated as if his life were at stake instead of his job, Devin clucked to Paulding and hurried out to keep his appointment with the D. A., for which he was already ten minutes late.

"NOT accidental deaths—and not suicides," murmured Steve. "To a son of a Police Inspector—not forgetting I'm a brother to one—there's only one answer."

John looked at him shrewdly. "You're getting smart. The answer is—*murder!* Interested?"

Steve lit a cigarette from the stub of its predecessor, waved it vaguely through the air. "Curious, maybe. Devin's an insurance adjuster, I take it. Who and what is Paulding?"

"His assistant."

"What's the story—and where do I fit in?"

The Inspector kicked back his chair, clasped his hands behind his back and paced the room a few turns. He stopped for a moment by the window, gazed down on the clattering traffic of Centre Street. Without turning, he spoke. "The story is simple. During the past six months there have been six mysterious deaths in the jewelry business. Too mysterious to be true. The papers called them accidents—suicides. We believed that for a while, too. In each instance there was a small fortune in jewels missing.

"It worked this way. The robbery—or supposed robbery—was reported. The police and Devin's company—the Cosmos Insurance Company—investigated. Between us, in each case we turned up evidence pointing to an inside job. Sometimes the finger pointed to one of the big shots—sometimes to an office-boy, a clerk, a bookkeeper.

"And then, just as we were getting ready

to close in, Mr. Goldfarb takes a nose dive out of his window on the twentieth floor of the Jewelers Building—a bookkeeper blows out his brains—the body of a clerk is fished out of the river . . . All suspects. We had proof enough apparently to convict each one of them for robbery of his firm."

Steve nodded his head judiciously, propped his feet on a corner of the Inspector's desk. "That's not so strange," he offered. "Mob psychology, and all that. One got caught and took the Dutch way out—and the rest followed suit. The power of suggestion. What makes you so sure they're murder?"

John turned slowly from the window, walked slowly back to his brother. He held Steve's eyes for a long moment in silence. Then, in a quiet voice: "Your father worked on this case. He *died* on it! He fell—or jumped from the thirty-third floor of the Tower Building to the hard, cement sidewalk of Maiden Lane."

"What? Not the Old Man! In your wire you didn't say how he died, but—"

His brother, however, was going on without a pause.

"The papers said accident. There was even a whisper of suicide. But Dad was getting too old to try any human fly stuff. *He didn't fall.* And no matter what he was up against, he wouldn't jump! The Old Man *never committed suicide!*"

Steve's eyes were suddenly hot: his throat constricted spasmodically. "You mean he was . . ."

"I mean he was—*pushed out of that window!* Murdered! Murdered by the same hand that got the others. You still think you want to be a movie double?"

Steve ignored the crack. "Go on," he said tersely.

John glanced at him sharply for a moment, the birth of a hope in his eye. Then, abruptly, he turned to his desk, yanked open the top drawer and extracted a crumpled white cuff from its dark interior. With a flirt of his wrist he tossed it across the table to Steve, who picked it up and studied it curiously.

An enigmatic series of numbers penciled on the linen of the cuff intrigued his eye.

"Dad's?"

"Yes. He was wearing it when it happened."

Steve indicated the cryptic numerals. "What do these mean?"

The Inspector shrugged heavy shoulders. "I wish to hell I knew. Concretely—nothing, yet. Abstractly, they spell murder. The Old Man's murder!" His voice took on a fierce harshness. "That was his clue to the suicide-murders, and he died for it—*because of it!*"

The somber silence of the room vibrated to the savage intensity of his voice. No one spoke for a long moment.

Then Steve broke the unnatural quiet as he hitched up his chair. With a long arm he dragged a pad and pencil toward him, swiftly copied the notation from his father's cuff. This was the result:

R-27438

Carelessly, he stuffed the scrap of paper into his pocket, looked up at his brother. "Car license?"

There was something in his eye, a metallic brittleness in his voice, that fanned the hope in the Inspector's heart to flame. John shook his head.

"No. No such number issued." His voice lowered to a husky growl. "If what I believe is true, you can't let me down now, Steve. But to hell with me! You can't let the *Old Man* down!" Then abashed at his momentary show of sentiment, he continued in his usual gruff voice. "What do you say? I can pull a few wires and get you on the force. Between us . . ."

Steve got up from his chair, jammed his hat down on his head. "I wasn't cut out for a cop, John," he said slowly. "But—I'll think it over."

Chapter II

ENTER SPIDER KELLEY

DOWN on the street, Steve stood undecided a moment at the curb. He was oblivious to the slashing rain that pelted at his face, unaware of the skidding cabs, immune to the curious glances cast at him by hurrying pedestrians.

Once more in his mind he stood at an open grave beneath a slate gray sky. Again his brother's words echoed insistently in his

brain. So his father had been murdered!

Bitterly he cursed himself. Why hadn't he said "yes" to John? Was he too proud to be a cop? After all, what was this much vaunted freedom getting him, except a few broken bones? A little discipline would do him good.

But he knew he was fooling himself. Self discipline, yes. But he was constitutionally unfit to take orders from any man. Least of all his brother, he mused bitterly. John was John—like his father before him. He, Steve, would have gladly laid down his life for them. But . . .

He shrugged, fished a cigarette from a crumpled pack and lit up. Murder! The word grated harshly in his mind. He had been up against death before, sudden, swift, uncompromising death—and had laughed gaily in its face. But this thing . . .

Aimlessly, he started to pound the pavements.

This thing was getting under his skin!

So the Old Man was gone? Someone had pitched him out of a twenty-story window! A nasty way of going out!

Suddenly he came to a swift decision. And with the decision, a bitter smile came to his lips, a reckless light to his eyes. With an upflung arm he hailed a cruising cab. Snapping a terse order to the driver, he sank back on the cushions.

They rolled.

And the further they rolled, the more bleak became Steve's eyes. His brother had accused him of having no job. Well, by God, he had a job now! A man-sized one! True, he had buried his dead. But his father lived on in him—the Avenger!

What matter that a murderer sat in the game? What matter that Death dealt the cards?

The somber mood that had oppressed him all day changed to one of implacable relentlessness. A half hour later, when his cab deposited him before an unpretentious apartment house in the upper Fifties, his hell-raising days were definitely behind him. Here his father had lived alone after John's marriage. Steve had not been inside the door in years.

He flipped a bill to the driver, pushed swiftly through the door of the building.

Inside, he took the three flights of stairs that led to his father's apartment with long strides. At the end of a dimly lit corridor on the third floor, he paused before a stout, oaken door. Fishing in his pocket, he extracted a heavily-laden key-ring. He selected an ancient, rusted key at last, was about to insert it in the lock—when abruptly he stiffened.

His eyes narrowed, his nostrils flared. Pressing an ear to the panel, he listened. And what he heard from behind the closed door put the glint of death in his eyes.

Softly he inserted the rusted key in the lock, turned it gently. The door eased open a foot. Like a shadow he crossed the threshold and the door closed noiselessly behind him. From up ahead, at the far end of the corridor, a faint light shone furtively. Other lights—more dangerous ones—glinted in Steve's eyes. He wished for the feel of a gun, was sorry for the first time he had no permit to carry one.

At the end of the hall he flattened himself against the wall, parted the drapes that hung there, and peered into the room beyond. What he saw brought a grim smile to his lips. By the light of a heavily shaded floor lamp, a small, crouching figure was working over the combination of the safe set against the far wall.

His father's safe!

The devil danced in Steve's blue eyes. He bluffed, plunged his hand suggestively into the pocket of his coat, then coughed.

"Sorry to intrude," he said dryly, "but you seem to be having difficulty. Maybe I can help?"

The figure at the safe froze for a moment, then whirled. And as he pivoted around, the door of the safe swung open.

Steve brushed the drapes aside and stepped into what had once served as his father's study. He swept the dimly familiar room with an all-inclusive glance, then centered his undivided attention on the man by the safe.

He was masked—and his hand was edging furtively towards his hip!

"I wouldn't if I were you," said Steve quietly. His bluff was magnificent. "A dose of lead at this short range is usually—ah—fatal."

Baleful eyes glared back at him from behind the slits in the mask. Steve prayed that his bluff wouldn't be called as he edged warily, further into the room.

"Who are you—and what do you want?" rasped the man in the mask.

Steve smiled frostily. "You're in a hell of a spot to be asking questions," he grated. "It so happens that I have the gun—and *you're* behind the eight ball!"

The eyes behind the mask shifted frantically around the room, then riveted with fascination on the ominous bulge in Steve's pocket.

"What do you want?" he flung out sullenly.

"Information, mostly—" Then, as a sinister after thought—"to begin with! Why the interest in the safe?"

The man in the mask decided to gamble all on one reckless attempt. He flung himself sideways and down, achieved a lightning draw. Orange flame lanced from the muzzle of his silenced gun as it cleared his hip.

DEATH fanned Steve's cheek. He jumped fast along the wall. Lead slammed into the plaster behind him. He dove suddenly forward, caught the base of a small table with the toe of his shoe and sent it hurtling at the spitting gun.

The automatic bobbed. Steve followed up his momentary advantage with a savage attack. He hadn't been a movie double for nothing. He flexed the powerful muscles of his legs, launched himself into the air and dove headlong at his attacker.

His shoulder—a hundred and eighty pounds of bone and muscle behind it—crashed into a flat chest. His right fist packed dynamite as it rocked against an underslung jaw. The silenced automatic flew wide, described a wide arc and clattered to the floor at the far side of the room.

Steve grasped his victim by the slack of his coat and yanked him to his feet. His long left shot out, his hand gripped the concealing mask and ripped it from the snarling face behind it.

Rat eyes—a low brow—and a weak chin marked the unmasked face. Steve studied the composite effect—and didn't like it. He

swung the wizened killer off his feet, jugged his jaw forward pugnaciously.

"What's the name, buddy?" he grated. "And don't think you can kid me. I'll twist your arm off if I catch you lying!"

The intruder hesitated, remembered those powerful muscles, and spoke, "Spider."

"Spider what?"

"Spider Kelley."

Steve's eyes were twin cubes of ice. As if the other were a rat, he shook the killer until Kelley's teeth chattered.

"Listen, you!" he said in a harsh voice. "You might be just an ordinary safe-cracker. It might be just accident that you hit this place. But I doubt it—twice! When I find out for sure—" his eyes became hot—hot and at the same time, cold as eternity—"when I find out for sure, you and I will have another little session. And it won't end like this one!"

A furtive ray of hope glinted in Kelley's shifty eyes. "What do you want?"

For answer, Steve yanked him forward, then with deft fingers went through his clothes. But if he had expected to find anything of importance—any clue leading to the identity of his father's murderer—he was disappointed.

He unearthed a packet of crumpled cigarettes, a handful of loose change and a scrap of paper on which was scribbled a short notation! *Romax—1420.*

He studied the slip briefly, then slipped it into his pocket. He confronted Kelley once more.

"How did you get in?"

The Spider indicated the window.

"Okay. Get out the same way."

"You mean . . ."

"Beat it!" growled Steve savagely, "before I change my mind."

Spider Kelley did not wait for a second invitation. With remarkable agility, he slipped over the sill of the window and disappeared into the blackness of the night.

Chapter III

PARTNERS IN CRIME

JACK QUINN, ex-pug, ex-con, was Steve Oakes' man Friday. And on more occasions than one, Steve had admitted that

he was the other six days of the week thrown into the bargain.

Quinn wasn't much to look at—he had a face with which to frighten children—but he had the priceless virtue of loyalty. He was muscled like a wrestler, could handle a speeding car with the dexterity of a Barney Oldfield, and he could shoot like a vaudeville marksman. And not least amongst his manly attributes, was the belief that young Oakes could do no wrong.

All of which made him invaluable, especially in a pinch.

For the past five years he and Steve had adventured around the seven seas of the earth. True, they hadn't gathered a great deal of moss, as measured in dollars, but they had acquired a marvelous polish and technique in extricating themselves from the innumerable hot spots their adventuresome spirits placed them in.

The last two years of their partnership had been spent in Hollywood, doubling for movie sheiks and would-be hard guys, who couldn't take it on the chin.

But now, as he marched down the corridor to his hotel room, Steve was thinking that his happy partnership with Quinn had come to an end—as all good things must, in time.

Free-booting in the far corners of the world was one thing. It was quite another, here in New York.

Quinn was applying himself assiduously to a bottle of Scotch when he entered the room. He promptly filled a second glass, shoved it across the table.

"Where the hell you been?" he demanded.

Steve ignored the question, picked up the pony of whisky and squinted through it speculatively a moment. Then he turned to Quinn. "Here's to you, Jack—a real friend."

Quinn snorted. These rare flashes of sentiment made him uncomfortable. "So what?"

Steve tossed off his drink, slid his glass back onto the table. "The happy days are over, son."

Quinn's eyes bulged out of his head; his muscles bulged and he heaved himself half out of his chair. "You mean you're going to join the cops?" he asked in an outraged voice.

Steve smiled, shook his head slowly.

Quinn collapsed in the chair, heaved a mighty sigh of relief and hastily poured himself another drink. When he had successfully irrigated his cast iron gullet once more, he turned a jaundiced eye on Steve.

"Then what's eating you? What do you mean, the happy days are over?"

Steve's jaw hardened and the bantering laughter died from his eyes. "Right, Jack," he said soberly. "It's hell—but we're all washed up. I got a job to do—and I can't deal you in."

A pathetic anguish crawled slowly across Quinn's homely features. From hurt eyes he studied the other's face. "Do you mean," he began in a gruff voice, "that you can't, or you *won't*—" his voice picked up with sudden hope—"or that you think you *oughtn't* to deal me in?"

Steve nodded. "That's it—the last."

Quinn assaulted the table with a massive fist. He kicked back his chair, towered over the other. There was a righteous anger in his eye; his great hands clenched and unclenched at his side.

"The hell with you!" he snorted. "You can't dump me like that. I'm sticking, see? What's good enough for you, or bad enough—" he pounded himself on the chest—"is good enough for me! Running out on me, huh? Giving me the go-bye! Why for two cents . . ." As abruptly as it had come, his pugnacious mood vanished. A sincere pleading crept into his voice. "Hell, Steve, what would I do without you?"

Steve was momentarily overcome by an alien emotion. He had a great affection for this hairy ape before him. His hand shot out. Quinn clasped it in a grip of steel.

"You win, Jack," said Steve simply. "I was a fool. Let's have a drink."

Quinn shook his head. "Later. The story first. There *is* a story."

Steve nodded. "Yes," he said laconically in a brittle voice. "The Old Man we buried today—my father—was murdered!"

IT took the slow thinking Quinn a full minute to assimilate this startling bit of information, another full minute to tie it up with Steve's desire to dump him overboard.

"So it was murder," he said at last in a

slow voice. "And now you're going to be a one-man lynching bee!"

"Two-man, now," corrected Steve with a twisted smile. "Sit down. I'll give you the story. If you want to back out then—I wouldn't blame you . . ."

Sparks flashed from Quinn's eyes, his huge jaw jutted forward dangerously. "Buddy," he said ominously, "you're asking for a bust in the nose."

Steve was a man of wisdom. He knew when it was expedient to bow to the inevitable, especially when the inevitable was backed up by the might of Jack Quinn's fist.

Without further preliminaries, he told his ally the few details he knew of the case the press was pleased to refer to as "The Suicide-Murders." He started with the session he had had with his brother in the Inspector's office, ended with the little scene he had enacted with Spider Kelley in his father's apartment.

"That's the story, Jack," he concluded, "—so far. There's going to be guns in it—and death before I'm finished. We'll be going up against murder, bullets—and police lead. The chances are we'll end up with a rope around our necks . . ." He shrugged philosophically. "But there you are. What do you say?"

Quinn grinned cheerfully. "Sounds swell to me. When do we start?"

Steve studied his face for a long moment from somber eyes. Then, suddenly, he grinned; the grin widened into a smile, the smile transcended itself into a laugh. He threw back his head and the rafters of the room echoed to his mirth.

"Quinn, my boy," he said when he could speak coherently once more, "I take back what I said about a noose. By God, between us we'll get away with it."

"When do we start?" said Quinn the practical.

Steve reached in his pocket, extracted twin slips of paper. The first was the one upon which he had copied the cryptic notation he had found on his father's cuff. The other was a scrap of paper, identical in size—a paper he had taken from his father's safe. And on it was penciled:

He tossed the slips over to Quinn. "What do you make of those?" he asked.

Quinn picked up the papers gingerly between thick fingers. His brows came together in a heavy frown and his bulging forehead corrugated like an accordion as he concentrated on the double series of numbers.

He shrugged, grunted, shook his head at last. "It's Greek to me. I'm no puzzle expert. Where'd you get 'em and what do they mean?"

"I can only answer the first half," answered Steve. "One I copied from the Old Man's cuff, the other I got from his safe." He pulled meditatively at the lobe of his ear. "And as far as what they mean—I wish to hell I knew! That's what we got to find out."

"Sure," agreed Quinn the impatient. "When do we start?"

But Steve was not to be rushed just then into any premature action. He worried the lobe of his ear a bit longer, then asked suddenly: "How much dough have we got?"

Quinn never hesitated. He plunged a hairy hand into his pants pocket, dragged it out a moment later clutching a tangle of soiled and crumpled bills. Unceremoniously he dumped them on the table. Steve emptied his wallet beside them and the tally was made. Between them, they had just short of a thousand dollars.

"Enough to start on," mused Steve. "Okay, Jack, you go to work now. Take the dough. I want two Lugers—plenty of ammunition for them—two black masks—make-up stuff—and a second-hand car that's got guts. You know, a nice job that'll get us places and back again in a hurry. Something that won't let us down in a pinch."

Quinn swept up the bills, stuffed them carelessly in his pocket. He grinned broadly. "Leave that to me. I'll get you something you'll be proud of."

"Yeah?" said Steve skeptically. "But pay for it, remember! And nothing hot!"

Quinn made a face, looked aggrieved that anyone should suspect him of either stealing a car or buying one already stolen.

"And make it fast," called Steve after him, as the door slammed shut behind his back.

ALONE, he draped his long form in the easy chair that Quinn had just vacated, lit up a fresh cigarette and sent blue spirals of smoke curling lazily toward the ceiling. He squinted speculatively through the widening rings, screwed up his face and pondered over the various facts he had learned from his brother concerning the series of mysterious suicides—or murders.

He remembered the aggressive Devin, and in his heart found a momentary pang of sympathy for his brother, harried by that impetuous individual. And there was Devin's pallid shadow, Paulding. Steve's nose crinkled slightly. There was something decidedly unhealthy about Devin's silent assistant.

With a shrug he dismissed the two insurance men and knotted his usually placid brow over the cryptic numbers his father had left behind him. After all, if the Old Man had been murdered, it was because he had known too much. Was the answer contained in those two innocent series of numbers, both preceded by a letter?

In brooding silence he studied the scraps of paper until the numbers danced before his eyes. Then he laughed, a short, harsh laugh, and jammed the slips into his pocket. What the hell! He was behaving like an Inspector! Acting like any slow-witted copper over a clue! Before he went to work, he had to learn more of the set-up.

Thinking back, he recalled the conversation that afternoon between his brother and Devin. They had been speaking about a Mister Graham—another jeweler. Steve's brow corrugated in a frown of concentration. From what John had said, the police net was closing in on Graham. And if this last case ran true to form . . . another murder was in the cards!

It was his best bet.

The classified telephone book hung from a nail beside the telephone stand. Hooking his toe neatly through the loop of the cord, he flirted his ankle and caught the book as it flipped towards him. With an agile thumb he rifled through the pages. "Jewelers"—"Jewelers, wholesale . . ." His finger ran swiftly down the list—stopped.

There it was: Walter Graham, Room 1420 Romax Building.

Steve whistled. Slowly he removed from his pocket the slip of paper he had taken from Spider Kelley. He glanced at it, but he already knew the answer.

The number on it was the room number of Graham's office in the Romax Building!

Decidedly, Mr. Walter Graham was his best bet!

QUINN returned a half hour later, laden with bundles and packages. From his bulging pockets he produced others, heaped them upon the table.

"The new wagon is downstairs," he announced. "Wait'll you see it, it's a wow. Not much to look at but there's a real engine under the hood. I opened her up for a few blocks just to make sure—and boy, that bus can travel!"

Steve snapped the string of a parcel, inquired with elaborate casualness: "Of course, when you opened her up, Jack, you made sure that no—er—cops were in sight?"

The enthusiasm faded from Quinn's face. Sheepishly he fumbled once more in his pockets. "I didn't think there were," he explained. "But just as I got her over eighty-five, one of those guys buzzed out of a side street—an' gimme this ticket."

He produced an official square of paper, fingered it gingerly.

Steve groaned.

"What's the matter?" flared Quinn. "Didn't you say to make it *snappy*?"

Steve made a helpless gesture at himself in the mirror. "The trouble with you, Jack," he sighed, "is that you're so infernally literal."

"Literal, hell!" snorted Quinn. "I don't read nothing but the comics."

Steve grinned, thrust out his hand. "Okay, sweetheart. Let's have it. I'll present it to John with my compliments. He'll fall on my neck."

He stowed the ticket away, then surveyed Quinn's purchases with a critical eye. Amongst the litter of paper and string reposed two heavy Lugers, two engaging black masks, boxes of cartridges, and a varied assortment of bottles, tins and make-up pencils. Steve devoted himself to the latter, selected several items and carried them into the bathroom.

"Let's go, Jack," he called. "The set's ready. Perhaps we can put a little excitement into the drama."

He seated Quinn upon a stool, tucked a towel about his neck, tilted his head to one side and studied his subject judiciously. "Sorry, Jack," he sighed, "there's really nothing much I can do about it. But I'll do my best. Those ears! That face! What will I make out of you—Gloria Swanson, or Mary Pickford?" He shook his head again, then went swiftly to work. "It's no use, Jack. You've got to be the villain of the piece."

Quinn registered resignation. "Maybe I ain't pretty, but I don't want to look like a chorus guy, anyway. Cut out the wisecracks and get busy."

Steve applied the make-up with deft, experienced fingers. A sly smile relieved the hard lines of his face as he worked, and seeing it, a scowl descended heavily upon Mr. Quinn's troubled brow.

In a few moments, Quinn's honest but battered features assumed a sinister, piratical cast. Subtle shadows brought out his flattened nose, heightened his cheek-bones. A few sure touches thinned his lips to a cruel, hard line.

Steve stepped back at last, dabbed his fingers on a towel and surveyed his handiwork with satisfaction. "There. Take a look at yourself in the mirror, my lad. And don't be scared of yourself."

Quinn looked at his reflection sideways from jaundiced eyes, saw the villainous-looking visage that leered back at him and growled his defiance at his own reflection. "Boo! Well, anyway, this ought to be a help if we get in a jam. All I need to do is to let 'em lamp this mug and they'll run."

"Or shoot first and ask questions after," grinned Steve, as he took his place before the mirror. He ran a quizzical hand around his chin, studied his reflection critically. He glanced once more at Quinn, then proceeded to transform himself.

The piratical Quinn watched him with a look that changed to deepening disgust. And when at last Steve turned to face him, he snorted.

"That makes us a hell of a looking pair!"

Steve glanced over his shoulder, winked

at himself in the mirror. And the reflection that winked back was anything but the lean-jawed, leather-faced, hard-eyed son of the dead Inspector Oakes. By subtle application of make-up, Steve had imparted to his features a wide-eyed innocence that was altogether disarming.

He now had red, round cheeks—the latter from cotton tucked behind his jaws—gentle eyes and full lips that hid the suggestion of a shy smile. He looked as harmless as any drug-store clerk. He actually looked like a pink-cheeked soda-jerker.

And because he felt in a particularly deadly mood, the irony of his disguise pleased him. He turned to Quinn.

"All set?"

Quinn grunted, unlimbered his Luger and examined it with a business-like precision. "All set," he echoed. "Let's go places."

Chapter IV

TWENTY-STORY DEATH

QUINN'S roadster rounded the corner of Eighth Avenue—but not at eighty-five miles. Forty was the best Steve would let him do in traffic. It straightened out, then slowed a trifle as Quinn's heavy foot eased off the gas pedal.

For the first time during the ride, Steve relaxed his hold on the door handle, took a deep breath. "Pull up over here on the right," he ordered. "That is, if we can find a parking space."

"Huh?" grunted Quinn disdainfully. He leaned over the wheel, spotted a small, unoccupied space between a parked sedan and a fire plug. It might have accommodated a motorcycle, in a pinch. He touched the brakes, stopped, meshed his gears and shot backwards. There was a metallic clang of bumper against bumper. The gears meshed again, the wheel wrenched around. Another jarring crash—a jolting stop. Quinn snapped off the ignition.

"Well," he said matter-of-factly, "here we are."

Steve cocked back his hat, tugged at the lobe of his ear and looked over his shoulder at the sedan they had crashed back some ten feet. "So it seems," he said dryly. "So it seems." Then he pulled his hat forward

again, sat up on the cushions and peered through the windshield. On the opposite side of the street, nearer Broadway, a tall building stretched its twinkling lights up into the night sky. He pointed it out to Quinn. "That's the place."

Quinn followed his pointing finger. "That joint? I know that dump. It's the Romax Tower. Full of chiseler booking-agents, booze parlors, two-bit book-makers and such trash."

"And jewels worth a fortune," added Steve. "The gentleman I'm going to visit isn't exactly in the—ah—piker class." He swung open the door, slid off the seat to the curb. "You can wait," he said tersely. "I'll be back when I'm through."

Quinn looked at him indignantly. "Wait, hell!" he wailed. "You didn't bring me along just to scare traffic cops, did you? Wait . . .?"

But Steve, walking rapidly toward the entrance of the Romax Tower, did not linger to hear him out. He was thinking of his father—and of Graham—and murder!

The office building, fortunately, was not closed at night, like normal business buildings. Its various enterprises were mostly nocturnal and consequently Steve's entrance was not particularly noticed.

With a low, tuneless whistle piping from his lips, he strolled into the lobby, stepped into an elevator. The lad who ran it, an under-sized kid with a shrewd, young-old face, slammed the door shut and jerked the lever.

"Where to, Mister?"

Steve's whistle died on an off-key. He remembered his disguise. "Oh, Mr. Graham's office," he answered politely. "Please."

The boy turned his shrewd gaze upon him, looked him swiftly over from head to foot. "That's in the tower. Say—you ain't a dick?"

"Dick?" repeated Steve innocently.

"Sure. Gumshoe," explained the kid. "They've been ducking in and out of here on Graham's heels for days. They make me laugh with their detective stuff. Hell, Mister, I can smell a dick a mile away."

Steve's wide eyes went wider. "I don't understand," he said gently. "You see I'm

Mr. Graham's nephew. I just got in from Beecher's Corners, so I thought I'd drop in and see him."

The boy's lips curled. "From the sticks, eh? Huh!" He at once lost interest in his passenger, turned back to his lever and the box of call buttons over his head.

The ancient elevator creaked its way upward, stopped at last with a protesting clank, deposited Steve in a deserted corridor and dropped earthward once more.

THE corridor was long and the doors that opened onto it from either side were dark. But directly ahead of Steve, at the far end, light showed through the frosted pane of yet another door. Steve patted his pocket, felt the hard, reassuring bulge at his hip, and then started swiftly for the lighted door. He made out the name, Walter Graham, printed in gold letters across the pebbled glass, took two long strides—and then froze.

From beyond the door of Walter Graham's office had suddenly come a piercing scream—a scream freighted with agony and mortal terror!

Steve hit the unlocked door with his left shoulder. Miraculously, his Luger sprouted in his fist. Poised on the balls of his feet, he landed inside the office. His gun snapped up, his finger tightened on the trigger . . . but he didn't shoot. He didn't dare!

Half in the window on the far side of the room, two dark figures, locked in a fierce struggle, were silhouetted sharply. Blood throbbled fiercely in Steve's temples. One of those two men was Graham—the other, a murderer! But as they swayed there, tottering perilously on the brink of eternity, he could not tell them apart.

He leaped forward. And then again, that terror laden scream filled the office.

And now, where there had been two men but a second before, there was only one! And that one was pumping lead at Steve from a heavy automatic. A slug grooved Steve across the head with stunning impact. It was no more than a scalp wound but the sudden shock of the bullet spun him half around, dropped him to one knee.

From blood fogged eyes he studied the

pattern of the carpet a moment, then shook his head. His Luger came up, swept round in a swift arc—and focused on nothing.

The room was empty!

As if drawn by some fascination of horror, his eyes turned to the window, then widened. The dangling end of a rope was outlined against the upper pane. It bobbed jerkily upward. Swiftly Steve leaped to his feet, crossed the room and recklessly leaned far out across the sill. He screwed his neck around, looked upward and was just in time to see the trailing end of the rope as it disappeared over the edge of the parapet, some six feet above his head.

Steve cursed bitterly, then the shrill blast of a police whistle, far below, brought his eyes back and down toward the canyoned street far below. On the sidewalk before the building a knot of people had gathered. And even as he watched, others converged from all directions. At that distance they resembled scurrying ants. But nevertheless, his keen eyes had no difficulty in identifying the motionless object that lay sprawled in the center of the gathering throng. It was a man's body—or the body of what had once been a man!

The unseen killer had struck again!

From somewhere a siren screamed, coming closer. The clang of an ambulance swelled the chorus of Broadway.

Steve ducked back into the office, examined it swiftly again. A large safe occupied one corner. He tried it but found it closed. Nothing seemed disturbed, out of order. Everything appeared normal, as it should be. And then his eye fell upon the floor.

There, on the polished linoleum, lay the one alien note in the office. A woman's glove—a tan gauntlet, small and dainty.

He picked it up, sniffed it, and his nostrils were assailed by a faint and indefinable perfume. Steve had never smelled that subtle scent before—and he would never forget it, he told himself grimly.

So a woman had entered on the scene! A woman—jewels—and murder! A bad combination!

The agitated buzzings of the bells in the elevator shafts announced the precipitate arrival of the police. Steve realized that

his present position, disguise and all, would not be an easy one to explain. And if he had any intention of eventually unmasking the lady of the lost glove, he had to get out of there.

An elevator door slammed far below.

He had to get out of there—fast!

Tucking his find in his pocket, he left the office, slammed the door behind him, and sped down the darkened corridor towards a rear stairway.

TWO minutes later, as a squad of policemen ascended to the tower of the Romax Building via the elevator, Steve, with the reckless ease of a seasoned second-story man, was negotiating roof-tops, fire escapes and back alleys. Expertly he dodged a battered array of garbage cans, murmured his apologies to resentful tom-cats for disturbing their nocturnal pleasures, and emerged at last out of the mouth of an obscure alley, into the stream of traffic that crowded Broadway.

He adjusted his tie in a store window, made sure that there were no traces of blood on his face and, lighting a cigarette, strolled leisurely to the corner.

He had just begun the reckless game of vengeance, and already the score stood one to nothing—in the favor of Death! Death and his unseen, unknown enemy!

Well, he mused bitterly, he always had been a poor beginner!

He turned west into 48th Street. A hundred yards ahead, before the entrance to the Romax Building, a crowd had gathered around the body that sprawled grotesquely on the sidewalk.

Steve swore softly. He had been late by a matter of seconds. A scream—swift death—and a woman's glove. All three intangible things. But at least his brother's hunch had been verified. No suicide this; and even though Steve hadn't seen the face of the body on the sidewalk, he would have staked his honor—or what there was left of it—that it was that of Walter Graham.

Things were getting complicated. And a moment later he found them more so. Neither Quinn nor the car were in evidence where he had left them. They had vanished completely, the one with the other.

His brows shot up; he frowned. Then he laughed—a laugh that was strangely incongruous against the bedlam of Times Square. Now what in the hell had happened to Quinn? He shrugged and hoped for the best.

With a wave of his hand he flagged a cab and headed back for his hotel.

UP in his room, he cauterized his scalp wound, then mixed himself a drink. He was halfway through his second drink when the shrill buzz of the telephone snapped him to his feet. With a long hand he picked up the instrument, pressed the receiver to his ear.

"Yes?"

Quinn's voice, low, guarded, came over the wire to him.

"I was wondering if it wasn't about time you were calling up," drawled Steve. "What'd you run away for?"

Quinn's snort of disgust outraged the telephone's delicate receiving mechanism. "Run away, hell! Listen! I'm waiting in the bus, see? And a guy comes fanning out of the alley like the wolves were at his heels. Well, I never doubled for a wolf but I felt like one was needed here. So I tailed him!"

Steve grunted enthusiastically, snuggled the receiver closer to his ear. "Swell, Jack," he said shortly. "I'll bring you a drink along for that. Where did he go?"

"I got the place spotted," came Quinn's muffled answer. "I'm phoning from a cigar store at Broadway and Eighty-fourth."

"Stick around. I'll be right up."

"And don't forget that drink," reminded Quinn.

"I'll bring the bottle," said Steve, and hung up.

Chapter V

GUN PLAY

WITH the professional eye of a burglar Steve surveyed the somber, brownstone house that Quinn indicated with a nod of his head. They were standing in the darkened recess of a doorway on the opposite side of the street.

"And you say he went in there?"

"In there," grunted Quinn.

"He rang the bell?"

"Rang the bell."

"Stop echoing me, damn it," said Steve. "Well, there's the roof—a window—or I can go in like a gentleman, through the door."

"Huh!" snorted Quinn. "How about coming *out* like a gentleman?"

Steve turned to him, grinned. "Thata boy, Jack. You've made up my mind for me. The door it is. A gentleman always. We VanDamm's may be poor, but we're a proud lot."

Quinn's jaw sagged. He gazed at him stupidly. "Hub?" he said bewilderedly. Then with a snort: "What the hell you trying to hand me?"

With a flourish Steve whipped an engraved card from his vest. "Herr Carl VanDamm from Amsterdam—diamond merchant," he said in a thick accent. Then abruptly he ceased his kidding. "I'm going in, Jack—through the door. Give me plenty of time. But if anything looks fishy . . ."

"Sure," growled Quinn in disgust. "You go in, I stay out! I thought this was a partnership—but, damn it, all I do is drive the car!"

"And get tickets for it," mocked Steve. "Don't forget that." Then his voice sobered. "But this is my funeral—not yours."

He turned abruptly, cocked his hat at a rakish angle over one eye and, humming a little ditty between his teeth, sallied forth across the street.

There was a swagger to his stride, a reckless light in his eyes as he mounted the short flight of steps that led to the ornate portal of the brownstone house. Before the door, he never hesitated. Wasn't he a VanDamm? Or better still, wasn't he Steve Oakes—the son of Martin Oakes?

With the tip of a polished forefinger he played the opening bar of *Tipperary* on the bell-push beside the door.

No answer.

He was just on the point of trying the effect of another tune, when a bolt shot back and a key grated in the lock.

The door swung open a foot, reluctantly. Confronting Steve from the far side of the threshold was a blue-jowled butler in a shabby livery that was several sizes too

large for him. He was low-browed, rat-eyed, weak-chinned; and he surveyed the dapper individual on his door-step with ill-concealed suspicion. He looked like anything but a butler. As a matter of fact, he looked remarkably like Spider Kelley.

Hot blood pumped swiftly through Steve's veins. Who had sent Kelley to his father's apartment? Was Kelley the man who had crashed Graham to his death? For why was he acting the part of flunkey? By God! He'd find out, and when he did . . .

He stepped smoothly into the rôle he had adopted, presented his card. "VanDamm's the name. I'm here to see about some diamonds," he murmured politely, but his narrowed eyes belied the honey in his voice. "A Mr. Graham sent me."

Kelley's Adam's apple jerked convulsively. His fist buried itself significantly in the pocket of his coat.

"Who do you wanna see?" he said sullenly. "There's no Graham here."

Steve hadn't missed Kelley's threatening gesture. He became even more polite—deadly so.

"Ah, some mistake, perhaps," he murmured. "Per—"

"Yeah," said Kelley. "A mistake." He started to slam the door, but to his surprise and chagrin found Steve's foot between it and the jamb.

"As I was saying," continued Steve frigidly, "perhaps it was Mr. Goldfarb who sent me—or Mr. Jameson, or . . ."

The pocket of Kelley's livery bulged with something more menacing than his fist. His eyes narrowed to pinpoints and his thin lips pulled back from his yellowed teeth.

An explosion was imminent—and then a heavy voice called from the rear of the darkened reception hall.

"Show Mr. VanDamm in, Briggs."

Steve snorted. "Briggs? Now where did I get the idea? I thought it was Kelley."

"The library, Briggs," continued the harsh voice; but now it was edged with ice. "I'll see him there."

Kelley's eyes were vitriolic as he swung open the door. Steve laughed unpleasantly, gave him the elbow as he stepped across the threshold.

The door closed behind him with an

ominous click. A chain rattled, a bolt was shot home; a key rasped in the heavy lock.

"This way," said Kelley sullenly, leading the way across the hall.

STEVE tagged along at his side. "You don't think much of this buttling business, eh, Kelley?" he asked.

But before the outraged Mr. Kelley could reply, two shadows materialized out of the gloom and converged on either side of Steve.

"Just a minute," said a hard voice.

"Two minutes, if you want," answered Steve. "I'm in no hurry. I wasn't going any place in particular and I thought I'd just drop in."

The man on his right snickered, then the unmistakable feel of an automatic prodded Steve in the ribs. The Luger was deftly frisked from his hip. "Well, buddy," continued the hard voice, "I don't know who you are. But if you just dropped in, it's just too bad. You'll *drop out* again. And you still won't be going places. Now march!"

Steve marched. Hedged in by the two guards, he proceeded down the hall. He noted a crack of light at the far end that seeped out from the room beyond. And then, just as he was a pace from the door, the light was blotted out.

There was a momentary pause. Then the door was yanked open and he was blinded by the glare of a powerful flashlight that shone directly into his eyes.

From behind the light came a smooth voice, mocking, yet edged with frigid menace. "You said something about diamonds. What diamonds?"

Steve lapsed momentarily into his true self. "To hell with diamonds! I'm here about murder!" he said bluntly.

His abrupt challenge was greeted by a sharp, indrawn breath. The light backed up a few paces and he was edged forward on the point of the gun. The light in his eyes was annoying—the gun in his ribs more so. But what the hell! What was he squawking about? He had wanted to get into the house—and here he was. As far as getting out again . . . He didn't want to get out—yet.

The voice was speaking again, curtly,

commandingly. "Who are you—and what do you want?"

"My card says that I'm Mr. VanDamm from Amsterdam," said Steve evenly. "But if you don't happen to like the name—maybe I can do better," he added hopefully.

"Yes," said the voice dryly. "Do better—much better."

Steve scratched the back of his neck reflectively. "Let's see. What was the story I gave the elevator boy in the Romax Building? Oh, yes. I'm Graham's nephew from Beecher's Corners. How's that?"

He heard the final note of the long, expiring breath from the lips of his unseen host. There was silence for a moment, then the voice spoke again.

"One of these days you're going to wise-crack yourself into a coffin."

"Now you're being funny," said Steve. "But don't you think it's time to unmask? You have me at a slight disadvantage. I didn't quite catch the name."

A heavy hand cut suddenly through the beam of the flashlight and, open palmed, slashed him across the mouth.

"I wouldn't try that again," said Steve evenly.

"Nuts!" snarled the guard on his right. The gun sank deeper into Steve's flesh. "Let me give it to him, Chief."

"Wait," said the voice behind the light. "There's plenty of time for that—later. We'll give this wise-cracker plenty of rope to hang himself. Maybe he'll tell us what kind of flowers he likes." His voice hardened with the unmistakable accent of Death. "Now talk, damn you! What do you want?"

Steve was thinking of Quinn and wondering how soon it would be before he crashed in. There in that room, with the blinding light in his eyes, the gun in his ribs, he stood two steps this side of the grave. It was an uncomfortable feeling. He had to stall for time.

"Why," he said judiciously, "I might start with the Graham jewels. They're here, aren't they?"

He felt the gun jerk convulsively under his ribs. His nerves strained; his muscles tensed to receive the shattering impact of a slug of lead. Then the voice spoke grimly.

"You asked for them—and you'll get them—with lead! I don't know who you are, but you know too much. Just how much I got to find out."

"Maybe I can tell you," said Steve. "I'm obliging that way."

"Who are you—first?"

"And if I don't answer?"

"You'll find yourself an angel—with wings and a harp. You've got an hour to think it over. I'll try to look you up in that time. But when the hour is up, I'm going to ask more questions. And I'll want answers. Take him away!"

ONE of the guards took Steve by the elbow. The gun dug deeper into his ribs. Swiftly he was hustled out of the room, marched back across the entrance hall towards the stairway by the door. They mounted through a sweeping curve of darkness and came up into the dim glow of light on the second floor.

The stairs turned them into a narrow corridor that ran the length of the house. He was hurried along past one door before which an under-sized dwarfish man lounged negligently. He had evidently just awakened, for he yawned prodigiously in Steve's face as he inspected him curiously. "Is dis the mug?"

The two guards made simultaneous grunting noises to signify that dis was the mug, and hurried Steve down the passageway to a stout door set in the far end. One opened the door, the other propelled Steve violently forward.

And before he had regained his balance, the door was locked and bolted behind him.

Steve took a deep breath, relaxed, wiped the dew of perspiration from his brow. He was in a spot—a hot spot! Then, almost mechanically, he felt in his pocket for cigarettes and matches. He lit up, puffed thoughtfully for a moment. Then cupping the tiny flame of the match in his hand, he surveyed his new quarters.

Though the room was of large size, it was absolutely devoid of furniture. Evidently it had once been the living room of the house, for a heavy, ornate chandelier hung suspended from the ceiling by a stout chain, in the center of the apartment. It

was one of those old-style chandeliers; the chain would have supported an elephant.

There were four windows, two each on adjoining sides, but they were locked, barred and boarded up.

Steve considered his situation, cursed himself for a fool. He had started out on a trail of murder—to avenge his father. And all he had succeeded in doing was in digging a grave for himself.

It was up to Quinn. If he didn't come through . . .

Steve shrugged, whistled unmusically between his teeth. If Quinn didn't, he had no doubt but that at the end of his allotted hour of grace, the devil behind the voice would keep his word.

He lit a second cigarette from the stub of the first. From the reaction he had received from several of his questions, he felt morally certain that the Graham loot was in this house. And, he was sure, in that rear room. Now if, with the help of Jack Quinn and a miracle . . .

He ceased puffing on his cigarette, then ground it out beneath his heel. Footsteps had sounded, coming up the stairs. They grew louder as they started down the passageway leading to his door.

He came to a swift decision, leaped swiftly to the center of the room. There beneath the chandelier he paused, gathered himself. For an instant he flexed the powerful muscles of his legs; then, with the ease of a trained athlete he leaped upward. His outstretched hands caught the rim of the chandelier. And, just as a key grated in the lock, he swung himself up. Holding onto the chain of the fixture with one hand, he balanced himself precariously on its edge.

The door swung open. The long barrel of an automatic pushed through the opening, followed immediately by the sneering face of Spider Kelley.

KELLEY'S ferret eyes swept around the room, and the mingled expression of surprise, consternation and disbelief that spread over his loose features was ludicrous as he found the room apparently deserted. His mouth opened, his eyes bulged.

Evidently he had difficulty in believing the evidence of his eyes. He took three

tentative steps forward into the room, stopped almost beneath Steve's perch. The gun wavered uncertainly in his fist.

Steve waited for no more. With the crushing impact of a battering ram he plummeted down from the chandelier. His feet landed squarely in the center of Kelley's back. The gunman crashed, and as the gun flew from his outflung hand, Steve caught it expertly by the barrel.

He had handled guns long enough to know what to do with it in the present emergency. He swung it sharply through a short arc. The heavy butt caught Kelley behind the ear. He jerked convulsively once on the floor, then lay still.

Tense, alert, the gun now reversed in his hand, Steve straddled the fallen body and faced the door. If the noise of Kelley's crash had been heard below, others would be up to investigate. If they did come, Steve determined to greet them with lead instead of shoe-leather.

Ten seconds passed. Nothing happened. Then, with an edgy whistle on his lips, Steve crossed swiftly to the open door.

Cautiously he proceeded down the long hallway that led to the stairs. There was no one to challenge his progress. On tip-toe he started down the curving flight. Then, on the landing between the two floors, he suddenly froze.

From somewhere deep in the house, a bell had buzzed raucously. It was answered immediately by a stir of movement below him in the gloom. Two men, the same ones who had escorted him to his erstwhile prison, crept forward across the hall toward the door. Light glinted evilly from the weapons in their hands.

Steve crouched hard back against the wall of the landing, directly beneath a small window. Had it been Quinn who had rung that doorbell?

He strained his ears towards the hallway below him, heard a bolt clatter, a lock turn. Then there came a surprised grunt and querulous words. Steve was swept by a wave of cold air, and he knew that the door was still open. The voices still drifted up to him, vague but puzzled.

Then, from immediately behind him, he heard a faint rasping sound. His gun

snapped up and he flattened himself against the wall as the window in the wall at the landing slid up another foot.

His eyes narrowed, his finger tensed on the trigger. He was conscious of a thrill of exhilaration that raced down his spine. And then his jaw sagged and he almost dropped his gun. For it was the battered face of Jack Quinn that pushed itself through the open window!

Quinn, with the technique of an old campaigner, had rung the bell to attract attention to the door, while he effected his entrance via the window. Very simple—but very effective!

Quinn, likewise, almost dropped his Luger when Steve gave him a hand in wedging his bulk through the narrow opening. And then, there on the landing, they went into a whispered consultation.

"There are two gorillas out at the door," said Steve rapidly. "Another upstairs—cold. There may be more. We go downstairs. You keep the guards at the door occupied. I got work to do. Got it?"

Quinn grunted and led the way downstairs. At the foot, Steve pointed with an eloquent thumb towards the rear room, in which he had had his little session with his unseen host.

"Give me a chance to get in," he whispered. "Then give the guards something to think about."

"I'll give them plenty," Quinn answered hoarsely, the light of battle in his eyes.

HOWEVER, before Steve could start for his objective, the two guards reentered the house. They were obviously still puzzled by the mysterious ringing of the doorbell and their suspicious voices echoed hollowly in the hall.

Warily they started for the rear room.

Steve reached out a long arm and his fingers of steel wrapped themselves around a heavy lamp stand. He poised it a moment behind his head, then heaved it suddenly forward.

It fell with a resounding crash at the far end of the hall, behind the two gunmen. They jumped, whirled nervously about on their toes. Glinting eyes and guns probed the darkness.

"What's that?" whispered one in a hoarse voice.

"Damned if I know, but I'll soon find out!" grated the other.

Followed by his companion, crouched low, he weaved cautiously back towards the door through which he had just entered.

Steve hefted his gun, and just as cautiously backed to the rear room.

The nerves of the two guards were jumpy. With much growling profanity, which was a thin veil to their mounting fear, they concluded their survey of the front end of the reception hall. Keeping close together, probing into odd corners, they started once more for the rear apartment.

Quinn's eyes were gimlet bright in the obscure shadows of the stair well. Flattened against the wall he shrewdly waited until the two guards were well away from the street door before going into action. At all costs, he had to keep the avenue of escape clear for Steve who had already disappeared inside that back room.

Then he drew bead, his finger constricted on the trigger, and a slug of lead whined ominously over the heads of the two guards. A warning! It was close—dangerously close! Quinn meant business.

The large bevelled mirror that hung on the far wall went out with a tinkle of falling glass. Flame spat from the guns of the two gunmen as they threw themselves flat on their stomachs. The already shattered mirror groaned beneath a new assault of lead. Quinn grinned in the darkness. His presence at the foot of the stairs hadn't been discovered, as yet.

With one eye on the two gunmen and the other on the door through which Steve had disappeared, he waited impatiently for his next cue. It was not long in coming. The door to the rear room creaked open.

The two guards greeted the noise with a new barrage of lead.

And then, when their entire attention and their fire was concentrated on the slowly opening portal, Quinn cracked down once more.

He steadied his gun, took careful aim, and fanned a burst of lead above the heads of the two gunmen. Then before they had recovered from the surprise of this unex-

pected counter-attack, Steve slid to a halt by his side.

"Get going!" ordered Steve.

"Why?" grumbled Quinn.

Lead erupted from across the room, ploughed into the wall behind their heads. Plaster sifted down on them like a shroud.

"That's why!"

"Hell! The fun's just starting!" groaned Quinn.

"What do you want to do?"

"Make them beat it!"

Steve shrugged his shoulders in the helpless manner of a man who carries the weight of the world on his shoulders. Just then a slug of lead nicked a chip out of his ear. That settled it. He pivoted, fired a burst at the two crouching figures at the far side of the room, whirled around and propelled Quinn violently towards the door.

"Get that damn door open!" he ordered. "I'll hold 'em off!"

Quinn grunted, charged to the door through a barrage of lead. But Steve's cross-fire had effectively spoiled the aim of the bewildered guards.

A bolt flew back, the lock turned, and Quinn flung the door wide. "Let's go," he called.

Steve fired the last of his bullets, then dove across the threshold after Quinn's broad back.

Chapter VI

THE OWNER OF THE GLOVE

THE disappointed Quinn was still grumbling when they got back to their room in the Breton Hotel. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror above the bureau, saw again the make-up that he had temporarily forgotten, and gave vent to an explosive: "Bah!" He poured himself a stiff four fingers. "Hell!" he growled. "I thought we were out to do something!"

"We were, and we did," answered Steve. "We've raised all kinds of hell, haven't we?"

"Sure. But outside of risking our skins, what did it get us? Nothing!"

Steve shrugged dapper shoulders, thrust his hand into his pocket. "I wouldn't say that, exactly," he answered gently. "These aren't precisely peanuts."

He flipped his hand across the table and a gleaming cascade of jewels scattered in its wake. The light shimmered on the heap of gems, sprayed dancing reflections across the gaping face of Jack Quinn.

The latter's eyes bulged; he swallowed hard at his Adam's apple, pointed a blunt finger at the loot. "Wh-what's that?" he croaked.

"If I'm not mistaken," said Steve grimly, "those are the Graham jewels. Murder jewels!" He poked at them tentatively with a finger. "They're lousy with blood!"

Quinn moistened his lips with the point of a dry tongue. "They look all right to me," he said. "Some haul! Where did you get them?"

Steve smiled thinly. "Get them?" he echoed. "Why in that rear room, of course. Did you think I went in there to study the interior decorations—or just to give you a chance to use that pop-gun of yours? And while we're on the subject of that," he continued reprovingly, "in the future try to curb your blood-thirstiness. If you're not careful, you'll be getting me into trouble."

Quinn scowled, then grinned appreciatively. "Sure. *Trouble*. Hah! That's one for the book. What do we do with the gee-gaws?"

"What do honest people do with stolen articles they have found? Turn them over to the police, of course."

Quinn stared. "Are you nuts?" he demanded. "In the first place, you didn't find them—you *hooked* them! In the second place . . ."

Steve shook his head. "Sorry, old man, but it can't be done. It's like this, Jack. We'll hang onto these baubles for a while, till the case is closed. Then we'll make a neat package of them, along with any others we collect, and send them, with our compliments, to my brother, the Inspector. I've been a thorn in his flesh for a long time. Perhaps that'll help to even it up."

Quinn collapsed limply back into his chair. "You're crazy!" he wailed. "Here we sit in this dump—busted, flat on our cans! And you want to turn those sparklers over to the Inspector with our compliments! If that's being honest, I want to be a crook. To hell with your brother! An

Inspector's pay keeps him in coffee and doughnuts, anyway. What are *we* going to do? Take in another notch on our belts and go hungry? Hell! Don't we at least cut-in enough to pay for the car?"

Steve permitted the gems to dribble through his fingers. He cocked one eyebrow and looked speculatively around the room. Then suddenly he brightened. "You're right—for once. We need some money for expenses. And now that we're in the business, we ought to have better quarters." He poked tentatively at the jewels. "We'll compromise. We'll take a cut of this loot for our work—say ten per cent. Nothing like being business-like."

Quinn brightened, rubbed his hands together in anticipation. He hitched his chair closer to the table. "Now you're talking. Ten per cent. *And* expenses!"

"Right," agreed Steve. "Now, let's see." He frowned at the gems before him and his mind went through a series of nimble mental calisthenics. Then he carefully selected several uncut stones, pushed them to one side. He looked inquiringly at Quinn.

"That ought to do it, don't you think?"

Quinn reached out a long hand, picked up a glowing ruby and added it to the pile of segregated stones. "And expenses," he reminded.

Chapter VII

THE PERFUME AGAIN

IT was not yet ten o'clock the following morning when Steve rapped on the door of the Inspector's office down at Headquarters. In response to his brother's gruff "Come in," he strolled leisurely across the threshold.

The Inspector's humor was not of the best. The Mayor had been riding the District Attorney; the D. A. had been riding the Police Commissioner—and the Commissioner, in no uncertain words, had ridden John. Another murder in the jewelry district! There would be hell to pay unless that series of crimes were solved!

John favored his brother with a brief glance, a briefer greeting. "Oh, it's *you*."

Unabashed, Steve sailed his hat onto the top of a filing cabinet, draped himself into

the one comfortable chair and hooked his heels on a corner of the Inspector's desk.

"I read about the Graham business in the papers," he offered, hunting in his pocket for a packet of cigarettes. He lit up, flipped the burnt match over his shoulder. "Thought I'd drop in to see if you'd learned anything."

The Inspector glared at him. Questions like that had been asked him every half hour since Graham's body had been found on the sidewalk before the Romax Building. And now, to have it reëchoed from the lips of his brother—his own brother, a confessed waster, a ne'er-do-well, who didn't know the difference between a clue and a copper's night stick—it was too much!

John exploded, snatched the stub of his cigar from his lips and hurled it violently at the cuspidor. "Not a damn thing!" he grated. "If you would do something with your useless life instead of asking damn-fool questions . . ." He broke off abruptly, looked shrewdly at the lounging figure in the chair. "Or maybe you've decided to follow my advice, eh, Steve?"

Steve wiggled his toes uncomfortably, looked abashed. "Well, not exactly," he temporized. "You see . . ."

The Inspector cut him short. "Okay. I don't want to listen to your alibis." His face set in grim, bleak lines. "I've asked you for the last time. Now you can go to hell in your own damn way!"

"Or maybe heaven," murmured Steve under his breath.

"What's that?" said John sharply.

But before the other could frame an appropriate reply, the energetic Mr. Devin hurried into the room, followed by Nancy Muir, who carried a sheaf of official documents.

Devin was unashamedly agitated. His bulky frame quivered with excitement. Beads of sweat glistened brightly on his forehead beneath his hat. He slapped down a folded newspaper violently on the Inspector's desk.

"Another one! By God, sir, if this keeps up, I'll go mad!"

"You won't be the only one," echoed the Inspector sourly. He turned to the girl. "Yes, Nan?"

In crossing to the Inspector's desk, she passed within a foot of Steve. His senses suddenly tingled—he was instantly wide awake. For, emanating from the lovely presence of the girl, came a subtle, delicate perfume—a perfume that Steve had experienced on only one occasion before. He stiffened in his chair and his eyes narrowed.

That glove he had found in the murdered Graham's office—the glove that was even then reposing in his pocket—bore identically the same exotic scent!

A dark suspicion crowded his eyes as Nan placed her papers on the Inspector's desk, then turned and left the room. Dimly, through a fog of tormenting thoughts and emotions, he heard Devin's booming bass:

"I've got some interesting documents down in my office—damn interesting! Evidence that might solve this case for us."

Chapter VIII

THE SPIDER DIES

DUSK was spangling the city with a million incandescent electric lights when Nancy Muir left Headquarters late that afternoon. With high heels clicking sharply on the pavement, she headed for the subway two blocks north. And so preoccupied was she with her thoughts that she failed completely to note the shadowy figure that materialized from a doorway across the street and followed after her.

And even if she had bumped squarely into the man, she would in all probability have been not in the least alarmed. For she would have looked into the innocent face of a drug clerk—a salesman—into the face of anyone but Steve Oakes—the Avenger.

He was ten paces behind her when she boarded a train, still there when she alighted at Eighth Street. They had dinner in the same quiet restaurant, walked down the same street after it, until at last the girl turned in at the door of a modest apartment house, never once having noticed his presence.

Steve puffed on a cigarette a moment, then strolled into the lobby after her. He glanced at the name plates over the bells, then crossed the street and watched the

façade of the building. A window on the fifth floor was suddenly illumined by a rosy glow from within.

He made a mental note of the address, and as he tucked it away into a convenient corner of his memory he added another bit of useful information. A narrow alley paralleled the building. From its shadows a slatted fire escape extended upward, past another window lit up by the same rosy glow.

There was nothing further to do but wait.

Waiting had never been Steve's long suit. He ensconced himself in the doorway of a vacant store, hunched his shoulders—and possessed his soul with patience.

It seemed incredible that a nice, innocent girl like Nancy Muir could be mixed up in this case of mystery and sudden, violent death. No high salaried movie star could have duplicated the frank, open gaze of her wide eyes; could have played the dull rôle with such convincing simplicity. That she could be a crook seemed preposterous.

Yet she had been in Graham's office, the night the jeweler had been murdered. There was no doubt about that. But just why she had gone there, and what she had been doing—he meant to find out. If she was mixed up in murder—his father's murder—girl or no girl, God help her!

Slowly the minutes dragged by, wearily they lengthened into hours. People passed by his covert, strolling in pairs or walking briskly alone. Still the light shone in the window across the way.

Steve exhausted his repertoire of melodies. He flipped the butt of his last cigarette in a hissing arc toward the gutter. The street became silent, deserted.

Then, just when he had decided that he was making an utter ass of himself, the light in the window winked out.

He squared his shoulders, addressed the darkened rectangle. "I'll give you five minutes. If you are in for the night"—he shrugged—"I'll apologize."

But she had not retired. Only four of the allotted five minutes had passed when she emerged from the doorway opposite, and turned eastward. Silent as a darker shadow in the night Steve slipped from his hiding place and followed.

AND by devious ways and even more devious means, the chase finally ended at—the Romax Building! Steve's brows shot up a notch as, without a moment's hesitation, Nan Muir swung through the door of the building. She had the sure, self-confident manner of a person who was going places and who knew what she was going to do when she got there.

Steve was no less self-confident. He knew exactly what *he* was going to do if certain things materialized. Nancy Muir could have but two possible objectives in that building of twenty-story death; either the dead Graham's office in the tower, or the office of the Cosmos Insurance Company, so ably represented by Mr. Raymond Devin.

What was it that Devin had said that morning? Something about new evidence? Was Nancy about to make a play for it? Steve decided that she was. His jaw hardened. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have gone up against a woman; but this was murder—murder—murder!

His father's murder!

Bleak-eyed he crossed the street, pushed through the door of the building. The clanking of the elevator chain told him that the car was lost somewhere in the tower. He took advantage of the moment's respite, squeezed himself into a telephone booth and swiftly dialed the number of his hotel where Quinn was waiting.

A moment later he had Quinn on the wire, had issued a series of swift orders to the effect that Quinn was to bring down the car and park it as directed. And then, just as the elevator grated to a stop on the main floor, Steve disappeared up the stairs leading to the floors above.

It was a long, laborious climb to the fourteenth floor, but he negotiated it swiftly. He paused a moment on the landing, listened, looked sharply about him.

The marble corridor was dark, deserted. Shifting his gun from his hip to the side pocket of his coat, he moved silently down its length, scanning the names upon the doors. At the far end, towards the front of the building, he found the one he was looking for: The *Cosmos Insurance Company*. But no light shone from behind the

frosted panel that bore the legend in neat, gold letters.

He pressed his ear against the door, listened intently. A faint click vibrated against his ear-drum. In answer to it, his right hand slipped into his coat pocket, closed there about the butt of the Luger. Then his free hand grasped the knob, twisted it slowly.

It turned easily under the pressure of his fingers and a faint smile twitched at the corners of his lips. Chalk up one error to the girl's inexperience . . . then the smile faded. Maybe he had under-estimated her—maybe she was waiting for him in the darkened room beyond . . .

He eased the door inward a foot, flattened himself against the casing. Nothing happened. The ugly snout of the Luger edged around the jamb, followed a moment later by the grim face of Steve Oakes.

The little anteroom beyond the door was dark, but directly ahead of him was another door which stood a trifle ajar. A thin crack of light outlined its opening. Steve was still smiling but his eyes were dangerous, now, as he slid across the threshold, and closed the outer door behind him. In three long strides he crossed over to the inner door, peered cautiously into the room beyond.

Apparently, Nancy Muir had had no suspicion that she had been followed. Mr. Devin's private office was dimly illumined by a small flashlight that had been propped on a chair. Its beam was focused on a large, modern, efficient-looking safe. And kneeling before that safe, in a strained attitude of concentration, was Nancy Muir. With deft fingers, she manipulated the dial swiftly.

Steve watched her from the shadows, a curiously bitter smile on his face. A hundred thoughts and emotions raced through his mind—a hundred unanswerable questions. He shrugged helplessly, at last. There was no accounting the inscrutable, mysterious ways of women.

"Go to it, kid," he addressed her silently. "That safe is the last word in tempered steel efficiency. If you can open it, you're good!"

She *was* good! With a little cry of joy

from the girl—echoed by a silent grunt of amazement from Steve—the tumblers of the safe clicked into place and the door swung easily open. A professional could not have done better.

Steve craned his neck forward as she reached inside, but unfortunately the open door blocked his view of the interior of the safe. He tightened his grip on the Luger. She was a nice girl, he mused—and a hard working one, as his brother had assured him. Too hard working! She put in too much overtime at night work!

A swell combination! A Detective Inspector's secretary—and a safe cracker!

Steve was just on the point of challenging her, when a faint, alien sound echoed eerily in the office. Nan's head jerked up, swung sharply around—not toward Steve's hiding place but toward the front of the room. A low cry escaped her, a strangled gasp! Steve had a good view of her profile, and her eyes were wide with horror.

He stretched his neck another two inches forward, followed her glance. And then he understood. And with comprehension, twin pulses beat violently in his throat. He had waited a long time for this moment!

HE saw an open window. And dangling from a rope in sheer space beyond, clung a squat, ugly, simian figure. An ebon mask covered its features but it was easy to recognize the ominous automatic that bulged in its hand.

Horrified, fascinated to immobility, Nancy crouched back against the open safe as a pair of heels swung in, hooked over the edge of the sill. A long arm reached in, grasped the edge of the window and then, on cat's paws, the apparition landed in the room.

Despite the mask, Steve Oakes thought he recognized the rat-eyes and weak chin of Spider Kelley. With finger tense on the trigger of his gun, he waited hopefully for further developments.

He had learned one thing already. Spider Kelley had never mastered the fine art of masking his emotions. Though the ill-mated pair might be accomplices, it was plainly evident that this particular meeting

was a mutual surprise. Kelley glared at the girl.

"So help me! A' frail!" Steve could almost see Kelley lick his greedy lips. With an insolent stare the Spider appraised the lithe lines of the girl's trim body as she crouched back against the safe. He took a long step towards her. "Who are you?"

The snarl of his voice and the venom in his eyes broke the spell that his melodramatic entrance had cast over Nancy. She made a gallant effort, recovered her poise and her courage. Her head tossed up defiantly.

"I might ask the same question of you!"

Kelley scowled. "Smart, eh? I don't like smart dames. I like 'em dumb—and willing. You got no business here, anyway!"

"From the way you chose to enter," she answered coolly, "neither have you."

Kelley's ferret eyes traveled to the open safe. He reached it in two strides, peered inside, jerked erect. "What did you take out of that keister?" he demanded.

"The—what?"

"The keister—the crib—the safe! What'd you lift out of it?"

"Nothing," she answered. "It was empty."

"Yeah?"

The single word echoed ominously in the room. Kelley's shoulders hunched, his hand jerked up, and the light glinted on the long cylinder of the silenced gun. It pointed straight at the girl.

"I told you I didn't like 'em smart," he warned. "Dame or no dame—if you're lying to me, sister, God help you!"

His long left arm shot out to the girl, and with grim expectancy Steve knew that the moment had come for him to act. He stepped lazily from the shadows. His voice whipped out like a lash of steel. "Lay off, Kelley! And about that pop-gun in your hand. Too late! Look at this one!"

Spider Kelley galvanized, spun around, looked deep into the yawning muzzle of the Luger. He stared for a moment as if fascinated. Then slowly his eyes traveled upward, rested on Steve's made-over face.

"You!"

"With a gun, this time," said Steve.

"Okay, Kelley, you can pass me yours—butt first. I like that little silencer jigger on the end of it. And you can get that mask off, too."

Though his tone was conversational, Spider Kelley knew the futility of argument. With eyes that glowed like agate balls of hate, he jerked off his mask and passed over the weapon. Steve took it, snuggled its butt into his palm and stowed away the Luger.

"I'll use yours, if you don't mind," he said calmly. "Mine makes such a damned annoying roar. It might startle the lady."

Events had taken place too rapidly for Nancy Muir. She had looked death in the face for one awful moment, and the experience, like the impact of a physical blow, had stunned her senses. The abrupt entrance of this newcomer had been a second shock.

Steve glanced at her swiftly from the corner of his eye. "Steady, kid. If you'll wait a few minutes for me, I'll escort you home."

With an effort, Nancy controlled her voice. "Thank you—but don't bother! I can't wait." Somehow she found the use of her limbs, strolled casually toward him.

He stood straddle-legged, blocked her path. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid you'll have to," he said, his voice crisply authoritative. "I have a little matter to attend to, and then you and I are going to have a friendly chat. You've forgotten something very important. Mr. Kelley, here, has become a decided menace. If we just kiss him good-bye and send him merrily on his way, he might decide to—er—annoy you again." He glanced at the gentleman in question, and in his blue eyes crept a glint of frosty steel. "It's devilish bad form, I know, to ask a lady to witness an execution. But for your own sake . . ."

THAT was as much as Spider Kelley waited to hear. With the snarling cry of a trapped animal, he bolted across the room. The rope by which he had entered still dangled, forgotten, before the window.

"Stop him!" cried Nancy.

Instinctively she ran after him as he made a flying leap and seized the rope. Her

hand clutched at his ankle, missed by inches. She leaned far out across the sill as he swung outward into space.

His snarling face was pallid against the night sky. His eyes spat hate at her as the rope reached the peak of a wide arc, swung back again toward the window.

The swift rush of his swing carried him back at dizzy speed. Before she realized his intention, one long arm shot out, seized her. And then, in one awful minute that seemed eternity, she read his terrible purpose in his distorted face.

He would jerk her from the window—let her drop into space!

Steve's gun was useless—she was squarely between him and the killer who clung to the rope. He leaped for the window. His iron fingers grasped the girl, flung her backward.

Spider Kelley was a fraction of a second too slow in releasing his grip upon her. Steve reached out, jerked violently, and Kelley sailed headlong into the room. Together they struck the floor, fighting.

There was a mad thrashing of arms and legs, then a muffled cough. The thrashing abruptly ceased.

Steve climbed to his feet, a wisp of blue-gray gunsmoke curling upward from the barrel of the silenced gun. Spider Kelley lay still—ominously still. Steve let the weapon slip from his fingers and drop to the floor beside its erstwhile owner.

Nancy leaned back limply against the wall for support. Her knees trembled. A low moan escaped her lips as she stared at the huddled body at her feet. She looked wildly at Steve. "I don't know whether you're an angel—or the devil!"

"It doesn't matter which," growled Steve. "I'm going to ask you some questions—and I'll want answers!" He poked gently at Kelley's ribs with the toe of his shoe. "This might annoy you. There might be complications. I think it would be wiser, Miss Muir, if we continued our discussion in safer surroundings—where we won't run the risk of being disturbed."

The fact that he knew her identity was just one more shock than Nan could stand in one evening. Meekly, in a daze, she permitted him to take her by the elbow and

lead her from the room into the anteroom beyond.

They stepped through the outer door into the corridor—and pulled up short.

The cables of the elevator quivered as the cage ascended. And up the shaft floated the voices of two passengers. Familiar voices. The voices of Devin and Inspector John Oakes.

There was no time to dash for the stairs at the rear of the building. The grilled top of the cage rose into sight as Steve leaped nimbly back into the anteroom, jerked the girl in after him.

Yet another door opened off to his left. He pulled it open and thrust her into the darkened office beyond. "Sit tight," he whispered. "I'll get you out somehow."

Her hand clung to his sleeve, her eyes looked luminously up into his face in the darkness. "What about you?"

He covered her tiny hand for an instant with his own. "I'm the reception committee. They'll be delighted to see me, I know."

Chapter IX

IN WHICH THE ANGEL IS BORN

BACK in Devin's private sanctum, Steve heard the startled gasp from that gentleman as he found the door to his office open. If that little detail caused such an uproar, Steve wondered what Devin's reaction would be when he found the door to his safe ajar.

Footsteps pounded heavily across the anteroom, the door to the inner office was flung open. Someone felt for the light switch, and with a click the room was flooded with brilliant light.

Steve looked up mildly from his contemplation of the dead body of Spider Kelley that decorated the floor. Devin and the Inspector pulled up to an abrupt halt, halfway into the room. Steve waved his Luger airily in an hospitable gesture.

Here was the acid test of his disguise! If it was exploded . . .

He shrugged. "Come in, gentlemen, come in," he invited politely.

A puzzled frown descended upon the Inspector's face. Watching him closely,

Steve's heart kicked out a faster beat. Then, to distract his brother before his real identity was unmasked, he continued in a voice that was a full octave above his own.

"Oh, Inspector—would you mind closing the door?"

John stared at him blankly. It was evident that he failed to recognize his brother in this pink-faced, grinning gentleman behind the heavy Luger. The frown of puzzlement on his brow changed to a scowl of anger as he complied with the request.

Steve smiled inwardly. He had gotten away with his severest test! "Thank you—so much, Inspector," he murmured.

In his long career as a police officer, Inspector Oakes had run into all kinds of receptions—but never before one like this. Blank-eyed he stared at the nonchalant figure holding the heavy Luger. Slowly his eyes traveled down to the grotesque body sprawled at his feet. He turned a bewildered eye to Devin's amazed face but received no enlightenment there.

Steve coughed discreetly, prodded at the prone figure of Spider Kelley with the point of one highly polished shoe. "Perhaps you haven't made the acquaintance of this rat?" he said harshly. "Permit me, gentlemen—Spider Kelley. Unfortunately he's dead or I'm sure he'd say how happy he is to meet you. Especially you, Inspector."

Inspector Oakes was firmly convinced that someone was mad. Outside of a slight numbness and haziness in the region of his brain, he felt quite normal. It must be this—this . . .

His teeth clicked shut, his jaw jutted forward, his beetling brows met in a ferocious frown.

"What the hell is this? Who are you, anyway?"

"Right now," answered Steve grimly, "I'm a man with a gun. And I don't mind telling you, I know how to use it. But as to my name . . ." he paused, hefted the Luger in his hand in a business-like gesture. "Let's see—what was it that lad up on Eighty-fourth Street said? Something about me being an angel."

He snorted, poised himself on the balls of his feet. "He was right, Inspector. I'm the Angel—the Angel of Death!"

A sudden fury distorted the Inspector's face. He took a long step forward. The gun in Steve's hand snapped up. "I wouldn't be foolhardy, Inspector."

His voice was quiet, but it flicked like a lash. The Inspector checked his charge.

"This case of the suicide-murders is getting rather complicated," continued Steve. "I thought I'd take a hand in it. And now that we're all here, a little conference might be of mutual benefit."

"Conference, hell!" snorted John. He pointed an accusing finger at the body of Spider Kelley on the floor. "It doesn't take any conference to know that *that* wasn't suicide!"

The Angel shook his head, sighed. "No," he said evenly, "I killed him." Carefully, with his left hand he felt for a packet of cigarettes, found it, flipped a butt to his lips. He thumbed a match into flame, lit up. "Too bad about Kelley," he continued in the same hard voice. "I had intended asking him a few questions." His voice suddenly quickened. "But he's answering them in hell, now!"

"Murder is a nasty thing, young fellow," said John Oakes in a matter-of-fact voice. "They usually burn them in this State for it."

Steve made a face. "Why remind me of it? But I was coming to that . . ."

There was a furtive footstep from outside the office. It passed the door, crept silently down the corridor, then died away.

"An accomplice!" snarled the Inspector.

"Well, not exactly," answered Steve. It was what he had been waiting for—the sound that told him Nan Muir was out, and safely on her way. With a feeling of satisfaction he turned back to Devin.

"But to get back to those murders—look in your safe, Devin! Tell the Inspector if anything is missing."

"The safe?" echoed Devin.

Steve bowed. "Kelley referred to it as the 'keister' or the 'crib.' But it's one and the same to me."

With jerky, automatic movements Devin crossed the room toward the safe. Steve swung around with him so as to be able to keep both Devin and the Inspector under the point of his gun.

A MOMENT later a hoarse exclamation rasped from Devin's throat. "It's open!"

"Yes," said Steve, "I found it that way when I got here!"

"It's gone!" cried Devin. His voice was almost a scream.

"What's gone?" snapped Steve.

Devin whirled from the safe. There was a gun in his hand. The gun roared.

The hat on the Angel's head bobbed erratically. Then he squeezed the trigger. The Luger leaped to convulsive life, and with a strangled cry, Devin loosed the automatic from his fingers, clasped his right shoulder with his left hand as blood oozed out between his fingers.

"Fool," said Steve softly. "I could have killed you just as easily. *What's missing?*"

Devin glared at him from baleful eyes. It was hate, rather than pain, that distorted his lips. "You know darn well what's missing. The evidence I had in that safe—it's gone!"

A bitter suspicion stirred at Steve's brain. The girl—Nancy! Had she made a sucker out of him after all? But he had no further time then to consider the matter. From down on the street a police whistle shrilled stridently. The noisy clang of a chain announced the swift ascent of the elevator.

Steve moved swiftly. Stepping across the room, he stooped, scooped up Devin's revolver, dropped it negligently into his pocket. Then in one long stride, he crossed to the Inspector. "I hate to do this, Inspector, but I got to." Then, with his Luger grinding at his brother's ribs, he deftly removed the heavy service revolver from John's hip.

He broke the weapon with a flick of his wrist, ejected the shells, then handed the gun back, butt first.

"Sorry that I have to run off like this," he began. Then, seeing the black scowl on his brother's face—"Don't take it so much to heart. We'll be seeing a lot of each other!"

The cage of the elevator clanked to a stop at the floor. Steve backed swiftly to the window, commanded the room a moment with the Luger, then whirled and dove headlong out the window.

With his left hand he caught the end of the rope down which Spider Kelley had descended. He was not doing movie stunts now for a pay-check. He was doing them for his life! The sweep of his dive out the window swung him out in a wide arc. Spinning perilously, clinging with one hand, his gun in the other, he swung back toward the granite face of the building.

He checked the rebound with his feet, then with the Inspector's hoarse bellow ringing in his ears, he climbed swiftly up the rope, hand over hand.

Once more he negotiated roof-tops, fire-escapes, back-alleys. He had been over the route before, and now he negotiated it swiftly, surely.

And while all hell was breaking loose up in Devin's office he strolled casually onto Broadway. But he didn't tarry long—just long enough to locate Quinn and the car.

He slid onto the cushions.

"Get going," he said sharply.

"Which means," said Quinn, "that you've run into hell!"

"No," corrected Steve. "Into the Inspector!"

When he had put ten blocks between them and the scene of the Angel's latest escapade, Quinn eased off on the gas pedal. "Home?" he inquired hopefully.

"No. The nearest Coffee Pot," answered Steve. "I've got a lot to think about."

"Where's the swag?" asked Quinn shortly.

"The swag this time consists only of a headache," answered Steve. "This case is getting damn complicated."

"No jewels?" wailed Quinn. "No nothing? I should have known better. Instead of taking orders and sitting on my fanny waiting, I should have tailed you. I'd have cracked that safe, come hell or high water."

He pulled up the car before the grimy, fly-specked window of an all-night beanery. Steve looked at the unprepossessing exterior of the place, grimaced, then shrugged. They got out.

"I didn't exactly forget that angle," he told Quinn as they entered the odorous little shop. "But the safe, unfortunately, was empty. It seems that I was a trifle late, and the evidence was already removed."

"Evidence," repeated Quinn, as they

climbed onto the stools. "You mean jewels?"

"Evidence," said Steve.

"Jewels," insisted Quinn.

Steve flung up his hands in mock surrender. "You win," he sighed. "You're worse than an old woman. You always have to have the last word. You've got jewels on that one-track mind of yours and you can't think of anything else."

They ordered coffee. The Angel eyed the muddy beverage warily for a moment, then gulped down a great draught of the scalding brew.

He exhaled with a whistling noise, set down the mug. "Oh, I almost forgot to tell you, Jack," he said casually. "There's a lady in the case, now."

Quinn dug up a handful of small change, carefully picked out two nickels and shoved them across the counter. "That's lousy," he said flatly. "Dames and business don't mix. The combination's poison. Is she a good looker?"

A crooked smile twitched the corners of Steve's mouth.

"A knockout," he said slowly. "But I don't know whether she's a princess or a murderess!"

"A murderess?"

"You heard me," said Steve savagely. "Let's go!"

"Where to?"

"We're calling on the lady."

TWENTY minutes later Quinn brought the car to an abrupt halt a short way beyond the narrow alley that paralleled the side of the apartment house in which Nancy Muir lived.

And once more, despite his bitter protests, Steve left him grumbling behind the wheel, as he slipped to the sidewalk.

Steve's first inspection of that alley had told him enough to enable him, now, to work with speed and certainty. In the somber shadows of the alley, he located the slatted fire-escape clinging to the side of the building.

He glanced swiftly once about him, then leaped up, caught the bottom landing and like a darker shadow in the dark night hoisted himself up.

A moment later he was silhouetted against the paler rectangle of an open window. Then, like an avenging spirit, he slipped noiselessly over the sill from the fire escape, landed on his toes in the darkened room beyond.

He stood there, motionless, while his eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom. Gradually various items of furniture took shape around him. He moved soundlessly forward.

The place seemed lighter now. In a far corner stood a huge bed, draped with shimmering coverings. He moved over to it, paused at its foot and looked down at the pale oval of a face that rested on its pillows.

Tousled curls spilled over the cushions, long lashes rested on delicate cheeks—one slim white arm lay stretched across the bed covers.

And as he studied the chiseled features, her lashes fluttered, flew wide. Nancy Muir jerked erect, one hand instinctively drawing the covers up under her chin, the other coming up to cover a mouth that had formed a round "O". Her wide eyes took in the shadowy form that had materialized at the foot of her bed.

"Sorry to have startled you," said Steve somberly. "I came to ask those questions—you know, the ones I was asking earlier tonight—when we were interrupted." He saw fear leap into her eyes, then he went on: "If the answers are all right, you have nothing to worry about. If they're not . . ."

Their eyes met and held like the steel of a pair of duelists, engaging.

"So it's you," she said at last.

"Yes—to ask some questions."

She ignored his pointed reference. "What are you doing here? And how did you get in?"

Steve indicated the window with a jerk of his head. "Safe-crackers should lock windows behind them," he said bluntly.

Anger crowded the fear out of her eyes. The covers stirred to the rise and fall of her breast. "Get out!" she said in a cold voice. "Please. You've no right in here."

Steve was in no humor for idle chatter. The girl was mixed up in murder. He frowned down on her.

"I've got about as much right here as you had to break into Devin's safe. That makes it even." His voice hardened. "A word of advice, Miss Muir— Better tell me the truth! *Where do you fit into this murder case?*"

Her chin set at a stubborn angle. "I'm not talking."

"I'll try another," said Steve patiently. "What did you take out of Devin's safe—and where is it?"

"I got nothing from the safe," she answered doggedly.

Steve considered a moment whether she was lying or not, and decided that she was. He held up his hands, examined them with a critical eye. "I never had to work on a woman before. But if I *have to*—"

There was an undertone to his softly spoken words that sent swift alarm flashing to her eyes. She reached out suddenly, grasped the chain that dangled from the lamp beside the bed, jerked it on. A rosy glow suffused the room.

STEVE rose in one lithe movement, crossed the room and swiftly pulled down the shade over the window. Then he turned—and found himself staring into the business end of a small but efficient-looking automatic!

"Don't move!"

Steve had stared into the barrel of a gun before. But this was the first time that the gun had been held by a woman—a woman, who most probably could use it and *would* use it!

Their eyes met, held, clashed almost audibly. The room was surcharged with dynamite and death. Then Steve relaxed, laughed harshly. He kept his eyes on the girl's eyes, gave to his voice a casualness he was far from feeling.

"You're a hell of a gun-girl, sister. The next time you go to work on a man, make sure that the safety of your rod is thumbed back."

Involuntarily, her eyes flicked down to her gun—and in that split second, Steve leaped. Flame erupted in his face; hot powder scorched his cheek. Death plucked him by the sleeve.

And then Steve's fingers of steel clamped

vice-like about Nan's wrists—tightened. Her hands went numb and the tiny, pearl-handled automatic slipped from her nerveless fingers, slid from the bed to the floor.

"I don't know whether to kiss you or kill you!" said Steve harshly. "Where's that evidence you stole from Devin's safe?"

Vainly she tried to wrench her hands free, pressed hard back against the pillows.

Steve laughed, mockingly. "Ah, the pillows! That's where the gun came from, of course. Let's see!"

He released his grip suddenly, shot a hand under the pillows. It came out a moment later, holding a small, black leather case. His brows puckered in a puzzled frown. Devin had said something about evidence that was missing—not jewels.

With an impatient movement he snapped open the lid of the case. And the rosy light from the bed lamp flooded the interior—bathed an iridescent heap of magnificent, unset jewels.

He turned slowly to the girl. His voice cut like a lash.

"If you didn't get these baubles from Devin's safe, where *did* you get them?"

Her eyes were hot with hate in the white mask of her face. She didn't answer.

Steve thought of his father.

"Murderess!" he accused savagely.

"Get out!" said Nancy.

Steve stooped swiftly, swept up the forgotten automatic and dropped it into his pocket. He backed to the window.

"Okay, I'll go," he said slowly. "But when I do get the answers—I may be back."

Chapter X

DEATH ON THE WIRE

BACK in their room at the hotel, Steve squirmed uncomfortably in his chair, rumbled a growl beneath his breath. It was the tenth one in as many minutes. He emptied the glass at his elbow with a greedy gulp, ran a troubled hand through his hair.

"It's hard to believe," he muttered at Quinn. "But damn it all—where *did* she get those jewels?"

Quinn squinted critically at the diamond in his left hand, then at the one in his right, as he pondered their respective merits.

"She's a crook!" he stated flatly.

"If not worse," said Steve. "That's the hell of it! I could forgive her a little gem lifting—we all got to live. But murder . . ."

"You don't know for sure about that . . ." Steve kicked back his chair and rose.

"Now where the hell are you going?" demanded Quinn.

Steve started for the door, stopped with his hand on the knob. "I'm going to find out *for sure*. I've got to know. You stick here. I'll drive myself."

IT was still early the following morning when Steve followed, at a discreet distance, the broad back of his brother into Headquarters. The first smile he had known in days twitched at his lips. He was animated by a suppressed excitement.

John had barely gotten seated at his desk when Steve lounged into the office. The Inspector looked up, ran a hand through his hair and grunted a none too cordial: "Good morning."

Steve looked toward the window, inspected the bright sunshine from red-rimmed eyes. "It is," he agreed pointedly.

John stared at him a moment, noted the tell-tale signs of sleeplessness, and grunted. "Hitting the high-spots, I suppose. Got a job yet?"

Steve hitched his right hip onto the corner of the Inspector's desk, tapped one heel in a gentle rhythm against the polished wood. "Not exactly. I've been doing sort of—odd jobs."

John was about to launch forth into one of his lectures on the evils of laziness, when the telephone on his desk buzzed raucously. He dragged the instrument to him, growled a response into the mouthpiece:

"Yes, Devin?"

An extension phone, obviously on the same wire, stood on the other corner of the table. Steve strolled over to it, calmly picked it up and snuggled the receiver to his ear.

The excited, booming bass of the insurance broker assaulted the delicate mechanism of Steve's ear. "I've got our man, Inspector!"

Oakes swallowed with an audible gulp. "You got what?"

"Our man!" repeated Devin excitedly. "The killer behind these jewel murders."

"Who?" demanded the Inspector.

Devin's voice lowered to a hoarse, dramatic whisper. "It sounds incredible, I know. But I've got all the evidence we need. It's"—he paused, as if he were looking over his shoulder—"it's my secretary, Paulding!"

There was a strained silence in the office, a silence that vibrated to taut nerves. Paulding, the murderer of half a dozen jewelers? The murderer of Inspector Oakes?

And then that silence was shattered.

Over the twin phones echoed the sharp, unmistakable crack of a gun. Then the voice of Devin cried hoarsely: "My God!" followed by a clatter as he dropped the invisible instrument at the other end.

The Inspector's chair scraped back with a protesting screech as he leaped to his feet. He leaned over the desk, bellowed into the mouthpiece. "Devin! Devin! Hello . . ."

A light glinted in Steve's eyes—the eyes of the avenger. "Shouting won't help," he snapped. "Suppose we just listen."

John did not even hear him. He remained frozen, rigid, the phone glued to his ear. Then the wire buzzed again, snapped them both to strained attention.

"It was Paulding!" came Devin's gasping voice. "He must have heard me—must have known his game was up. He's killed himself!"

The Inspector drew a deep breath. "Where are you—in your office? Wait for me! I'll be right down!"

He slammed the telephone on its hook, reached for his hat and barged out of the office. Steve replaced the instrument he had been using, tugged at the lobe of his ear for a moment.

His eyes suddenly narrowed, hardened. "Damn!" he said softly. "I wonder . . ."

With long strides he leaped out the door after his brother.

DEVIN'S private sanctum was crowded when the Inspector and Steve shouldered their way into the room. A throng of morbidly curious office workers pressed in close about the body which was guarded by two stolid policemen.

Paulding lay crumpled face down on the floor, his left knee doubled up under his body, his right hand outflung. And in that hand, held by clutching fingers, was a .32 automatic. A pool of sinister red oozed out from beneath the body and widened slowly on the mauve carpet.

The Inspector glanced callously at the body, surveyed the room swiftly, noted that Deven had collapsed in the chair at his desk, and turned to one of the officers.

"Dead, eh?" he growled.

The copper nodded. "Yeah. Through the head," he said laconically. "Did a swell job of it."

John grunted, squinted at the gun. "A .32 usually does. Okay; get this mob out of here—and keep 'em out!"

The bluecoats did their duty in their usual efficient manner, and while the Inspector dropped to one knee to examine the body, Steve strolled aimlessly about the room.

"It's terrible, eh?" he sympathized with the distracted Devin. "How did it happen?"

Devin raised haggard eyes to his, mopped at his florid brow with a gaudy silk handkerchief. "I was talking to your brother on the 'phone, telling him that I had discovered that it was Paulding who was behind the series of crimes—when—when he shot himself. Blew out his brains, poor devil." Then his voice hardened with righteous indignation. "It was either that or the chair, and I guess he knew it. My secretary! What will the home office say?"

Steve clucked sympathetically, wagged his head from side to side. "Crime doesn't pay," he admitted. "They all get caught sooner or later."

Devin murmured something incoherent under his breath.

Steve lit up a fresh cigarette, patted him encouragingly on the back and continued his casual inspection of the office. A moment later he drifted down to where John was still making his examination of the body.

He glanced once, shrewdly, at the crumpled body of Paulding, then turned away. In his eyes was a curious, far-away expression.

John misinterpreted it. He jerked his head at the body. "Kind of gets you, eh?"

"Yes," replied Steve shortly. "I'm getting out of here. I'll see you later."

STEVE was strangely quiet that night, but there was an ominous quality about his inactivity. For long hours he sat immobile in his chair in his room at the Breton, gazing blankly at the far wall. He smoked incessantly, lighting one cigarette from the stub of its predecessor. He drank sparingly.

And he said no word.

The hours dragged by—ten—eleven—twelve. And then Steve echoed the final stroke of midnight with an explosive: "Damn! It's *got* to be! It's the only way things fit!"

Quinn looked at him hopefully. He knew that tone of voice of old. It presaged action.

"What's got to be?" he asked.

Steve ignored the question, slipped his Luger from his shoulder holster and gave it a careful and thorough examination.

Quinn's eyes squinted and his lips parted in a crooked smile. With business-like precision he followed suit, slipped out the twin Luger to Steve's and went over it with an expert eye and hand.

"What's got to be?" he said again.

And again Steve ignored the question. He countered with one of his own. "Want to be in on the finish, Quinn? In on the kill?"

"Don't ask damn fool questions," growled Quinn. "And stop talking in riddles."

"Paulding was no suicide," said Steve bluntly. "He was murdered! Murdered by the same devil that killed the Old Man—and all the rest."

Quinn's heavy head sank between his shoulders: his jaw jutted forward. "And you know who the guy is?"

Steve nodded. "I'd bank my life on it. But there's one thing we can do to make sure."

"What's that?"

"Crack a safe!"

"What tools will we need?" asked Quinn the practical.

"None," answered Steve. "I've got the combination."

Quinn kicked back his chair, reached for his hat. "Well, what are we waiting for?"

Chapter XI

THE KILLER UNMASKED

THE Royale Apartments, at Broadway and Eightieth Street, lift a splendid shaft of brick and steel thirty stories into the sky. From that point on, the building continues on upward for ten more stories in a narrow tower effect, with only one luxurious apartment to each floor.

It was precisely one o'clock when the express elevator of the building deposited Quinn on the twenty-sixth floor. Ten minutes later, Steve alighted from another car on the thirtieth floor. And at one-fifteen, the two men met on the graveled roof of the building.

From beneath his coat Steve produced a short length of stout manila rope. Leaning far over the parapet that surrounded the roof, he surveyed the sheer face of the building a moment. Then, walking ten paces to his left, he made one end of the rope fast around the stanchion of a skylight, and paid out the other over the edge of the roof.

For a moment the hands of the two men met in a grip of steel. No word was said. No word was needed. Then, after shifting his Luger from his hip to the side pocket of his coat, Steve climbed the parapet, gripped the rope—and, hand over hand, lowered himself down over the forty-story abyss.

There was need of speed. A casual eye from an adjoining building meant the police. And one slip meant death. Swiftly, Steve dropped ten feet, came abreast of a recessed rectangle that marked a window. It was dark, shaded. The toes of his shoes gripped the window-sill and, holding on to the rope with his left hand, he tried the lower sash with his right.

A grunt of exultation escaped his lips as it gave beneath the pressure of his fingers. He slid it up noiselessly, grasped the raised sash, released his hold on the rope and, with perfect co-ordination of nerve and muscle, swung his feet over the sill.

He made no sound as he dropped into the room beyond. But he was taking no chances. Gun in hand, he flattened himself against the wall and listened. Nothing—no sound save the heavy beating of his

heart against his ribs. Only when he was satisfied that the room was empty, did he jerk the rope in signal to the waiting Quinn.

And twenty seconds later, Quinn padded to the floor beside him.

Tense, ready for instant action, they waited another ten seconds, then Steve slipped a flashlight from his pocket, clicked it on. In a wide arc he swept the tiny beam around the luxuriously furnished library, focused it unerringly on a heavy safe set into the far wall.

Swiftly they crossed over to it. The torch was shifted to Quinn's left hand. Then, with eyes that were hard and bright and a pulse that was hitting a hundred and thirty, but with a steady hand, Steve's fingers went out to the dial.

His entire theory was at stake. If he could open that safe, with the combination he had—he had his father's murderer! Before his mind's eye, in burning numbers, flashed the cryptic numerals he had found in his father's safe, in a far less pretentious study.

L-39265.

He tried them on the safe, twirled the dial to zero, then manipulated it carefully: Left 3—right 9—left 2—right 6—left 5.

The tumblers clicked into place, the handle turned. The safe door swung open! And there, in dazzling array, beneath the penetrating beam of the flashlight, was a display of jewels, fit to ransom a king. There was the ruby wealth of India there; the splendor of African diamond mines; sapphires from Brazil. And there was something else . . .

And then a voice spoke from the doorway—crisp, menacing, deadly. "That's perfect, the way you are. Drop the guns!"

The curt command of the words was backed up by the authority of a heavy automatic. And behind the automatic was the twisted face of Raymond Devin!

Steve's Luger trickled slowly from his fingers and fell to the carpeted floor with a dull thud. It was followed a moment later by Quinn's.

Then, like the flash of a rapier, Steve's hand licked out to the open safe—grasped the gun that lay inside it close beside the jewels.

He pivoted, side-stepped, fired—all in one simultaneous movement. The roar of his gun was echoed by the automatic in Devin's fist. Lead criss-crossed the room, twin spirals of smoke drifted lazily up from the muzzles of the two automatics.

Steve staggered back a step, then steadied himself on straddled feet. The gun was still held tight in his fist.

Devin coughed once, hollowly. His left hand went slowly up to his lips, came away red. From wide, amazed eyes he stared at the blood on his fingers. He went down slowly, joint by joint, as if dragged to the floor by the weight of the still smoking gun in his hand.

"He's dead," said Steve simply. "Through the heart. Our job's done, Jack."

Quinn stared at the crumpled body a moment, then whistled softly. "God, what shooting."

"Too good," answered Steve bitterly. "I didn't want it to end this way. It's too easy an out. But he forced me to it."

He turned swiftly to the safe, scooped up the tray of gems and stowed the jewels in his pocket.

Then, as heavy hands outside beat on the apartment door and the corridor beyond filled with excited voices, they crossed swiftly to the window. And even as Spider Kelley had done before them, they grasped the still dangling rope down which they had descended minutes before, and disappeared upward, swallowed by the night.

NO word was said between them until they were seated again in their hotel room, a bottle of Scotch before them. No word was said even then, until the bottle had been lowered some four inches. Then:

"The jewels in the safe prove it was Devin," began Quinn, "but how did you know to look there? How did you know that that slip of paper you got out of your father's safe bore the combination to Devin's safe?"

Steve squinted speculatively through his drink a moment, then replaced it on the table.

"Nan gave me the tip-off."

"The girl?" said Quinn incredulously.

"Yeah. Remember the time I caught her

up in Devin's office, cracking his safe? Well, I was dumbfounded at the time at the ease with which she did it. But she didn't crack that safe! She had the combination! There were only two answers; either she was in league with Devin, or she had gotten the combination from some other source. And then I remembered that penciled notation on the Old Man's cuff. It was obvious—the combination to a safe. The kid knew about that."

"You mean," said Quinn, "the girl figured the puzzle out—doped out the clue on your father's cuff—and went to Devin's safe?"

"Right," said Steve. "After my little session with her, up in her room, I went back to Devin's office and checked up. The combination on the Old Man's cuff fitted Devin's office safe."

"And the other combination you had fitted the safe in his home," concluded Quinn.

"Exactly. Of course, Devin made mistakes—big mistakes. Especially when he murdered Paulding and tried to make it look like suicide. He had actually killed Paulding with a silenced gun a minute or so before he called my brother. Then when he had John on the wire, he fired his own gun to make the suicide story hold up."

He paused for a moment, then went on: "I saw Paulding's body crumpled on the floor. The bullet had entered beneath the right side of his jaw and had mushroomed out on the left side of his skull. Get it?"

"Get what?" growled Quinn.

"The automatic was still in Paulding's hand," explained Steve patiently. "Well—if everything was on the up and up, it couldn't have been there. Listen. Get this—and learn. The left side of the brain controls the right side of the body. If Paulding had shot himself—committed suicide—and in doing so, blew out the left side of his brain—that gun couldn't have been in his hand. The muscular reaction wouldn't have let him keep a grip on it.

"Well, when I saw that it was *still* clutched in his fingers—I knew it had been placed there, *after* he was dead!

"This wasn't suicide. It was murder."

Quinn beamed appreciatively, "By God,

Steve, you ought to be on the cops. You'd make a swell dick."

Steve grinned wryly. "No thanks. I'd have to take orders, then. I like to pick my cases. And what the hell would I do with you—or *without* you?"

Quinn snorted eloquently. "That's what I'd like to know! I've gotten you out of more scrapes . . . But let's forget that. We're pals, see? What else about Devin?"

Steve smiled appreciatively at Quinn's thrust. "That's about all. You see, Devin had a perfect set-up. He always knew about the jewels because he *insured them for his company*. And due to his constant contact with his various victims, he had learned the combinations of their safes.

"All he had to do was to send Spider Kelley around to pick up the stuff for him. Then—it was a devilish scheme—he would plant false evidence against the men he had robbed—build up a strong police case against them—and then murder them in such a way that it looked like suicide.

"Of course, when the set-up began to look phony, he came running to the police to cover himself." Steve's voice hardened abruptly and he drummed a savage tattoo on the table top. "There's only one thing I regret about the whole case. That I didn't drop Devin from the fortieth floor . . ."

"Forget it," growled Quinn. "Spider Kelley's gone—Devin's gone. We got a couple of million in loot. What do we do with it?"

"You know damn well!" shot back Steve. "Ten percent plus expenses." Quinn groaned pathetically but Steve was adamant. "Get me some paper and a pencil."

Quinn rummaged about the room and after much diligent search produced the blunt stub of a pencil. Paper was another matter. He finally tore off a strip of wrapping paper, smoothed it carefully and handed it to his ally in crime. Steve accepted it dubiously.

"Not exactly official-looking. But it'll do, I guess." He pulled at the lobe of his ear, scratched at his head, wrinkled his brow in heavy concentration. Then at last, with a sigh, he applied pencil to paper and began the laborious task of printing the message

that was to accompany the return of the Devin loot.

Quinn read over his shoulder as he wrote, alternately grinned and scowled as the printed words slowly unfolded on the torn bit of wrapping paper which was the only stationery available.

The epistle was finished at last, down to the final period. Steve looked up gratefully. "What'll I sign to this classic document?" he asked. He thought for a moment, then found inspiration.

With a smile and a flourish he applied pencil to paper again. But this time he didn't print. Instead, he drew a curious device beneath his message—a device that, within a short time, was to intrigue and baffle the police of the country.

AND in his morning mail, along with a fortune in jewels, Inspector John Oakes received the following communication:

Inspector John Oakes,
Police Headquarters,
Centre Street, N. Y. C.

My dear Inspector:

Pardon the unusual stationery. But my social secretary seems to have mislaid my monogrammed notepaper.

However, I am sending you herewith, the loot stolen during the series of crimes known as the Twenty-Story Murders. Or at least most of it. I have deducted a commission of ten percent for my services in recovering them. Also one ruby to cover my expenses while so engaged.

You will find an itemized and receipted expense account attached hereto.

The untimely death of Mr. Devin last night puts an end to this series of terrible crimes. One bullet saved the State the cost of trying and executing him.

Hoping that we shall meet again in the course of our work and that we may be of mutual service to each other in the future,
I am,

Very respectfully yours,
The Angel

Between the body of the letter itself and the signature was the skeleton outline of a man. A pair of large wings adorned his back; a halo sat rakishly over one ear. Clasped in his left hand was a harp—and in his right, a heavy automatic.

An Angel—a fallen Angel!

THE END.

THE DEVIL'S BROTHER

By MARGIE HARRIS



A Crime That Only a Killer Himself Could Solve

Chapter I

HIDDEN WIRES

EVEN before I entered Peter Burton's private office, I knew that something was wrong. For there, hidden right in the door jamb, close in against the hinges, was a pair of hidden brown wires. Insulated brown wires in a door jamb! And any fool knows that honest electric wires are never put where they are

likely to be scraped bare and short circuited. But I had no time to think further, for just then the man who had sent for me called out to me.

"Come in, Wyant," he rumbled. "Drop your hat anywhere and join me in a high-ball. Have a hard trip? No? Well, flying here from New York in a half storm isn't exactly my idea of a good time."

Small, hatchet-faced and scrawny, Burton seemed almost lost in the depths of the

high-backed swivel chair behind the big desk. Certainly he did not look like the multi-millionaire that had more than once scared the wolves of Wall Street half to death. I wondered what it was now that had scared him enough to make him send for me.

"Oh, flying's all right," I said. "It's the sudden stops that hurt. And more people are hurt in automobile crashes than in plane smash-ups. But that highball suggestion isn't a bad idea."

He twisted a mahogany office cellarette around, and brought out bottles and glasses. "Make it a big one," he warned. "That'll make it easier for you to say 'Yes' to my proposition."

As if I had any idea of turning down a twenty-dollar-an-hour job! But as I sipped my highball, the memory of those hidden wires came back with a jump. And there was a reason. Because my toe had suddenly felt a ridge under the thick office rug—a ridge that might have been made by a couple of wires.

That ridge seemed to come up out of the floor, then run along diagonally under Burton's desk. While I sipped at the highball I looked over the articles on his desk. To his right there was a master speaker-box with a straight-line telephone at each side of the blotter. At his left elbow was a heavy electric cigar lighter with a broad, oval base, and a crescent top. At the tips were horns which were flame spouts.

I found a cigarette, fumbled for a match, then, quite naturally, leaned forward and touched the lighter lever. Flame came from both tips, but the base held immovable.

Burton grinned. "The kind you anchor down; it was a present."

"Smart gadget," I told him, clicking the contact lever again. Then, while his mind was off center, I said:

"You must have something big, Mr. Burton. Private dicks don't get twenty-dollar-an-hour calls, with air transport thrown in, very often. You know that I don't touch scandals, and—"

He started growing before my eyes. One minute he was just a rich little dyspeptic cuss. The next he was a hell-tooter of a Big Boss—and he did all of it with his eyes.

"I know a lot about you, Wyant," he said in his strange, reverberating tones. "I know that you're a triple-smart detective; that you kill as casually as I order scrambled eggs for breakfast; that you're hard as nails, expensive to buy—but that once bought you stay bought."

I gave him a crooked grin and said, "It isn't possible you're my long-lost rich uncle, is it? You see, I never saw the old guy."

The quip amused him. He said "Har!" in the tone of a skipper bellowing through a gale. But my eyes were on the electric lighter.

There had been a muffled click just before he spoke. Just the ghost of a click, but it was electrical.

Burton was speaking again. I heard the words, sensed them automatically, but I was sizing him up. He was rich enough, important enough to have a dictograph on his desk with a trusted secretary to record important conversations, but would he take such a precaution while talking with a private investigator? Wasn't it more probable that Burton was the victim of surveillance; that whoever was at the other end had more than a passing interest in my visit?

Suddenly intuition, detective instinct, told me that this was the truth. We were being spied upon.

But Burton was talking ahead:

"I wouldn't blame you if you shy away when I tell you what I have in mind. It's damned important—and dangerous."

I told him, "If I get ready to shy, I'll tell you about it. I was run off a case once—that was back in 1907—"

As I talked, I was writing swiftly on a card. Now I tossed it over to Burton. It read:

Make some excuse to take me over to the window—and don't talk here.

He nodded after studying me gravely for a moment, and said, "Come over to the window so I can show you the lay of the land."

I was out of my chair like a flash. Crossing to a stationary washstand back of a screen, I started the water running, full head. Burton, on my heels, said, "What the heck—"

I jerked a thumb toward the desk. "The

microphone hasn't been made that will register words over the sound of running water. There's one on your desk. If you put it there, everything's okay. If not, talk here."

HE turned, glared at the desk, anger rising in his cheeks.

"So that's it, huh? Spying on me— Well, listen, Wyant. Find me the man or woman at the end of that line, and you get a bonus of five hundred cash!"

"Then it means something to you?"

"*Something?*" He almost choked on the word. "Merely a man's life, half a million dollars in money, and the work and hopes of five years! That's what it means: that's why you're here."

"Make it short," I told him. "Details later—and keep your voice just above the sound of the water."

He came closer, spoke almost in my ear.

"It's a new radio development. We called it 'invisible power'—a radio wave over which we can send electric power. Two associates and myself have been working on the idea for years. Figured it would be a great thing for the people of the country. My associates are Henry Sanders and Morton Kessler."

Sanders and Kessler! I whistled. Between them they had about all the money in the United States that Peter Burton didn't have. Burton, Sanders, and Kessler! Give me those babies on the home team and I'd take any combination on any day, for money or marbles, right up to the U. S. Mint!

"Who's the electrical expert that worked it out for you?" I asked.

"Hubert Parsons—the electrical wizard—you remember he was supposed to have retired from business five years ago. Actually he went to work secretly for us. Briefly, he perfected an apparatus that will send unlimited power for thousands of miles to homes, factories, entire cities—and for a fraction of the present cost. It would revolutionize living in America—and break up the power trusts."

Break 'em up? Why a thing like that would just wipe 'em off the map completely. And how the Big Money in the power trusts would love being wiped off the map!

"I get you," I said, nodding. "You mean you sent for me to keep an eye on this apparatus, and on Parsons, too, maybe—"

"No," he said grimly. "You're too late for that. Parsons was murdered last night! Sanders, Kessler and I were watching from shore—saw him run down by a sea sled—saw him practically shot out of his motor cruiser by whoever it was that ran him down. Then they sank his boat."

"You mean they were after his invention? They got it?"

"I don't know. There were no drawings, no blue prints. He kept everything in his head. He did build a tiny model of his apparatus, though, as a demonstrator, but I don't know where he kept it. Anyway, we can't find it. It and Parsons are gone."

"Then what is it you want me to do?"

"I want you to run down Parsons' killers! I'll pay twenty-five thousand dollars apiece for them, dead or alive, and ten thousand apiece for anybody you can prove even had the slightest thing to do with it. And I want the spy in my office at your own figure. But I want, most of all, to find Parsons' miniature model. It mustn't fall into the wrong hands. Now, do you want to shy off?"

"You couldn't drive me off with a riot gun," I told him, "but it'll cost you plenty in dough and influence, for things may get rough—here and there. I want a free hand, no interference, and possibly a hell of a lot of protection in high places. Can you deliver?"

He grunted contentedly. "You'd be surprised," he told me. "Where do you start?"

"Right here in your own office—when everybody's gone," I said. "All I need is a door key and a lot of luck."

Chapter II

A THOROUGH SEARCH

IT took five minutes to find the secret of the microphone after Burton's keys had admitted me to his private office, that night. The wires followed down the door jamb, along a carefully hollowed slot under the rug between two of the hardwood boards. It was a neat job, hard to see even with the rug turned back.

But they came to the surface just short of the desk, crossing to a spot under the right front leg of the conference table, and disappearing into a hole there. I pulled the drawers out on that side, got underneath and found where the wires came out again and ran across the drawer space to a hole in the hollow bolt which held the lighter in place.

I'd been right, then, about the lighter. Closer inspection showed cleverly concealed holes in the elaborate carving just above the base. A hard twist with both hands let the top part of the lighter swing free on a screw connection and showed me a small, intensely powerful microphone.

Replacing everything as I'd found it, I went back to the doorway and started tracing the wires back the other way. They led me along mouldings, baseboards, up beneath the outlining wood of decorative panels, and finally to a tiny room at the extreme end of the suite from Burton's private office.

The door was locked, but there was a cubbyhole marked "Office Manager," and search of the desk there brought to light marked keys for every lock about the place.

The one that unlocked the door of the rear room was marked "File Clerk," and the office roster showed that individual to be one Esther Malm.

It was a storeroom for active indexes to files in the vault, the cards being kept in sliding drawers on steel rods.

I pulled drawer after drawer out and stacked them on the floor until I came almost to the last one. Then I suddenly saw, far back in the empty space, the ends of two tiny wires. And then I stepped back and turned in a fine job of cussing.

For the wires didn't come out anywhere in this room at all. They ran right on back through the wall again and disappeared. All this terminal back of the drawers merely was a connection—the sort of connection with a hole in it that you find in a telephone switchboard. To complete the connection all you had to do was shove a brass plug of the proper size down into the hole between the two wires. This wasn't the end of the microphone line at all; it was just a switch to hook it up to the real listening-in station somewhere farther on.

I looked around for the plug, but there was none. And then I saw. The brass knob of the drawer itself was what they used. It came unscrewed by turning to the left, and its end had been filed down to fit the hole in the plug. I could even see the scratches on the tip where it had been shoved into the connection.

I unscrewed it to examine it, but I didn't try it in the connection. There might be an annunciator box at the end of that wire, wherever it led to, and it might tip off the people there that their microphone had been discovered and was being traced.

It was too late to do any further investigating, especially as I had no keys for other offices in the building. So I replaced everything carefully as I had found it, locked the door behind me, and left the building. I stopped in the first drugstore and looked through the city directory, under the "M's," until I found the name of Esther Malm—"clerk of the Burton Syndicate—residence, the Sartor Arms apartment hotel."

I snapped a glance at my watch. It was nearly one o'clock, and I was sleepy; far too sleepy to go prowling about looking for some girl file-clerk. So I flagged a taxi and gave the order, "Ardmore Hotel—and make it snappy."

By the time I reached my hotel I was yawning. And I was almost asleep on my feet as I got my key from the night clerk, went up to my floor, and unlocked my door. But the minute I snapped on the light I came wide awake.

My room had been searched with vicious earnestness. Holes in the fabric showed that pillows, bed clothing, even the mattresses, had been prodded with some sharp instrument. Worse, every article of baggage and clothing had been searched ruthlessly and had been added to the pile on the floor.

Cusswords? Sure, plenty of 'em. I stooped to retrieve a pair of white gold military brushes, but there was the sound of soft movement behind me. I threw myself aside, sent a hand streaking for my gun.

But my fingers never touched the butt. Something whizzed through the air from one side. It collided with my skull and changed the world into an inferno of black-

ness shot with red and white lights. My last conscious thought was that I had been added to the other pile of *débris* on the floor.

INTOLERABLE shooting pains within my skull, and a sense of keen discomfort along my stomach and chest, brought me back to consciousness. I blinked in the light rays which seeped through the window, and felt about gingerly.

And suddenly I realized that I lay there, stripped to the hide, and suffering acutely from something which dug into my flesh.

Groaning with pain, I levered myself to my feet, staggered to the light switch. With the glare, memory returned. With only a barest glance at the heap on the floor, to which had been added my clothing and the articles from my pockets, I went to the bathroom. There I turned on the cold water, splashed it on my head and face until the worst of the pain had gone.

The mirror showed me a Gid Wyant with lopsided head, red-rimmed eyes and a certain dissolute air of worthlessness which only the victim of a knockout—or a week's *souse*—can achieve. There was a welt across the side of my head just above the ear, a deep bruise which reached out to discolor my temple and left eye. The skin was unbroken, but I had a headache that was a lulu.

After that I donned a bathrobe and started sorting things out of the pile on the floor. They checked, down to the last item: papers, keys, money, clothing. Just as I finished, there came a ring on the telephone. It proved to be the night operator who said:

"There's a man on the line—something about a telegram. Want to talk?"

"Hold it a minute and I will," I told her. I thought quickly. "Listen, lady—there's ten bucks in it if you get the call traced before that party hangs up. Is it a sale?"

"Sold," she whispered. "My sister's the night supervisor. . . . Here's your party."

I pretended plenty of peeve. "Hello-hello-hello," I yelped. "Why don't you answer? What's wanted?"

A strange voice, smooth, suave, said gently, "Have a nice nap, Mister Wyant?"

I told him, "Yeah, a lot better than you think. I was stalling, dumbhead: I got a couple of good peeks while you were going through my clothes. You're going to see more of me."

That drew a sour chuckle from the mysterious stranger at the other end of the line.

"Not *me*, Gumshoe; that was just a room prowler I used for a simple job. If you want him I'll let you have him—for keeps. But I've got a message for you: listen closely."

"I'm doing it," I snapped. "Say your piece."

"Check. It's like this. Either you're out of town by noon today—or you'll never leave, if you get what I mean. You've bought a stack of cheap chips in a game that's too hot for you."

I kept quiet for several seconds. Then I told him "Check!" explosively, and hung up. I grinned at the thought of him standing before a phone somewhere, wondering which meaning of "Check" I had intended.

Then the bell rang again. It was the operator.

"Sorry," she said. "It's a dead end. The call came from a nickel booth in the inter-urban station. But there's something which may help you. While he was waiting for me to get you on the line, someone close to him said, 'Oh, forget it, Clay; let's go.' Does that help some?"

"It's worth ten clinks of anyone's jack, sister," I replied.

Chapter III

DOUBLE LIFE

THERE were two elevator boys at the Sartor Arms when I went around, next day. I chose the one with the weak chin and showed him a folded five-case note.

"Graveyard stuff, Bud," I told him mysteriously. "The Malm girl in E-14; what about her?"

He clawed for the bill, said: "Her? Huh! Little Orphan Annie daytimes—Mae West an' the Harlow gal rolled into one at night. Mister, that broad can show off, sittin' down in a dark closet even."

"A high stepper, eh? Who does she play around with?"

"I wouldn't know," he told me darkly. "She always goes off in a cab by herself; comes back the same way." He snapped his gum twice before he added, "Mister, you oughta see her joint; it's jam full of trick stuff."

There was greed in his eyes. So I told him, "That'll be another five for you. Can you make it—now?"

He looked at his watch. "I get a ten-minute relief at nine o'clock—six minutes from now. I'll take you up, get a master key and be back while the clock's still striking."

He did—with a second to spare; opened the door with a master key and ushered me inside. I couldn't help one whistle of surprise. On every hand was luxury, costly draperies, rugs, furnishings. The closets were jammed with expensive clothing, row upon row of high priced shoes, each with its own set of trees.

But I passed up that part of it with a glance. What I sought was a secret hiding-place where I might find papers with names, clues, facts that would set my feet on the right trail—and I had only minutes in which to do my stuff.

Midway of the second wall my eyes stopped on a framed landscape. It was in a gold moulding, and down in the lower left-hand corner was a badly tarnished spot.

Why it is that smarties don't use handkerchiefs when they handle the false fronts of their wall safes is more than I know, but in this case it was the tip-off. I pressed hard at the same place, and the entire painting slid aside.

Back of it was a small safe with a key slot instead of a combination knob. One of my tool-steel picklocks handled that quickly, and disclosed three articles. One was a sizable roll of big bills. This I pushed aside in favor of a red memorandum book which contained three names with telephone numbers. I copied these and put the book back in the safe.

The last item was a technical work on radio construction. I leafed through it quickly and felt a glow when I found the name "Albert Clayson" written in a spidery hand in several places. And was that a tie-up! A man called "Clay" had telephoned me

after the assault, and here a fellow named "Clayson" owned this book which, of all things, had to do with radio construction. You can write your own headline.

Just then the elevator boy twitched my sleeve. "I gotta get back," he said anxiously. "C'mon, will ya?"

Back at the elevator shaft again I laid a hand heavily on his shoulder and said:

"I meant it when I said 'graveyard.' Open your mouth for one word, and I won't guarantee your safety overnight. It's your neck if they find you let me in here!"

The boy's face paled. "Who's 'they'?" "I'd tell you if I knew," I said solemnly. "Maybe they're kidnapers; I'm pretty sure they're killers, the sort who'd take a kid like you, wring his neck, and hang him over his own fence to dry."

He said "Gawd!" in a scared whisper and beat it for the stairs. The elevator was too slow for him now.

TWENTY minutes later I was back in Burton's office sending in my card. While I waited I got a good look around the main office.

At the desk I had marked as that of the Malm girl sat a colorless, almost dowdy young woman. Her hair hung in a stringy bob about a head too well shaped for the rest of the masquerade. Heavy, horn-rimmed glasses stole all of the expression from her eyes. Even her clothing seemed badly made, ill fitting.

Burton sent for me just then, barked "Well?" as he waved me to a seat.

Instead of replying I set one hand tight about the base of the cigar-lighter and said, "Who gave you this? Tell me all about it; it's important."

Burton said, "Safe to talk?"

"As long as I cover the sound inlets: no longer. Now tell me."

"It was a present from the staff two years ago, on my birthday. My office manager made the presentation and had a carpenter in to install it properly. Does that mean that I've been under surveillance for two years?"

"I'd say so. Now tell me—who is your file clerk, Esther Malm?"

"The niece of a one-time business asso-

ciate, Albert Clayson. We were interested in radio research at one time, but we disagreed as to methods and I finally bought him out. He had put the girl to work several months previously and, rather than seem petty, I let her stay."

I leaned forward, plenty hot and bothered now. "And Clayson's office is—"

"On the floor above—at the end of the corridor."

Score one for the home team. I told Burton, "We're getting places now. The microphone line runs through your offices under the mouldings and baseboards to the index room. It ends there in a double jack. The connection is made with an innocent seeming knob from one of the file cases."

Burton let out a string of cusswords.

"Damn it, it's where it goes to I'm interested in."

"I know," I said. "All I can tell is that it goes on from there to some other spot *in this same building*. And you've just said Clayson's office is in this building, too."

He frowned, shook his head. "Not Clayson: he's an honorable man and wealthy. He'd have no object in spying on me."

I held up a warning finger. "A man nicknamed 'Clay' called me at my hotel last night and warned me to be out of town before noon today or I wouldn't ever leave at all. That was after some mug had searched my room, and had knocked me senseless and stripped me, looking for papers."

That knocked him for a loop. "What?" he roared. "Assault—threats? What do you plan to do?"

"Let go of this 'mike' in just a minute. After that, you rattle some papers and then start talking as though you'd kept me waiting. Say you've decided not to go further with the case; that's the best thing. You won't throw good money after bad, et cetera."

"And you?"

"I'm sticking—but under cover. Ready?"

At his nod I let go, sat quietly until he said:

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Wyant, but I had to get one matter out of the way. Now, about the case: I've thought it over and have decided to drop it. It looks as though we're pretty soundly licked. Here's

an order on the cashier for a thousand dollars. Enough?"

"Plenty," I told him, "but I'd like to look around a little—"

"Nope," he cut in. "The others feel the same way about it. Goodbye, and good luck to you."

With the check order he handed me a slip which read:

"Get me at Lange 4546 after 6 p.m. Leave word where I can call you."

Chapter IV

TRAIL'S END

I TOOK the noon train for New York, scowling at everybody in sight. I had the feeling that I was being watched, but somehow I couldn't spot the "eye." But fifty miles down the road I slipped off the train and took an automobile back—if a battered, ten-year-old flivver could be called an automobile.

I'd undergone changes myself, too. Disguises are the bunk, so I'd just made myself over to fit the flivver. A shapeless, greasy old hat, clothes to match, a dragging right foot, no shave that morning, and a little grime worked into hands, face and neck, did the trick. It was the opposite of the usual camouflage. I'd made myself plenty noticeable—for one look; after that nobody'd waste time on me.

I didn't much blame Clayson's reception clerk for sniffing at me when I admitted I'd like to see the financier.

"What is the—er—nature of your—er—business, Mr. —" he demanded prissily.

"The name's Sampson, Mister, an' my business ain't none of yore business, bein' private-like with Mister Clayson. Run in an' tell him George Sampson's here with big news about a radio dingus."

He repeated it after me. "Dingus?"

"Yep, just that. Your boss'll understand what a dingus is. An' if he don't, you tell him it's like a doohickus, only it's got more legs."

I accompanied the words with a gentle shove. He was back quickly, saying: "Mr. Clayson will see you."

In a moment I was in an office nearly the size of Burton's and much more lavish-

ly furnished. Back of a conference table sat a tall, commanding-looking old codger, with white hair and mustache and a pair of compelling black eyes. He gave me a cordial smile, motioned to a chair.

"I seldom see strangers without an appointment," he told me gently, "but your message about the dingus and doobickus intrigued me. They're words such as I haven't heard since childhood. I understand your name is Sampson; what is your business with me?"

I rolled an imaginary quid under my tongue, fumbled in my pockets, all of the time grinning at him vacantly. Then my right hand moved quickly and I had him covered with my shoulder gun. He paled, but sat there unmoving.

"Don't try any monkeyshines," I warned him. "You'll live a long time if you take this easy."

He said, "Quite right, my friend. Do I understand you have some grievance against me?"

"Nope," I answered. "They tell me you're a great feller. But I'm curious as an old maid, and there's something I want you to tell me."

"What could I know that would interest you?" There was a bite in his tone, a trace of a sneer.

I looked him square in the eye as I answered:

"Just directions to the place where you folks are holding the model of Burton's radio gadget."

I thought the surprise would get him, but all it drew was an icy grin.

"Let's lay aside the masquerade," he said finally. "You're not a farmer, and something tells me you wouldn't shoot me. As far as my injuring *you* is concerned, look—"

He lowered his hands to the desk, sent his chair spinning away from the table. Then I saw what my eyes had missed before. His legs from the thighs downward were encased in braces.

"You see?" he continued. "You don't know very much about me, do you? Now I'll tell you about yourself. Country louts don't have well trimmed nails and cuticle. So, as long as we understand one another,

let's sit down here and talk—*Mr. Wyant!*"

He chuckled genially at my expression of surprise.

"It's not as mysterious as you think," he said. "Burton called to ask about some matters, and happened to mention that you were suspicious of me. I told him I'd help in every manner possible if you dropped in."

Somehow it didn't occur to me to doubt his word. He was clean, cultured, a gentleman. He had a Chauncey Depew sort of face and it went without saying that he had nerve. So I slid my gun back into the holster and sat down.

"That makes it easier for me," I told him. "But I'd still like to *prowl* about a little. There's a dictograph wire from Burton's desk that runs somewhere in this building, and it might be as well for you to be in the clear. Someone's given Burton a *dirty* deal and I want to say 'No' about as many suspects as possible, so that when I say 'Yes' about one, it'll be the big one."

THE slight frown left Clayson's face and he nodded. "Who is the suspect in Burton's office? Some newcomer?"

That gave me a jolt—which I passed on quickly.

"Esther Malm—your own niece," I said crustily. "You see now why you tie into this—the girl, and the old row with Burton."

"But Esther isn't really my niece. She's the daughter of a girl I wanted to marry in the old days. The chap who did marry her wasn't much good, and when he died I sort of kept an eye on the old friend and her baby. To avoid discussion, I've always spoken of Esther as my niece. What about her connection with this?"

"She's in it up to the ears," I said with brutal frankness. Then I went ahead and told him the whole story, down to the discovery of the wall plug in Esther's file room.

Clayson turned hurt eyes up to meet my gaze. "The daughter of Madge Malm couldn't be a crook," he said defensively.

"The daughter of a fine old lady in a little New York town turned out to be Sophie Lyons, one of the greatest women crooks of all time," I snapped. "We're dealing with facts now, not emotions."

Clayson spread his hands. "You win, Mr. Wyant. Take the place to pieces if you wish."

"But the others—the employees out there?"

"They'll be gone in fifteen minutes. It's Saturday, a half holiday. I'll hurry them along."

He reached for the buzzer, but I stopped him. "Nothing unusual, please; remember this is murder—and a Federal case as well."

Presently a pert, black-eyed secretary came in. "Anything else, Mr. Clayson?" she asked.

"Nothing, Miss Janes. Run along—and a pleasant week-end to you. Are the others gone?"

She nodded. "All but Keller," she replied, and left.

"Keller is my chauffeur and helper from my office to my car," Clayson explained. "He's honest as the day is long; been with me for eleven years. I'll vouch for his silence."

He touched the bell and in a moment a tall, stringy man of forty came in silently. He had capable hands and the cold eyes of a Norse sea captain. Clayson said:

"This is Mr. Wyant, an acoustic expert; he is doing a little task for me, Keller. I want to go about with him."

The man crossed to the wheeled office chair, moved it to the middle of the room. I peeled off my coat, rolled up my sleeves and started crawling about in search of the elusive microphone wire. In all it took three hours before I had to confess that I was whipped. There wasn't the slightest trace of what I sought, and I told Clayson so.

He frowned, apparently as disappointed as I. "You've been very thorough," he said thoughtfully, "so I guess it isn't here."

Then suddenly he held up a hand eagerly. "We've forgotten one place," he said. "The vault! Take me back to my office, Keller."

I tagged along, suddenly vaguely uneasy. I'd noticed the vault door, but took it for granted it was one of those shallow things where business men keep their personal papers.

Clayson spun the combination quickly.

Presently there was a click, and Keller, spinning Clayson's chair aside, threw the bolts and opened the door.

Within was a second barrier, a steel gate of polished rods which extended from the floor to the top of the opening. Keller unlocked this and stood back waiting.

Clayson looked at his watch, nodded to me. "I must leave shortly," he said with a smile. "If you don't mind hurrying a bit—"

I stepped within briskly. A bright light shone from a ceiling fixture, casting a white glare down onto steel shelves and an egg-shaped safe built into the left wall.

I saw these things merely in passing. What drew and held my gaze were two objects at the rear of the oblong.

The first was the terminal plug for the dictograph line! And beside it, on a broad steel shelf, was a recording instrument and a length of heavily insulated wire which terminated in a plug!

Tricked! I'd walked into the trap like the veriest novice. Even before I whirled and went for my gun, I knew what I would see.

Yes, the barred door was closed and both Clayson and Keller were out of range. I leaped for the barrier, tugging at it in the hope that the lock had not caught. But it held.

Then Clayson laughed tauntingly. "Don't tell me that you found the microphone line," he chuckled. "Imagine my not—"

"Skip it," I snarled, pressing close to the bars in the hope of getting a shot at one or both of them. But Clayson said:

"You walked into it, didn't you, Mr. Wyant? So don't be fussy."

"Yes," I told him bitterly. "Now, what's the next step?"

It came to me in that moment of silence that my only hope now lay in making some sort of deal with them.

Another sardonic chuckle came from Clayson's lips. "Why," he said judiciously, "you've found the dictograph line, you're on the trail of the right crowd—why not notify your principals and call in the police?"

"What's in your mind?" I asked. "A deal?"

"No—no deal." He said it softly, contemplatively. "You see, Wyant, it's air-and-sound-proof in there. Presently Keller will close the door and throw the combination. Then tomorrow, maybe Monday, we'll come back, smuggle your body out and leave it for the dumb police to muddle with. I doubt if they ever succeed in identifying you."

I was in a tight spot, but something told me not to truckle to him. So I said merely:

"That's your last word?"

"My last word—and yours, too," he barked. Then, right after that, he said, "Now, Keller!"

The outer door slammed shut, bolts shot into the sockets, and then the combination purred.

I was a prisoner in an airless steel cell—airless except for the small amount of oxygen which my breathing would exhaust in a few hours. It was nearing four o'clock and I estimated that I had something like a three-hour air supply. In that one hundred and eighty minutes lay my only chance of survival.

Chapter V

VAULT OF DOOM

MY initial problem, of course, was to get through to a new air supply. So my first act was to unbutton my vest and shirt and unbuckle from about my waist a pocketed belt several inches in width. I put this on a shelf and began unsnapping the pockets.

Any cracksman in the world would have paid real money for that outfit. There was a tool-steel jimmy in three sections; annealed screwdrivers shaped like clock keys; skeleton socket wrenches tooled to fit a slotted, three-piece lever handle. Also there were more picklocks and a tight-skinned length of steel wire to which I pinned all of my hopes.

It was of the hardest steel, yet highly pliant. Instead of a smooth surface it was burred on all sides with staggered teeth, each row pointing in a different direction. With a few feet of that I'd guarantee to beat the Sing Sing death house.

It was, in effect, a saw for working in

close quarters. I threaded it through between the uprights of the barred door, brought one end back inside and looped it about the tongue of the lock.

I knew only too well that the bars were of vanadium steel, but the lock, purchased usually from another manufacturer, would be of softer material.

Using two handkerchiefs for holds, I stepped back and started a slow, methodical back-and-forth tugging with both hands. It bit into the hard metal as a file cuts into lead. When it became too hot to handle, I stopped and flashed the beam of my pen light into the opening. The job was half done. Another forty minutes and I would be able to swing the barred door back against the shelving.

But already my head was aching, my senses dulled. The air was fouling much faster than I had expected.

I struck a match, held it level with my waist. It burned freely. But it flickered when I raised it even with my face, and puffed out just above my head. Already a third of the air had been fouled.

Returning to the barred door I increased the speed of my sawing. At last, just when my thudding pulses warned that I was nearing exhaustion, the burred wire ripped through the final fraction of an inch. It came free in my hand and the door swung toward me.

So much for that. Momentarily I dropped to the floor and reveled in the fresh air at the lower level. After that I reached for the remainder of the tools and attacked the combination box.

Safes had been my hobby in other years, so thoroughly so that I knew I'd have no trouble in working the combination from the back as soon as I could get my hands on the mechanism.

The last operation I carried on in a kneeling position. My socket wrenches did the trick of loosening the heavy steel bolts which held the combination box in place.

Finally it came free and I began working the combination wheel from within, using two of the picklocks as levers. One by one the tumblers dropped into their appointed slots, but I still lacked power sufficient to throw the bolts.

But there still was a way. I got to my feet, choking in the now stagnant air, and got my hands high on the upright bars which operated the upper tier of bolts. These in turn engaged the cam which operated the side and bottom bolts.

Suddenly I leaped upward, caught a higher grip and threw my full weight suddenly on the bars. They held momentarily. Then they shifted, there was a resounding click and all of the bolts sprang free of their sockets.

Stopping only to switch off the dome light and to get my gun out from under my arm, I thrust the door open a few inches and stood there waiting.

The fresh, clean air swelled in my lungs, sent the blood racing through my body like a flood of electric energy. I was free, armed, once again my own man!

The inner office was dark, the outer lighted by a single ceiling lamp. There was no sound of human movement. I stepped outside, reveling in the fresh air, the sensation of absolute freedom. I'd been face to face with death before, but I had trouble in repressing a shudder as I glanced back at the vault.

But in another moment I was running back across the room, my one thought to get back inside the vault in the shortest possible time. For there suddenly had come to my ears the sound of a muffled buzzer somewhere in the darkness. And it came from the direction of the vault.

AS I entered the vault on tiptoe it sounded again. It came from my left and close at hand. A quick sweep of my flashlight showed me the top of the vanadium steel safe, above it a metal door in the wall. There was a hole for a flat key, but one of my picklocks did the work as well.

Within was a compactly made field-set telephone, a coil and transmitter box and a tiny, cup-shaped receiver on swing wires. I drew the box to me, put the cup to my ears and said "Hello" gruffly.

A feminine voice said, "Murry just called to say that Parsons will live. There's a slight fracture, but most of the trouble was concussion; the bullet glanced off his skull.

The other wound in his leg is healing nicely."

That was news! Then Parsons hadn't gone to the bottom of the bay after all. They had kidnaped him. And having Parsons alive would be almost as good as having his model, even. I thought fast.

"Good. Now we'll get somewhere," I told her in as good an imitation of Clayson's voice as I could manage. Then I added, "I can get a tight-mouthed doctor from New York if you think—"

"Why?" She almost snarled the word. "Blassing's doing everything necessary, and we know he won't talk." Then when I didn't reply, she demanded, "What's the matter with your voice? It don't sound right."

I snorted. "Humph, you'd understand if you were here. Keller and I had a visitor today: he's staying here—*permanently*."

She gasped. "Wyant? He came back?"

"Nobody else. But his next trip will be made in a box. The vault's air-tight, you know. He's here beside me listening right now, but he's tied hand and foot."

"What did he—what had he discovered?" There was worry in her tone now, cold fear.

"Plenty," I told her. "The dictograph in Burton's office, the wall connection in yours. But I thought—"

Suddenly I heard her gasp. Then, "*Who is this?*" The words came over the line like a knife, sharp with sudden suspicion.

I scowled, wanted to kick myself. I'd been going on the assumption that I was talking to the Malm girl, and the words "in your office" had tipped my hand. The party at the other end wasn't the Malm girl at all! There was one chance now—one only.

"I'm the chap Clayson and Keller locked in the vault to die," I said quietly. "It's nice to—talk to someone—"

She said "Wait!" quickly, flutteringly. Minutes passed. I could hear a voice somewhere near at hand, talking in lowered tones. Then she came back.

"Hello, Mr. Wyant," she said, and now there was a taunt in her voice. "So you got around to telling the truth at last."

Instead of answering, I waited. She called "Hello" several times, then whistled

shrilly into the transmitter. The sensitive apparatus took up the sound, changed it into an eerie wail.

In a moment I struck the receiver cup sharply against the side of the box and said "Hello," vaguely.

The woman said, "Where were you? Why didn't you answer?"

I made my voice as distressed as possible. "I'm down on the floor—the air's pretty good down there—still. What do you want?"

"To tell you 'Goodnight, Gumshoe,' also 'pleasant dreams.'"

I mumbled "G'night" vaguely, then asked, "Where'd you go?"

"I telephoned—somebody; found you really were locked in the vault. Wouldn't it be nice to be *here* instead, planning what you'd like for breakfast? But you won't be interested in any more breakfasts, will you, Mr. Detective Wyant?"

She laughed tauntingly and sloshed a drink about near the transmitter so I could hear the ice clink against the glass.

I ignored her question, asked one of my own. "Parsons—he's okay? He'll get well?"

"Yes—but what does that mean to you?"

I waited a little while before I muttered, "I—don't know—guess the—air—" I managed a hollow cough, leaned closer to the transmitter so she could hear me gasp for breath.

Presently she said, "What are you doing?"

I told her, "Dying—but do something—will you? Stay on the—line—until—"

She said "Wait" again, but this time she almost shouted it. I heard the transmitter drop heavily, then footsteps, running. After that voices came nearer to the set and I heard her say to somebody evidently beside her, "You said you'd be there at 6:30. How was I to know? Anyway, what's the difference? No harm has been done, and he's pretty near to the end."

It was Clayson's voice that answered. "No, no harm, but you startled the hell out of me when you called to ask who was locked in the vault. You say he's nearly—through?"

I heard the transmitter scrape over some-

thing as she replied, "Here, talk to him yourself. He can't bite you."

I started coughing again, a paroxysm of sobbing barks, and let Clayson say "Hello, Wyant," several times before I made a strangled response, more of a groan than a word.

Clayson's voice was mellowly ironic. "Well, Wyant," he said, "we meet again. I was wrong about that last word, what?"

Instead of replying, I took the box and let it down on the stone floor heavily, following it with a realistic thud. Then I mumbled:

"I'll talk—now. I'm down on—floor; air—better. Listen—I've got news—for you."

Clayson said, "News? My, how you do get around."

I said "Listen" again, angrily, adding, "You'll burn—for me, Clayson. *Burn*—I said! I've got it—all fixed. You can't beat it."

"Surely." He said it patiently, as one talks to an idiot. "You're leaving a note for someone to find."

"No note. *My body, dead of a pistol-shot!* I'll use my own gun—when things get—too bad."

Clayson chuckled evilly. "A break for me. That's fine. We'll just dump you and the gun out in the country and the cops will call it suicide."

"Not a chance!" I put some strength into my voice. "I've jimmied the—combination! *An outsider'll—have to open it.*"

"Wha-a-a-at?" he howled incredulously.

"You—heard me. I get—the last laugh!"

The sudden plan that had flashed into my mind at sound of Clayson's voice was nearing its climax now. The next few seconds would tell.

Then he half shouted, "Don't! Don't do that! I'll—I'll come down, let you out—"

"You can't. The lock's smashed—already."

Clayson cursed frenziedly, mumbled words ending in "somehow."

I told him again, "You can't— And now you'll—burn!"

He grumbled, whispered, "My God! He's got us!"

That gave me my turn to give a dirty

chuckle. "Oh, shut up!" I rasped. "You've got months in which—to die. My gun's—in my hand—now—"

That cracked his nerve like a hammer on flimsy china.

"Don't—don't!" he pleaded. "We'll find a way."

I coughed hollowly, silenced him. Then I said:

"Here's a—deal. You tell—where Parsons is—and I won't—use the gun."

There was no answer through several long seconds. At last he said cautiously, "You promise you'll go out—the other way?"

That was a laugh. I took a look out through the open door and told him solemnly, "I promise—I'll go out the other way. Where's Parsons?"

"At the Clark manor—on the Marine Highway headland, eight miles out."

He said the words with a rush, stopped chokingly as though something had caught at his throat. Then I heard him say to the woman, in a low voice, "Suppose he *does* know: he's practically dead right now. And there wasn't any choice. I had to stop the gun play."

But the woman refused to be convinced.

"You're a fool," she grated. "Get along down there and make sure he isn't pulling a fast one on you." After a moment she said, "No, wait! I'm going with you."

That was my cue again.

I cleared my throat huskily and said, "Oh, Clayson! Listen—"

He answered instantly, "Yes—yes, what?"

"Listen to this."

I held the gun near to the receiver and fired one shot. At the same time I swung the cup against the floor and smashed it.

That concluded my business in the vault. I flicked off the light, skipped out through the door, threw the bolts and twirled the combination. Then I looked around the office for a place to hide.

A closet in the opposite wall looked promising. I moved the closet key to the inside of the lock, tested the hinges to make certain they did not squeak, and donned the coat and vest I'd taken off hours before.

After that I sat down in Clayson's own easy chair to rest—and wait.

Chapter VI

INTO THE TRAP

THE whine of the elevator warned me of Clayson's approach. Darting across the room, I took my stand within the closet, holding the knob with my left hand so that I could see through the crack.

Presently there were voices in the outer office. Clayson came in first—and he was walking! His tread was slow, mechanical, and he used a cane, but it was apparent that his supposed affliction was a blind.

After him came an angular, red-headed woman. She was tall, square jawed, with the flat hips and powerful shoulders of a male athlete. Appraising her narrowly, the thought came to me suddenly that here was a worthy opponent not only mentally but physically.

Her eyes went instantly to the vault, noting the closed door. Even then she was satisfied only when she'd crossed the room and jerked at the T-handle.

"It's better than I'd hoped," she said crisply. "I had a hunch that he'd wriggled free somehow; that he was taking you for a ride." She shook her head in puzzlement, adding, "Think of it! Can you imagine a dying man—even a detective—wanting to know the inside of a case before he kicked off?"

Clayson shrugged, handed her a flat automatic.

"I'm going to try the combination," he said huskily. "It might work."

He worked the knob with practiced fingers, gasped in relief when the knob turned. He waited a moment, flashed a glance at his watch.

"Cover me," he barked suddenly. "That gunshot may have been a plant to draw me down here, to make me open the safe, just as I've done. See it?"

The woman nodded grimly. "He gets plugged if he moves," she said.

I had to hand it to him for brainy thinking. Instead of jerking the door open and standing there for a target, he stepped far to the left, twisted the handle and pulled back slowly. Then he and the woman stood listening breathlessly through the space of a long moment.

Remember, I'd clicked off the light when I left the vault, and rays from the one he'd turned on in the office didn't carry inside. So presently he clicked the wheel of a pocket lighter and leaned forward to peer within. The woman, equally tense, took a long step forward.

That was my cue. Unconsciously they'd posed themselves better than if I'd ordered it. I stole out on tiptoe, crossed the room in three long strides; held the gun at the base of the woman's brain, right at the lower edge of her red bob.

"Drop the gun!" I told her curtly. "And both of you get your hands high—quickly!"

The woman stood like a statue through a long count of five. Then slowly, almost contemptuously, she uncoiled her fingers, and let the gun fall to the carpet. She lifted her hands over her head.

Clayson's already were up. His face, pallid in the dim light, was working, grimacing with fear.

"Wuh-Wyant!" he gibbered. "It's Wyant, Lora."

The red-headed woman chuckled acidly. "You wouldn't fool me, Albert." Some measure of her contempt for his lack of nerve was shown by her next words. "Suppose it is Wyant—he's not God!"

"Into the vault, you two!" I snapped at them. "It's my party now."

Clayson almost leaped over the sill and into the vault. But Lora stood still, stubbornly. I jabbed her with the gun, told her, "Inside, Big Girl; you're just another tough guy so far as I'm concerned."

"Then pull the trigger," she snarled. "It's easier to die out here than to smother in there."

"And lose interest in what's to be had for breakfast," I reminded her acidly. I wasn't so much interested in throwing her taunt back at her as I was in camouflaging the next step.

For, even as I was saying the words, I'd dropped the gun back in its holster and had her by the elbows, goose-stepping her into the vault. She fought with surprising strength, but my hold was above her center of balance and before she could get really organized I'd shoved her inside and had thrown the bolts.

After that I stepped back, waited while the hands of my watch moved through five minutes. Then I opened the door a few inches and caught the back of a straight chair under the T-knob to hold it immovable.

"WE'RE cracking the case right here," I told them quietly. "I'm going to have just as much pity for you as you had for me. If you don't talk—now—that door shuts for good!"

Clayson, his nerve gone, moaned pitifully. But Lora was defiant.

"Fair enough," she said sharply. "You win, we lose. You'll not hear any squawking out of me. And if Clayson tries to talk, I'll take care of him *with my hands*."

There was a world of menace in those last three words. I knew she meant them and that there was power in those long, powerful hands to make her threat good.

But I ignored it, suggesting quietly, "There's a good chance for the one who turns state's evidence; I'll work for a suspended sentence." After a moment I said, "Clayson?"

The woman answered for him. "Shut the door, Gumshoe," she snarled. "We're staying. But if you only knew it, I'm your ace card."

"You *would* pull one like that, Lame Brain," I told her. "If you'd been half of one per cent smart you wouldn't be in this jam."

I wanted to anger her. Instead, she went cold as ice.

"You want Parsons more than anything else in the world, don't you?" She asked it in the impersonal tone of one commenting on the weather.

"So what?"

"Just this. You've had all the luck in the world, but it's running out now. If certain persons don't hear from me in exactly twenty-eight minutes, Parsons will go to sleep under an ether cone—and *he won't wake up!*"

"That's an old trick—and slightly sour," I said gruffly.

"Yes? Better think it over, Sleuth. If you think it isn't true, we lose. But if it is true, then your only chance to save Parsons is to turn us loose."

I flashed a quick glance at my watch; it stood at nine thirty-three. If Lora's story was true, then ten o'clock was zero hour. I had seconds less than twenty-seven minutes to get to the street, find a car and travel eight miles of road which might be rutted and broken.

I called her bluff.

Without another syllable I crashed the door shut, twisted the T-knob, set the chair under it so it couldn't be pushed open. Then I twirled the combination and ran for the elevator.

There was, I knew, one danger in the plan. Though I'd smashed the field-set receiver, there still was the chance that they might make contact with someone in Lora's apartment. If so, it would be a race to the old Clarke farm, with Parsons' life as the prize.

Speed and more speed, that was my best ally. I raced out to the street, signaled a taxi and said, "Old Clarke manor; eight miles out on the Marine Highway. Know it?"

"Like I owned it," he answered. He was cross-eyed and weasel-faced, but he looked like a speed fiend.

"Twenty bucks for a mlie a minute," I suggested.

He flung the door open but eyed me speculatively. "Town get too hot for you, Ezra?"

For the first time in hours I was reminded of my hill-billy appearance, but I didn't argue. "I said, 'Twenty bucks for a mile a minute, starting now.' Sold?"

"Sold the first time," he muttered. "Hang onto your hat."

It was a small, eight cylinder car of a popular make with a fast pick-up. It was doing forty-five miles in second, and ten more before the end of the first block.

"Back streets," the driver called over his shoulder. "Eight blocks further, but I save five traffic stops."

After that the car bored steadily eastward. Once it made a skidding turn to avoid a truck, but within a few minutes it was out on a broad, asphalt highway and burning the wind at seventy.

Five miles further along the driver slowed and called out, "The next dirt road to the south; pretty bumpy."

"I want to sneak in," I told him. "You know where to stop?"

"Yeah—foot of the hill in the lane where the trees is."

We creaked and jolted along for several minutes before he slowed to a crawl and cut his lights, his second gear whispering softly. Old oak trees bordered the road here and dimly I could make out a fence, a barred gate and rural delivery mailbox. I slid out, closed the door softly, handed the driver his money.

"You may get another sawbuck if you stick around a few minutes; I may be going back," I said.

He cut his switch, slid down in the seat, and told me:

"I hope the Old Lady does throw you out; I need the jack."

Chapter VII

HOLED UP

SPEED! I was on the ground, but the minutes were fleeting.

I put my hand on the top of the fence and vaulted over. I lit running. In a moment I was in pitch darkness, with only the star gleam above me to show the shape of the wood I was threading.

The lane turned sharp left before I'd gone twenty yards and there was something white that glistened in the reflected light well up on the bole of a big tree. Coming closer I discovered it was a porcelain insulator on a short arm nailed to the trunk. To it was attached a telephone wire. The house loomed almost ahead.

Without breaking my stride I went into the air, jerked the telephone line free, drew in slack from both sides. Two hacks with my knife cut through the insulation; several quick twists with a rotary motion broke the wire. That, I hoped, ended the possibility of communication with the outside.

Instead it played hell with my plans. Someone was talking on the wire, for almost instantly I heard a curse in the house and a heavy voice braying:

"Somebody's cut the line! I was talkin' with Hank and I heard it go! It wasn't just a broken connection!"

At the same instant an oblong of light cut

through the trees as a door opened and two men stood there peering out.

Momentarily I had nothing to worry about. Coming from the light and staring into the darkness, they'd be blind for ten seconds or more.

So I dropped to my knee, edged closer, listening for all I was worth.

"I was talking to Doc," the heavy voice went on. "He said something about loosening the cap bandage on the guy's head at midnight. Then there was a scratching noise on the line, a big crash when it went dead. Something's screwy and I'm going to find out what it is."

The taller of the two men started to come out, but the other stopped him.

"If the line stays dead we can't talk to the Sturges woman at ten. You know the orders; what about them?"

"Nothing about it, George. Clay and Lora both said, 'If you don't hear from us every two hours on the hour, slip him the ether cone—and leave it on.' But that was supposing the line was okay and they could get us. Now we know that they can call their heads off without getting an answer—which means they'll come piling out here hell for leather. So Parsons gets no ether cone until one or the other gives the word."

I wanted to stand up and cheer. The time limit had been extended automatically, and instead of five or six minutes I now had possibly hours ahead in which to do what was to be done.

But then George objected. "Probably you're right, but I'm going up there and sit beside Parsons with my gun out until the Boss comes along with a better idea." Which, of course, put things right back on a fighting basis again. I'd had a hunch that I might steal in, make my way to Parsons; maybe sneak him out without attracting any attention.

The second man replied, "Okay; I'll scout around and see that everything's all right." With the words he produced a flashlight and started around the end of the house, which was a two-storied, clapboard affair a little longer than its width.

The man George went back inside, leaving the door open. After a few moments a light clicked on in the corner room at the

left and I could see a squatty shadow against the curtain.

That was okay by me. For the first time since I'd started on the case I had something more than a suspect to deal with. Better still, I had a choice of antagonists.

I chose the prowler with the flashlight. There was a big shrub at the corner of the house, thickly leaved out, higher than the crown of my head. In a second I was in its shelter, tight against the clapboards, my gun flat across my palm.

The flashlight showed first, wavered, came closer. It stopped just about the corner, flickered here and there about the yard, came back and cut a path toward the door.

I waited until the man carrying it was passing, before I lashed out and down with the barrel of the gun. But some extra sense warned him. He said "Hah!" plenty loud, and twisted aside. The gun took him on the collar bone and tore a yell of fright and anger from his lips.

I raised it again and brought it down on his forehead, giving me a batting average of .500. For this last one was a home run. It stretched him out on his back, limp as a dishrag. I jumped for the flash, thumbed the switch off, then dragged him back around the corner of the house.

ALREADY feet were clattering down the stairs. George was on his way in answer to the other's shout of distress. In a moment he was at the door, calling "Oh Pete!" softly.

I answered, "Yeah—everything's jake. I stumbled over a vine."

But I'd wasted my breath. George was naturally suspicious. The light went out and I heard the door-latch click as he charged out into the darkness and scuffed through the gravel in front of the step.

There wasn't anything the matter with his nerve. He knew something was wrong and without stopping to figure the odds against him, he came out to do whatever little chore might await him.

It followed that he wasn't anybody's cream puff. That he knew something about fighting in the open was proved a moment later when he called out:

"Pete—if you're okay put your flash on your face."

"Can't," I mumbled. "I tripped; it's broken."

A silenced gun coughed while I was speaking and I'll swear the bullet came within inches of my nose. There wasn't any percentage in that sort of thing, so I beat it around the house, hoping to come on him from the side.

But halfway around I changed my mind. A breeze whipped my left cheek suddenly, and when I moved aside to investigate I discovered an open window.

I was through like a flash, then out in a hallway and scouting for the stairs. There was a soft glow of light from the left, and in a moment I was mounting solid steps that didn't squeak. The light grew stronger as I neared the top, disclosing a transom over the door of the end room.

A tall, gray-haired man lay on a narrow bed inside the room, his feet and hands roped to the iron scroll work. Gray stubble covered his face. The deep-set eyes were half open, glassy, uncomprehending. I bent forward, thrust a lid back, felt only the slightest tremor after several seconds of exposure to the light.

He was breathing heavily and about his head was a tight cap bandage. At first I thought his coma was the result of injury. Then I noted the strange appearance of the pupils of his eyes and realized that he had been doped.

There wasn't any help in that quarter, nor would it be possible for me to take him from the house unaided while George and the man Pete, probably recovered by now, were prowling the dark with loaded guns.

But there was more to come. Suddenly bright lights flashed across the curtained window at my side and the dull roar of a heavy machine, rocketing along the rough country road, came to my ears. The newcomer was in a hurry, judging from the chatter of his engine—and it was a thousand to one shot he wasn't any friend of mine.

Then suddenly there sounded the scream of brakes, some loud talking, the crash of a gun twice—three times. Instantly a lighter engine flew into life and there was the sound of a car whizzing away.

That would be my taxicab and the cross-eyed driver. I was marooned there with an unconscious man and with the opposition gaining reinforcements. Not so good.

There still was one ace in my hand. I cut Parsons free, got him onto my shoulder and tiptoed out into the hall with him. I had a picture before me of what the opposition would do. They'd gather there under Parsons' window, riddle the place with slugs and then, when the time was ripe, they'd comb the house for their guest—*me*.

At first I thought of hiding in another room with Parsons, but suddenly my pen flashlight showed me a steep flight of stairs leading to the attic from the extreme end of the hallway. That was a bet, so far as I was concerned, for there lay the chance of a bit more of delay and something niftier in the line of final defense.

It was a stiff climb up the almost perpendicular stairs with Parsons' limp body; a tough job to maintain my balance, hold him with one hand and push back the sliding scuttle with the other. But I made it and nearly shouted with joy when I found the attic was piled high with old boards and small timbers.

I picked out a cosy spot back of the center of the heap, laid Parsons down as comfortably as I could, and then took stock of the place.

THE roof lifted to a peak in the center but the place was devoid of windows. It was ideal for my purposes. I'd closed the slide after me, and all I had to do was lie quiet and let the chaps down below do the worrying.

But was it? Just when I was counting on Parsons snoozing along peacefully, he flopped a hand down hard against the floor and groaned. It was an old he-groan that sounded like others to come.

So I did the only thing left to do. I turned the flash full in his eyes and pried a lid back roughly. The glare, coupled with the nerve shock, did what Nature might not have done for an hour or so more. It brought him back to realization that something was going on about him.

Suddenly he rolled his head, then opened both eyes and stared up at my face, outlined

too in the light from the flash. He still was dazed but you could see his mind was ticking, for when I said "Keep quiet," he closed his lips and raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

"I'm from Peter Burton," I whispered. "We're in the attic and those other birds are hunting us. You'll have to keep quiet. Understand?"

He whispered "Yes," and added, "Let me sit up."

I gave him a hand, got his back against the lumber pile, got down on my hunkers beside him.

"Maybe we'll get out, maybe not," I told him softly. "It doesn't look so good right now. How many of them are there?"

He was quiet so long I feared he'd passed out again, but presently he spoke.

"Five—Clayson, Lora Braeme, Pete Holder and George Sason, and a fifth man in town they call Perry. Then there's a doctor who's been taking care of me. I don't know his name."

"I do. It's Blassing," I said. "But tell me, did they get your drawings—the model?"

"No drawings," he said quickly. "And the model's hidden where they'll never find it."

I snapped out the single word "Where?" but he wasn't ready to swallow me—yet.

"How do I know you're Burton's man?" he whispered coldly. "Or that this isn't a trick to find out the one thing I won't tell?"

We had to drop the argument there, for the approaching car had stopped in front of the house and there were loud voices—plenty of them. There were nine shots left in my gun, and in my pocket was one spare clip of ten more, hardly enough for the first show of strength.

There wasn't any lath there in the attic, so by leaning my ear tight against the clapboards I was able to pick up some of what was being said.

"It's a detective—Wyant," a familiar voice said. "He tricked us; a cab was waiting for him in the lane."

It was Clayson's voice! Apparently the lucky stiff knew something about safes, too; knew how to work the discs and drop the center bar in the slots. I could see him and the big Amazon, Lora Braeme, smashing

against the safe door until they splintered the chair back and got loose, after which they'd come boiling out to do Parsons and me as little good as one could imagine.

The man George answered. "He got up close, cut the phone wire. Then he got behind Pete and crowned him. I slipped out and got one shot at him but I guess I missed. I haven't heard a peep out of him since."

Then Lora spoke up. She was a great little manager—an idea a minute, if you get what I mean. She said:

"Probably he's in the house with Parsons this minute."

After that feet raced up the stairs. Clayson howled some big threats when they found that Parsons and I both were missing.

"Scatter!" he ordered. "They can't have gone far; there hasn't been time. Kill that damn' detective if you can, but bring Parsons back alive. He's still too weak to do any fighting."

With that I leaned closer to Parsons. "Hear that, mister? Do you still think I'm in with 'em?"

He said "No" gustily, then: "If you get free and I don't, tell Burton the model is in the peak of my boat. They sank her in about twenty feet of water almost opposite Crag Point. They ran me down, wounded me when I wouldn't surrender."

"What does Clayson want with it?" was my next question.

"I don't know for sure, but I suspect a sale to a foreign power alliance. Back of that, of course, is his long hatred for Mr. Burton. Clayson offered me the world with a fence around it if I'd come over to his side."

WHILE we talked in whispers, the group downstairs was scattering for the search. Now Lora spoke again, raspingly.

"Try the house first; I've a hunch they're here somewhere, not outdoors. Remember, Parsons not only was ill from his wounds, but Blassing gave him a big hypo to keep him quiet."

Apparently they were standing in the doorway of the room where Parsons had been imprisoned, for their voices came up to me clearly. Maybe the woman's continued

interference was getting on Clayson's nerve, for he snarled in reply.

"If you want to search the house, nobody's holding you. I still think they're hiding outside."

Seemingly she took him at his word. Doors slammed and there was a great scurrying about for a few moments. Then she said from the foot of the attic stairs:

"They may be in the attic. Come on—let's look."

But Clayson snapped, "I'm going to look around outside." I could hear his feet clattering on the stairs a second later.

But Lora came ahead. There was a sudden gleam of light as she thrust the scuttle back and stood, half of her body within the attic, looking about. Pretty soon she came up the rest of the way and walked halfway back to the pile of boards behind which Parsons and I were crouching.

I heard her fumbling with her purse, had to duck my head like a flash when she scratched a match on the inside of the frame and held it high over her head.

After that she stood there for a moment looking about her, and I'll take my oath that I saw her sniff like a bloodhound.

But at last she turned and went back downstairs, leaving the sliding scuttle open. I drew a deep breath of relief. She'd had her look-see and now she'd stand out for her own eyesight as against any suspicion the others might have.

Oh yeah? Just when I'd come to that wise solution there were three quick reports from a gun, followed by the crashing of glass. A moment later she was bellowing at the top of her voice:

"Inside—all of you! They're in the attic, holed up behind some lumber. *Come and get them!*"

And did they come! From the sound it might have been an army that came trooping up the stairs. I helped Parsons over to the extreme corner, put him flat on the floor where he'd be safe from flying lead. Then I slipped back and stretched out flat on the floor—but *back of the scuttle opening*.

Brave? Not a bit of it. They were five or six to one; I was short of ammunition and whatever advantage I could take I was taking.

A storm of bullets that buzzed like giant bees in the stuffy attic preluded the rush up the steep stairs. There must have been twenty shots in that sudden surge of firing.

Then George's shoulders showed in the opening. He'd stooped, gathered himself into a ball, then he'd come over the top like a released spring. My bullet caught him on the wing, straightened him; dropped him back on the edge.

He hung there for a moment, groaning. I heard his fingernails scratch across the boarding as he clawed for a handhold. Suddenly he went limp and in his fall he cleared the stairs beneath him. Several bodies struck the floor at the same time, and for a moment there was a great scrambling about.

But they were determined to get us. In no time at all the crown of a black hat showed in the opening. However, it stopped there, was withdrawn a moment later. I knew it then for a ruse, an effort to locate me so they could fire through the ceiling.

Now I recalled thrusting something aside as I had lain down. I felt about me, found an empty stone jug with a sizable thumb-hole at the neck. I got it in position, raised it experimentally. It was heavy, practically unbreakable; an ugly weapon.

Pete was the next one to try it. He came up silently like a barefooted man. He looked around toward me, and the light from below showed blood on his face where my gun had broken the skin.

I waited until he was shoulder high within the attic before I brought the jug over in a regular Joe Tinker throw to first base. It caught him high on the back of his neck with a splintering sound that turned even me half sick for a moment.

Even before he started to fall his head lolled over on his left shoulder in a way that heads never were meant to go—and I knew that the heavy jug had broken his neck.

Chapter VIII

A HOT TIME

THAT was two down and either four or five to go. I counted Lora as a man, for I knew that I'd have to shoot at her the same as any of the others to protect Parsons.

Pete's tough luck quieted them for a few moments. I could hear them whispering. Then one pair of feet clattered down the stairs: a door slammed at the rear. That meant they were planning something rough, but I wasn't prepared for what it turned out to be.

I heard the messenger come back and drop a pail or tin can on the floor. I lay quiet, listening breathlessly for a tip-off, but it didn't come.

Then hell flew up past my face and dropped with a plop between the scuttle and the lumber pile where Parsons was hidden. It was blue hell with wavering yellow edges—a gasoline soaked wad of cloth that blazed instantly into a torch of death.

Fortunately it had fallen on two dust-encrusted planks that had toppled from the main pile. But even these started blazing as fluid soaked from the pad and caught fire. I drew my knees up, ready to scuttle over and smother it, when Clayson called from below:

"There it is, Wyant! Which'll it be: roast—or come down?"

I kept silent, let that one ride for awhile.

Clayson's answer was another blazing ball that fell a yard further away from the scuttle. The first one had the two planks blazing fiercely now; the second bade fair to turn the attic into an oven in jigtime. But I still had the advantage of no air currents; there still was plenty of time before I had to make a move.

They let several minutes pass in silence. Then I heard Clayson mumble, "Hell—they can't have gotten away." After that he cursed. "I know we'll get them."

To which Lora added contemptuously, "So, you've started knowing things again, Albert? You knew that Wyant was safe in the vault—and now look at us!"

But the talk sounded phoney somehow. In another minute I knew why, for there was a faint creak below me and I saw the faint movement of a dark shadow across the edge of the opening.

I stretched out, set the butt of my gun against the flooring and covered the entrance with a steady hand. This, I figured, would be the man Perry, the inside man from town. With him out of the way I'd have the fire,

Clayson, Lora and possibly one more with which to deal.

So I planned to kill—not injure. It wasn't any time for half measures.

At that he made it tough for me. First of all something black came up through the hole and opened, flap-wise, to make a screen about the scuttle. It was a hinged, steel cover, seemingly thick enough to turn slugs from any hand-gun.

Then in a moment it shifted so that it presented metal walls to every side of the attic except the side next to the clapboards. It was about three feet high and seemingly had been made to cover a tank or cistern.

After that it moved forward toward the lumber pile, a few inches at a time—but almost continuously. A few moments more and it would be goodbye Parsons and a nice, hot slug for Gid Wyant.

There was only one thing to do—go Injun in a big way and sneak up on him. Lord, how my joints creaked as I got to my toes and fingertips and started stalking that makeshift army tank! I had to make a half circle to keep out of range of the scuttle, yet I had to move fast enough, straight enough to get him before he got Parsons.

But luck was with me. The floor didn't creak and I didn't stumble over anything. So finally I was at my objective and lifting into a crouching half sprawl.

It took seconds to shift my weight until it suited me, with most of it on my left foot.

Then I pivoted, swung the right leg outward smartly and drove my toe against the shield with force enough to send it clear of the man crawling behind it.

His gun roared at the same instant. Probably it was a muscular reflex caused by surprise. But mine roared like an echo and my slug wrote a big, black "finis" on his book of life. His legs jerked just once before he called it a day and went on from there.

I didn't waste any time in mock sympathy. He'd come in there to kill or be killed, and the answer had been written. And there were two things that had to be done quickly.

First I snatched up his gun, pawed in his side pocket for spare clips. Then I drew the steel shield to me, kicked the blazing fire

balls onto its surface and moved the whole works over the spots where flames had attacked the surface of the flooring.

MY next move was to duck past the lumber pile and take a peek at Parsons. Excitement had done him good. He grinned when he saw me, and whispered, "Looks like you're holding them."

"Looks like we'll hold them," I corrected him. "Here's a gun for you in case anything happens to—"

Just then Clayson's voice boomed through the room. He was on the stairway calling "Perry, oh, Perry!" angrily.

I stood on the middle of the pile and looked down at him. He was worried, but the red-headed Lora was at his elbow and she was training a gun over his shoulder.

"Perry doesn't live here any more," I called out, adding a dirty chuckle for interest.

Clayson cursed bitterly. But Lora was more practical. She let drive with three slugs at a shadow in the attic without moving her gun from beside Clayson's ear.

It shocked him, tore at his already shaken nerves. Instead of jumping out of the way he twisted about and batted the gun out of her hand. The red-headed part of her disposition got the better of her and she hit him a back-handed wallop that sounded like a board hitting water.

Before he'd caught his balance, I was halfway down the stairs, covering them both with my gun—and Parsons was squatted on the top step showing them the hole in Perry's rod.

"Now we're right back where we were in front of the vault in your office," I told them softly. "You've had all of this hell-raising for nothing. It's my party again and—"

Crash! Wham! A door in the downstairs regions splintered and there was the sound of heavy feet running up the stairs. I had visions of reinforcements for the opposition, until I saw Lora's face. It was pasty white. For the first time she saw defeat coming and she didn't like it.

So instead of backing up to the attic again, I stood there holding them under my gun. It was a matter of seconds before a big, red-faced man carrying a cocked .45

came clattering along the hallway. Back of him came three others, all armed—and bringing up the rear was that blessed, cross-eyed taxi driver whom Clayson and Lora had run off.

"That's him," he shouted excitedly. "The country guy with the rod. I was waitin' fer him t' come back when th' broad an' two other ginks run me off like I tol' youse."

I flashed my private detective badge and told the red-faced man, "I want them for attempted murder and a heluva lot more."

He nodded, took Clayson's gun and handcuffed him to Lora.

"I'm sheriff of this county," he said. "What's been going on here?" He looked at the bodies of Pete and George which still lay where they had fallen. A glance at Clayson's gun showed that it hadn't been fired.

"There's another one in the attic," I said. "But he's pretty dead, too."

He glanced upward, caught a glimpse of Parsons sitting there with a gun in his hand, the tight bandage still about his skull.

"He is like hell," he grumbled. "Here, come on down, you."

It took considerable explaining to make him see what had been happening, and a lot of high frequency words to induce him to go back to town with Parsons and me, bringing Clayson and Lora along for a talk with the man I described as "my principal."

"Don't be like that," he grunted. "Who is this feller who's too big for a mere sheriff to know his name?"

I said "Peter Burton" softly. That proved to be the proper trump.

He jerked at Clayson's arm. "Outside," he snapped. "Get goin'. And if it wasn't for this guy you'd be on your way to a cell right now."

Chapter IX

A BULLET AND A WINK

THE cock-eyed taxi driver insisted on fulfillment of his contract of ten bucks for the ride back to town, so Parsons and I rode with him, and at the end of the journey, which was Burton's house, the bandit got his ten and forty more for his presence of mind in getting the sheriff.

I had Burton routed out and waiting for us in pajamas and a dressing gown when

the sheriff and one deputy drove up with Clayson and Lora.

Burton took both of Parsons' hands in his and said, "Hi-ya, Jim; so Wyant got you, eh?" After that he said "Howdy" to the sheriff whose name turned out to be Hix, but all Clayson and the woman got was a dyspeptic glare.

Burton took us into the library, motioned toward chairs, then said, "Now shoot."

But I shook my head. "I want Esther Malm; then the party'll be complete."

"I thought you might," Burton answered, and touched a bell. A big, English-looking servant responded, bowing when Burton said, "Bring the young lady, Higgs—and the woman who's with her."

Then he turned back to me: "She was leaving town with light baggage, so I got headquarters and had her brought out here with a police matron—pending instructions from you."

Clayson slid out to the edge of his chair at that, his face contorted with anger.

"You can't do that," he rasped. "Esther's not in this."

That set Lora off like a roman candle.

"So—it's like that, eh?" she snarled. "You're not content to ball everything up like you have, but you want to ease your baby-faced sweetie out of it, eh?"

Yeah, there it was, the old green-eyed monster. Which is a visitor any detective is glad to see pop up. I winked at Burton.

"I want a little quiet here for a few minutes," I said. "Suppose you provide a place where the deputy sheriff can keep Clayson while you and I get some things straightened out."

Burton nodded to the sheriff. "There's a billiard room at the back; you can take him there," he said peremptorily.

As Clayson went through the door with the deputy, Esther Malm had to step aside so he could pass. He tried to whisper something, but the deputy barked a warning and shoved him ahead roughly.

The Esther Malm who entered the library was everything the elevator boy had described, and positively nothing like the drab clerk in the Burton offices.

Mascara, deft touches of rouge and powder, an artful swirl to her bobbed hair

and something pretty classy in the way of a travelling dress made her seem a well poised and decidedly beautiful young woman of the world.

I flashed a quick glance at Lora. Her face had gone so white with anger that the rouge spots stood out on her cheeks like daubs of soot. Her green eyes literally flashed sparks and her generous sized mouth was twisted in an animal-like snarl.

She felt my eyes on her and whirled about like a cat with a mashed tail.

"You—Wyant," she snarled, "you offered one of us a break for turning state's evidence, didn't you? Well—I'm it. Let's go."

THE Malm girl took a quick step forward.

"No—me," she almost shouted. "I had to do—what I did."

But I'd come to respect Lora Braeme as an antagonist and now I chose her for an ally. It takes what the highbrows call intestinal fortitude to turn up a pal, but what it needed, Lora had. So I gave her the nod.

"Spill it," I said. "Starting with whoever's behind Clayson."

She pointed a rigid forefinger at Esther Malm.

"That rat," she said viciously. "She's the bait for an international power trust, but she's a lot more. She engineered the break between Burton and Clayson, saw to it that the other plotters had a chance to buy up Clayson's paper when he got spread out too thin. Then one fine day they offered him his choice between ditch digging, and a handful of big notes marked 'Paid,' plus a cut in the sale price of Parsons' invisible power."

Burton was getting ready to tell her he thought she was a cock-eyed liar, so I hurried to cut in with:

"Now tell us about you and Clayson."

That got me a dirty look but finally she said, "I've been Clayson's fool for ten years. He's always promised to marry me some time, but in the meantime I pulled his chestnuts out of the fire for him. I got wise to him two years ago, about the time Esther Malm came into the picture. I'm no fool. I watched them, waited until I found she'd definitely taken my place.

"After that it was a case of dog eat dog.

I played along with Clayson, apparently the eternal sap, but all of the time I was planning, scheming to get even. Perry, the last man you killed tonight, was my man in the play. He and I were going to double-cross Clayson and Esther and take the loot for ourselves. We were tired of being used like a ventriloquist's dummies."

She shrugged, smiled crookedly, wearily.

"And now we've lost too, Perry's dead and I'm on my way to prison, I suppose. You can promise me immunity all you want to, but this case will come under the Lindbergh law — and Uncle Sam will see to it that I get plenty."

With the words she dropped into a chair, swung about modestly and seemed to be arranging her garter. While she fumbled she continued talking.

That's how it happened that nobody was prepared for her next move. I saw her lean forward as though to straighten about in her chair. In fact I was getting ready to ask her another question, but the words died in my throat.

For suddenly she flashed erect. Her right hand lifted from the folds of her skirt and belched three slugs from a squat automatic full into Esther Malm's face from a distance of five feet.

The reports blended into each other like a drum-roll while three purple spots were blooming in her victim's face. The first was in the center of the forehead just above the level of the eyebrows. The second and third were an inch apart in the left cheek. All were turning into rivulets of red before Esther swayed and fell on her side—dead.

In a split second Lora had backed against the wall, her gun muzzle travelling in well modulated jerks to cover us all in turn.

"Hold it," she said coldly. "This is the way I've planned it for months, in case anything went wrong. I've fixed it so pretty Esther won't get away with anything; so Albert Clayson will have the load to carry all alone." She twisted her head about toward me: "Get it, Wyant?"

I told her, "I get it, but it looks to me like a damn' bad fumble. You're in over your neck now—and I can't help you."

She nodded thoughtfully. "No—you can't," she answered, "nor can you do a damn' thing about this."

She was right. I couldn't.

For before I could move a finger she reversed her gun, put the muzzle under her right ear—and pulled the trigger.

And just as she was doing it, that gosh-awful, cold-nerved woman *winked at me!* Winked like a chorus girl landing a Johnny!

In my long years as a dick I've seen a lot of hard cases take an exit riding a hot slug, but none of them ever got me like that one.

I caught her as she fell forward, carried her to a couch and spread a handkerchief over her face. There was a lump in my throat, the makings of a prayer in my heart.

Burton was sick, mentally and physically. Violent death right before his eyes was a new experience. He flared around at me like a mother-in-law.

"How much, Wyant?" he snarled. "Name your price and get out of here, you damn' bloody butcher. If you aren't the devil, you're the devil's brother! I'd give twenty thousand dollars if I never had seen your face."

"Give me twenty grand and I'll guarantee you'll never see it again," I snapped back at him. "I lived thirty-four happy years before I lamped your ugly pan."

Parsons didn't like the turn things had taken.

"See here, Peter," Parsons barked. "You're unfair as hell. Why, this man—"

I grinned at him. "Skip it, brother. My job's done. You're safe, and the model can be recovered or rebuilt. And as far as Burton's concerned he can go—"

But Burton didn't let me finish. He tore a check from his book, handed it to me.

"Twenty—and five extra," he said coldly. "That's five thousand apiece for your dead. Suit you?"

I blew him a kiss. "Okay, sweetheart. I had a nice time at your lovely party."

Then I went out into the night. And the police matron hissed at me like a cornered panther as I passed her.

Women are funny that way.

DEAD MAN OVERBOARD

Complete Novel by
WEED DICKINSON



Alive and a Millionaire One Moment—but a Dead Man Before He Struck the Water

Chapter I

DEAD MILLIONAIRE

IT was the second murder that intrigued Burt Calhoun. The first he did not know about for some time after it had occurred. Not, in fact, for several days.

He had not even heard about the first when he dove, literally, into the second. This

would have been amazing, considering the fact that Burt Calhoun was admittedly one of the two or three ranking detectives of the country.

But Burt Calhoun had been out of touch with everything, including newspapers, for three weeks. So now, as he lay at anchor in his little ketch *Querida* in Longport harbor, he had no knowledge that a murder had

already been committed, or that another one waited just a few cable lengths away. He was on his annual vacation and as usual he spent it in cruising, single-handed.

No other small yachts of the *Querida's* size lay in Longport harbor, but a few hundred yards away the graceful hull of a big three-master, her ports and deckhouses glowing with light, made a patch of life on the still water. Burt Calhoun recognized her as the bark *Valhalla*, owned by old Gordon Seaton, the millionaire soap manufacturer.

It was almost dinner time—just time for his usual swim. Changing into swimming trunks, he dived cleanly from the *Querida's* rail, and struck out in a racing crawl.

For perhaps fifty yards Burt Calhoun sprinted, then he abandoned the crawl for an easy trudgeon. As he approached the big bark he thought, "Might as well swim around and look her over. Probably the nearest I'll ever come to being aboard her."

He lazed along now without a sound, under the bowsprit where four headsails gleamed vaguely in their white covers. He trod water to look at her entrance lines and the fine flair. Then he turned on his back and fin-flipped silently down the port side, looking up at the sleek black hull and the glare of yellow lights.

He passed a group of the crew, lounging at the rail near the foremast, and two officers in uniform amidships. The sound of shouts and laughter came to him from the after-deck, over the strains of dance music. Evidently there was quite a party going on.

The shouting grew louder. Burt Calhoun twisted over and trod water so he could better observe what went on. There was hysterical laughter, and a girl's voice shouted, "Look out! Dilly can't swim!" A man's gruff voice called, "Look out, you fools!"

Three figures, two of them in bathing suits, were struggling on the rail, holding to the main shrouds. All three were laughing. Suddenly one of them tottered and pitched out. There were screams on deck and a resounding splash as the figure hit the water, all doubled up. With a vague impression of someone else diving off the yacht's rail, Burt Calhoun broke into a swift crawl. He was scarcely twenty yards away and reached the figure first.

Taking no chances Burt Calhoun grabbed the man from behind, locked one elbow under his chin and began towing him toward the gangway. He said, "Don't struggle! I've got you!" Before he reached the gangway the second swimmer pulled up from behind and said, "Lemme give you a hand. He'll be all right." Burt Calhoun said, "Let go! I've got him!" The other, hardly more than a boy, nodded. He slipped forward swiftly and was hanging to the gangway when the detective got his burden alongside.

PEOPLE were trying to get down the gangway, and being pushed back by a ship's officer. Two husky sailors in white stood at the foot. They reached down.

Burt Calhoun said, "Wait a minute! Take this kid out first."

"Hey, I'm all right!" the youth objected while the sailors hauled him up to the gangway platform.

Burt Calhoun held on to a rope with one hand. Then he swung the figure in his arms around till he could get his ear down to the man's chest. There was no heartbeat. Quickly he felt of the wrist, floating the body on its back. There was no pulse.

The sailors pulled the dead man up and carried him to the deck. Burt Calhoun followed. At the head of the gangway a girl rushed whitely to the form between the two foremast hands.

"Dilly! Dilly!" she sobbed. "Speak to me! You aren't hurt, are you? Dilly—tell me!"

Others clustered about, mostly young girls and men, many of them in bathing suits.

Burt Calhoun looked around. A man with gold stripes on his white sleeve stood near the deckhouse. He had narrow eyes and a thin nose with a mole on the left side of it. Burt Calhoun recognized him from his uniform as the first officer.

The sailors had been halted by those crowding around the limp form and had lowered it to the deck. Burt Calhoun motioned. The officer approached with a surprised expression.

Burt Calhoun said, "Get that man below!"

The officer studied him a moment and into his face came a tightened look, like a quince

in alcohol. His words were polite, but his manner was insolent.

"Are you of this party, sir? I have not seen you aboard before, and we've been cruising for a week."

Burt Calhoun said, "I don't care if you've been cruising since Magellan! Do what I tell you!"

"Is the owner aboard?"

At that moment a heavy man with jowls and a bald head came forward along the deck.

"I am the owner," he said with a bare glance at Burt Calhoun. Turning to the officer he commanded, "Rence, get the boy below and get a doctor."

"Yes, sir!" said Rence.

Burt Calhoun stepped across the deck swiftly as the heavy man turned back to him. He said, "Mr. Seaton, I want to talk with you!"

The soap manufacturer gazed at him out of intolerant eyes.

"This is a poor time for talking. I'm afraid I don't know you. How—"

"I swam over from the yacht *Querida*," Burt Calhoun cut in. "I picked up the body." He lowered his voice. "It is a *body*, Mr. Seaton! A doctor won't do you any good, though it's better to send for one, along with the coroner."

The pudgy features of the owner seemed to spread.

"A body?" he gasped. "D-d-dead?"

"Dead."

The heavy man made an effort to get hold of himself.

"How do *you* know?" he challenged. "Are you a doctor?"

Burt Calhoun sliced his words thinner as he shook his head.

"Nuh-uh! But I've seen too many dead men not to recognize one. I'm Calhoun, of the Calhoun International Detective Agency. Want to talk now?"

Gordon Seaton's jaw hung loosely. He turned and spoke to the first officer in a low tone. Then he grunted something that sounded like "Come'th me!" and went aft. Burt Calhoun followed.

Seaton led the way across the deck, down a companionway, through a passage, and into an elaborately furnished stateroom.

SEATON motioned him to a chair. He lowered himself to the end of the horse-hair couch and looked at his visitor.

"You sure he was—" the soap manufacturer's eyes shifted and he hesitated for the fraction of a second—"dead?"

Burt Calhoun nodded. "Who was he?"

"Dillworth. John Dillworth."

"The son of the chain store king? The boy who came into Bradford Dillworth's fifty million dollar estate a few months ago?"

"Yes."

"That's very interesting," Burt Calhoun said quietly. "I think I'd like to examine the body."

Gordon Seaton hesitated. "How do I know you're who you say you are?" he inquired.

Burt Calhoun said, "You don't. But you can send a boat over to my ketch to prove it. There are plenty of credentials in the desk drawer in my cabin."

Again the eyes of the soap manufacturer wavered slightly.

"Good idea," he said. "I'll order a boat. You better go with them."

The detective turned, went through the passageway, up the elaborate companion and out on deck. He had not stood at the head of the gangway two minutes before a fast speedboat swirled around the *Valhalla's* stern from her port boat-pole and shot up to the platform. Two of the bark's crew were aboard.

Burt Calhoun ran briskly down the gangway and stepped aboard, almost before the launch had come to a stop.

"Shoot!" he said, pointing. "The ketch *Querida*—right over there."

The sailor at the wheel looked up with surprise. "We bane told to wait. The cap'n—"

At that moment the figure of First Officer Rence appeared on deck.

"Take your hands off my crew!" he said. "I told the gig to wait. I'm going with you."

Burt Calhoun grinned. "An unexpected honor! But make it fast if you're going, or I'll have to swim over!"

As the launch shot toward the *Querida* the detective turned to Rence. His mouth was sardonic.

"To what do I owe this pleasure? Isn't your crew capable of handling a boat without an officer aboard?"

Rance's narrow eyes stared at him without expression as the launch made fast to the *Querida's* starboard quarter where her boarding ladder hung. He avoided a direct answer.

"Let's see these credentials!" he suggested.

Burt Calhoun smiled cordially.

"Certainly. Come down in my cabin." He waved his hand at the *Querida*. "She's hardly as elaborate as the *Valhalla* below decks," he apologized, "but she's all I need."

With a grunt, Rence followed him aboard and down into the tiny cabin.

As he stepped aboard, Rence's narrow eyes went over the ketch with a quick, appraising glance which took in the sails, in close, tight rolls; the jib sheets neatly coiled in circular rope mats on her after deck; the taut halyards with their coils looped over small belaying pins at the foot of the main and mizzen; the main sheet, trimmed and cleated till the blocks almost met below the boom. Burt Calhoun never left his ship in anything but perfect shape. Rence grunted and followed his host below into the yacht's tiny main cabin.

BURT CALHOUN switched on the cabin lights, said, "Have a seat" and began rummaging through the little desk alongside the door into the galley. Rence lowered himself cautiously to the port tansom bunk, sitting on its very edge, his feet spread wide on the floor. In a moment the *Querida's* owner found what he wanted.

"Here they are," he said, extending the papers to the First Officer. "Look them over, while I slip into some clothes." He turned and went forward into a small passageway stateroom.

Rence spoke from the main cabin.

"You are a detective, after all!" he said. The man's voice was curiously different from before—not less sullen, but it seemed to have in it a note of anxiety.

Burt Calhoun grinned and slid into a shirt and shorts. He said, "You flatter me!" and sat down on the edge of the bunk. As he glanced up he saw Rence slipping up the

companionway. He peered into the main cabin. His identification papers were nowhere to be seen. Just then the roar of the speedboat's engine burst out above him.

Burt Calhoun leapt up the companionway. He hit the deck with a gun in his hand. The *Valhalla's* launch was surging off at top speed, already ten yards from the *Querida's* side. Rence could not be seen, but the man at the wheel was plainly visible.

"Wait a minute!" the detective ordered. "I'm going with that boat!"

The men on the launch paid no heed. It was gathering headway fast.

The sharp sound of a gun cracked above the *Querida's* rail, and there was a yell from the man at the wheel as he clutched his shoulder.

Burt Calhoun said sharply, "Get back here, quick! The next time I won't aim just to wing you, Buddy!"

The launch slowed, reversed and backed to the *Querida's* side. First Officer Rence appeared from inside the canvas-covered spray-hood. The sailor at the wheel still clutched his shoulder, and blood soaked out, spreading a slow stain down his white jumper sleeve.

Rence said, "What the hell you doing, shooting my crew? I was just taking these credentials to Mr. Seaton."

Burt Calhoun's voice was as cold as an Arctic gale.

"I'll take them to Mr. Seaton myself, Rence. They don't go anywhere without me. You ought to know that as well as I do. Get down in the cabin till I put on the rest of my clothes!"

Muttering, Rence reached out and handed him the documents. He turned and talked with the two sailors in low tones.

"Come on!" said the detective. "I want you where I can see you from now on!"

Burt Calhoun drove the First Officer before him down the companionway and stepped past him into the stateroom. He laid the gun on the edge of his bunk and went on with his dressing. He slung a shoulder holster under his left armpit and put on his coat. From the shelf that ran along the skin of the boat under the deck he took a small automatic and put it in his right-hand pocket. Rence got up.

Burt Calhoun's manner was once more suave and slightly ironic.

"Come on, Runaway!" he said. "We'll shove off. And don't try playing hookey again!"

Rence went up the steep steps of the companion with the *Querida's* owner close at his heels. Burt Calhoun was about to follow the first officer into the cockpit when the *Querida* seemed suddenly to drop from beneath his feet. He had a flash of violent pain in the top of his head, and everything went black.

Chapter II

DEATH WITHOUT A TRACE

WHEN he came to he could not remember where he was. He was lying on his stomach over the edge of a well, apparently—head down, pitching into the blackness. He groped with his hands and touched wood—matched wood calked with tar. Then it came to him. That smash on the head. He was lying over the top step of his own companionway, head down into the *Querida's* deep cockpit.

He dragged himself erect and looked about. The *Valhalla's* launch was gone, of course! But the *Valhalla* herself still blazed with light at her mooring.

Burt Calhoun felt of his head. It ached abominably and pounded like an engine with a cracked piston. There was a bump the size of an egg on his skull, and minor abrasions. Carefully he wiped the blood from his inquiring hand on a clean handkerchief, felt for his two guns, recovered his battered felt hat and smoothed it. That hat had helped a lot, he reflected. Then he ran forward along the deck to the boat boom, swung the dinghy in and dropped quickly overside. With short, powerful strokes that sent the little eight-foot boat leaping ahead he rowed swiftly over to the *Valhalla*.

Purposely he circled and approached from the stern. There was activity on the *Valhalla's* deck, but the night was dark and he made the companionway without being seen. He tied his boat and slipped up on deck. Several sailors and several of the guests were about, but he apparently was mistaken for one of the latter. He could see the figure of Rence aft at the wheel, but he made for

the mid-cabin companionway, went down and turned aft in the direction of the owner's stateroom. Gordon Seaton was not there.

He found the soap manufacturer alone in the main cabin. Seaton stared.

"Well!" he growled. "I thought we'd got rid of you!"

Burt Calhoun did not smile. He said, "Apparently you did—but you're a long way from being rid of me, though your crew did their best. Were those *your* orders?"

Seaton scowled. "I don't know what you're talking about!" he said. "But I'll have you thrown off my ship, you faker! Pretending to be a detective! Why, I could have you arrested for this! You have no credentials!"

Burt Calhoun said, "Do these look like credentials?" He put them in the owner's hand.

The soap manufacturer looked at them blankly for a moment.

"Why!" he gasped. "You *are* Calhoun! Rence said there were no papers aboard your ship, so he returned without you!"

The detective's face relaxed a bit, as if he were anticipating something pleasant.

"I'll tend to Rence later," he said. "Right now I want to examine that dead boy's body thoroughly. Then I'll talk with *you*!"

Seaton hesitated, then nodded. "All right," he said. "The boy's in his own stateroom—second one to port, going forward. I'll wait here."

In the stateroom Seaton had indicated Burt Calhoun made a painstaking examination, but he could find no indication of the cause of death.

There was not a mark on the body. There was no trace of poisoning around the mouth or lips; no evidence that he had swallowed his tongue and choked to death from some unusual cause. But only an autopsy could determine with finality the manner of his death. He *might* have died from heart failure. But as Calhoun remembered the laughing face of the youth as the three struggled on the yacht's rail, he could not consider that solution seriously.

He went over the stateroom and its contents. Several pipes, a heavy gold cigarette case with the initials JLD wrought upon its face in baguette diamonds, a platinum

wrist watch, the pictures of two very beautiful girls in silver frames on the dresser, expensive clothes in the locker at the head of the bed, an expensive walrus bag in one corner. The bag was locked.

Burt Calhoun took a very thin, flexible steel nail-file from his pocket and went to work on the lock. It yielded in a few minutes to his expert manipulation.

IN the bag was a litter of ties, shirts, socks, handkerchiefs and a few papers. He ran through these hurriedly. Most of them he tossed back. One, a letter on the stationery of the Seaton Soap Company, he perused carefully. It was written in long-hand and read:

My dear John:

Your father was one of my closest friends, and he would have trusted me. I hope you will do the same.

Please don't make snap judgments about a matter which is solely upon my conscience, and which would result in criminal prosecution for me at a time when I can least afford it because of conditions, and you can least afford it because money must be and will be returned to you.

I can make complete restitution within a very short time. I can, in fact, pay you twenty-five thousand, which will be one quarter of the amount I borrowed while acting as executor of your late father's estate, within two weeks. I can explain everything, and I urge you to take the matter up with me in person before you decide on any course of action.

The letter had no closing line other than the scrawled signature "Gordon Seaton."

Burt Calhoun began whistling "Don't Blame Me!" folded the letter carefully and put it in his pocket. Then he locked the bag and returned to the main saloon where Gordon Seaton waited nervously.

"Well?" the owner asked.

Burt Calhoun's mouth drew down wryly at one corner, and the rest of his smile was thin as a well-worn dime.

"Seaton," he said, "suppose you tell me what you know about this murder!"

The soap manufacturer's face went putty-color and his putty-like features worked.

"M-m-murder?" he stammered.

"That's my guess!"

Seaton's features reassembled themselves.

"A guess, huh!" he stormed. But somehow the storm lacked convincing fury. "That's just what I thought! Why—it might have been heart failure! Anything!"

Again Burt Calhoun's smile was tight. "Heart failure in healthy, athletic kids of that age isn't very common. Did you ever hear that young Dillworth's heart was weak? I recall he was quite a football star in Harvard, wasn't he?"

Seaton hesitated. "No," he said. "As far as I know he was in superb health, I must admit. But that proves nothing. He might have hit his head on a submerged rock, or something. I feel sure it was an accident."

Burt Calhoun said, "And I suppose the attack on me aboard my own ship was an accident? By your crew, remember! Was it by your order, Seaton, or not?"

The soap manufacturer shook his head.

"I knew absolutely nothing about it. Rence told me nothing, save that you produced no credentials."

Burt Calhoun nodded. "Send for the Captain," he ordered.

"I'll send for Mr. Rence immediately," Seaton agreed.

The detective held up his hand. He said, "I specified the Captain, *not* the Chief Officer!"

"Rence is the captain, in reality," Seaton explained. "My regular captain, Murchison, was taken ill very suddenly in New London and hasn't been aboard since. Rence is in full command."

"What do you know about him?"

"Not much, except that he's a competent master. He didn't always get along with Murchison, I believe, but he's a good sailor. Been with me for two years. He was captain of the *Islander* before that. She was poor Dillworth's yacht."

"Do you know how he happened to leave Dillworth's employ?" Burt Calhoun's voice had the "not-that-it-matters" quality which often distinguished it.

"I think there was some kind of trouble.

A disagreement of some sort. I was in Europe at the time. I believe young Dillworth fired Rence, but I've always found him satisfactory."

Burt Calhoun said dryly, "I can imagine so! Now—"

He stopped suddenly. There was the rattle and clanking of heavy chains through the forward bitts, clearly heard even in the bowels of the big yacht.

BURT CALHOUN looked at Seaton questioningly.

"Weighing anchor? I sort of expected that—after *this!*" He rubbed his head gently. "How about that doctor you sent for?"

The soap manufacturer coughed. "I changed my mind," he said. "The boy may be in a state of coma—you know, arrested animation. If he isn't dead—and I have nobody's word on that but yours!—we ought to get him at once where he can have the best possible medical attention. Longport can't provide proper facilities. In two hours run we can make Fairhaven. They have a good hospital there. We ought to go there."

Again the detective's smile was tight and slightly out of alignment.

"Any time you speak, Seaton," he said, "you ought to consult counsel. What you *ought* to do is stay right here—and that's what you're *going* to do! How will it look spread all over the police blotter if you run away from the proper authorities with a dead man aboard?"

Seaton shivered slightly. "No! No!" he said. "We can't have that! Think of the scandal! My daughter is aboard, and all her guests."

Burt Calhoun nodded. "Just what I thought. Tell your captain to drop that hook again, and we'll all have a pleasant little talk."

The *Valhalla's* owner pressed a button and a steward appeared.

"Yes, sir?"

"Tell Captain Rence not to weigh anchor. We'll stay here for tonight."

"Yes, sir."

The steward had hardly gone before Seaton turned to his visitor.

"Look here, Calhoun. I'd like you to handle this case yourself. I know your repu-

tion, of course, and if you really believe John Dillworth was murdered I'd like the murderer run to earth!"

"Thanks!" Burt Calhoun said dryly. "I wasn't job hunting, you know. And it might not be—er, entirely pleasant if I took the case. Right now I want to ask a lot of people questions, but first let me get a few facts straight about this cruise. Is it your daughter's cruise? It's her party, I mean?"

"Yes. I didn't start out with them. I joined them in Gloucester a few days ago."

"To see anybody in particular?"

Seaton stared. "No. Why did you say that?"

Burt Calhoun smiled. "Nothing important at the moment. Now your daughter's name, as I remember the society columns, is Alice?"

"Yes."

"How many guests has she aboard?"

"Twelve, I think. Twelve or thirteen."

The steward appeared again in the doorway with two men behind him.

"Dr. Rose and the coroner to see you, sir."

Dr. Rose was a nondescript little mouse of a man with a moustache and the old style physician's Van Dyke. The coroner, who introduced himself as Burton Bones, was short and fat with the pink face of a baby.

When they were ready to leave, after certifying to young Dillworth's death "from causes unknown," Gordon Seaton addressed the coroner.

"We want an immediate autopsy," he said looking at Burt Calhoun significantly. "I've got to get back to New York, and I can't afford to be held up here any longer than necessary to straighten this thing out. Mr. Calhoun thinks there is reason to fear foul play. Will you kindly see that the autopsy is expedited, and I will make suitable payment."

The coroner was obsequious.

"Sure, Mr. Seaton!" he purred. "I'll do all I kin to hurry things 'long. I think we kin have th' autopsy performed right quick—soon as we git the body up to Longport. You ken't never say Burton Bones didn't try to help a ge'man like you!"

"Good!" said the soap manufacturer. "And now I suppose you'll want to question

the guests, Mr. Calhoun? That is, if you'll do the investigating for me?"

"I want to question them anyway!" Burt Calhoun said. "But I'll take the job. Provided"—he smiled upon Seaton—"I'm to have a free hand, even with you!"

"By all means! By all means!" the owner agreed heartily. He seemed to have entirely recovered from his previous nervousness. He beamed upon the detective. "The ship, and everybody on it, is at your disposal."

Chapter III

UNWELCOME GUESTS

GEORGE BURNSIDE and Horton Weeks, the two young men who had been struggling and fooling around with John Dillworth on the rail, told what appeared to be straightforward stories. The three had been rough-housing on the deck just before the tragedy. Burnside and Weeks had hoisted Dillworth to the rail as a joke, pretending they were going to push him overboard.

"Wasn't that a rather dangerous sort of joke, when the man couldn't swim?" asked Burt Calhoun.

"Couldn't swim?" gasped Burnside. "Then neither can Johnny Weissmuller! Why, Dilly was a champion!"

"He could outswim any of us at any distance," Weeks broke in. "Why do you say that, Mr. Calhoun?"

"I distinctly heard a girl's voice cry out, 'Look out, Dilly can't swim!' just before he fell over," the detective explained.

"That must have been Marj—she's always clowning!" Burnside said.

"I see," Burt Calhoun said. "Go on!"

Weeks took up the story. "There really isn't anything more to tell, Mr. Calhoun. We were just fooling around, as we've told you, and suddenly Dilly went limp. He sort of gasped and fell off. I thought he was fooling, but he hit the water so funny I dove off after him. Then you towed him to the gangway. That's all there is."

"He hadn't complained of feeling ill at any time before this?"

"No sir, not that I heard of," Weeks answered. Burnside also shook his head.

"And you can think of nothing else—no

other incident—that might throw light on his death?"

"He got stung by a bee," Burnside admitted somewhat sheepishly.

Gordon Seaton grunted. "A bee! That couldn't have had anything to do with it!"

Burt Calhoun said, "Um! When was this?"

"Just before we started fooling around. Three or four minutes, maybe. I couldn't be sure. I heard him say, 'For croonin' low, a bee just stung me!' and he was feeling the back of his neck. But I couldn't see any mark and I told him he was nuts. That's what started the rough-house."

"And who was on deck at the time?"

"We were all there, I guess. Anyway, quite a gang of us."

Burt Calhoun pinched his chin thoughtfully with the thumb and two fingers of his right hand. He said, "Would you mind showing me just where this occurred? We can all go on deck and you act it out."

Gordon Seaton smiled indulgently. "Aren't we getting—er—a little entomological for such an investigation?" He shrugged as Burt Calhoun looked at him sharply. "Oh, go right ahead, if you consider it important!"

THE incident of the bee had occurred near the chartroom on the afterdeck. Dillworth, it appeared, had been standing with his back to the wall of the chartroom. Burnside had been nearest to Dillworth, he said—perhaps ten feet away, by the rail. He had turned to see Dillworth rubbing the back of his neck, and had gone over to investigate. He insisted stoutly there was no sign of a sting on Dillworth's neck.

Burt Calhoun noted that the wall of the charthouse had a porthole immediately behind the spot where Dillworth was standing, according to Burnside's story. He turned to the *Valhalla's* owner.

"Mr. Seaton, will you be good enough to call Captain Rence now?"

The First Officer approached with obvious reluctance. "You wanted to see me, Mr. Seaton?"

Seaton waved his hand. "No. Mr. Calhoun did. He is in charge of the investigation."

"Very good, sir."

The narrow eyes and thin nose with the

mole on the left side turned to the detective. The eyes flickered. The voice had a shade too apologetic a tone. "How can I be of assistance to Mr. Calhoun?"

Burt Calhoun said, "Not with a club! And kindly don't let any of your crew get behind me!"

The First Officer flushed. "I wish to assure you, sir, that I had nothing to do with that unfortunate incident. I left with the launch, yes, but it was the sailor you shot who hit you when you came up from the cabin. I knew nothing of the plan. He is a Lascar, and very vindictive, sir."

Burt Calhoun passed the tips of his fingers lightly across his lips, as if to erase a smile. He said, "Never mind that now. You and your employer had plenty of time to get your stories fixed up before I rowed over here. We won't bother about that yet. Just answer a few questions. First, who was in the chartroom before young Dillworth died? I mean, immediately before."

The First Officer straightened his collar. He seemed choking. "Farnsworth Dutton, sir, for one. And a sailor named Johnson, and myself."

Burt Calhoun paused like a man who pauses before a well-indexed filing cabinet to pick out the exact record he wants with the least searching.

"Farnsworth Dutton, the scientist? The man who took over the American Chemical and Biological Research Institute?"

"Yes, sir."

Gordon Seaton said hurriedly, "I hadn't had time to tell you, Calhoun, that Dr. Dutton was aboard. He's my guest—came on with me at Gloucester. Everything's been so upset."

Burt Calhoun said, "Perhaps we had better have Dr. Dutton here. Where is he?"

"Probably in his stateroom. I'll send for him."

Burt Calhoun nodded. "And your daughter, please." He turned back to the yacht's skipper. "Tell me the rest," he said.

Rence's narrow eyes seemed to grow more narrow. The nose with the mole worked like that of a rabbit sensing lettuce.

"It's very simple, sir. I was in the chartroom checking a bearing. Johnson was there cleaning up and putting back used charts.

I had just finished my task. I went to my cabin forward. I had started back when I saw the three figures on the rail. I thought nothing of it at the time. I had my back to the group when I heard shouts and turned in time to see Mr. Dillworth fall. That is all I know."

"And you say Dr. Dutton was in the chartroom, too? How did that happen?"

Rence started to speak, but Gordon Seaton answered for him.

"Quite natural, Calhoun. Dr. Dutton is interested in navigation. He often checked positions and worked over maps. A marvelous amateur navigator, isn't he, Rence?"

The narrow eyes turned obliquely. "Yes, sir, quite."

BURT CALHOUN frowned. He could have qualified, himself, for such praise. He turned back to Rence. "But you were at anchor," he objected. "Why navigation at a time like that?"

"Dr. Dutton was working on a theory he had of determining latitude by lunar time," the First Officer explained. His thin smile said very definitely what he thought of trying to determine latitude by lunar time.

Burt Calhoun shot a question suddenly.

"And there was no bad blood between young Dillworth and yourself?"

"No bad blood, sir!" Rence insisted hurriedly.

"But he fired you from command of the *Islander*, didn't he? What for?"

"Just a slight disagreement, sir."

"Over the handling of the ship?"

"No, sir—over a girl."

Burt Calhoun looked surprised. "Over a girl? I don't quite understand."

"Well, you see, sir, he asked me my opinion of a certain young lady, and I was foolish enough to give him an honest answer. That made him angry. You see, Mr. Dillworth was engaged to her at the time. She was Miss Toby Van S. Roberts."

Burt Calhoun grinned. "I remember that case," he said. "Lovely smear in the papers. She wouldn't give him back a bracelet he'd given her after they broke the engagement—wasn't that it? Both sides issued very caustic statements to the press."

"Yes." Rence lowered his voice. "If

you'll step this way, sir." He led his interrogator up the deck. "And Miss Roberts is aboard *now*. They had a terrible row over something off the Maine coast, she and young Mr. Dillworth, sir. Miss Roberts wanted to be put ashore. But we couldn't put in along there in that weather. She finally got so hysterical I had to give her a hypo from the medicine chest to quiet her."

Burt Calhoun pursed his lips. "Does Seaton know about the row, Rence?"

"I don't know, sir. I haven't told him, naturally."

Burt Calhoun grinned, but there was no mirth in it. "You keep secrets well, don't you, Rence?"

"Yes, sir." The First Officer hurried on. "Miss Roberts had been keeping pretty much to her stateroom, but she was on deck tonight when it happened. Standing right over there near the chartroom deadlight."

Burt Calhoun said, "Very peculiar. Do you know *why* Miss Roberts is aboard with Dillworth also aboard? Particularly since his current fiancée, as I recall, was the young Spiers heiress? She aboard too?"

The First Officer shook his head till the mole on his nose seemed to make a brown scar in his face.

"No, Miss Spiers is not aboard, sir. But if you want my opinion, Miss Alice Seaton had her cap set for Dillworth herself, and she invited Miss Roberts along to use her as a stalking horse. She knew, I think, that Miss Roberts couldn't hold Dillworth. Miss Roberts was too jealous—too hot tempered. But Miss Alice thought if the Roberts girl could get him away from Miss Spiers, she herself could take him away from Miss Roberts."

Burt Calhoun nodded. "Very intelligent observation, Rence. I'll question you later if I need you. Let me talk with the sailor, Johnson."

The First Officer said, "I'm afraid that will yield nothing, sir. Johnson's head is like wood."

Burt Calhoun found that in this the First Officer was right. Johnson, obviously, could know nothing about a murder or anything else save shining brass and making sail.

The detective returned to the afterdeck,

where Gordon Seaton moved nervously from the rail to the table, to his big deck chair and back to the rail again. His daughter, a small blonde with a skin like country cream, leaned back in another chair. She had been crying, but she seemed perfectly in control of herself. She exhibited none of the jumpiness of her father.

Nearby was seated a tall man in white flannels and a blue sport shirt. There was no gray in his hair, but one streak of pure white straight down the middle of his dark head looked like the center line on a black asphalt road. He wore a wide ribbon on eye-glasses through which he peered with the mild curiosity of one who has spent many hours over a microscope, examining strange forms of life.

Burt Calhoun had never met the man, but he knew him well by reputation. It was Dr. Farnsworth Dutton who had organized and directed repeated explorations into the far corners of the globe, to study flora and fauna of little-known lands, and to aid in the continual battle against disease which was one of his many activities.

Chapter IV

THE FINGER OF SUSPICION

DR. DUTTON corroborated the story of the First Officer in that he was in the chartroom just prior to the tragedy, but he insisted he had left the deck to go to his stateroom a few moments before young Dillworth's fatal plunge. Being immersed in some calculations he had not seen the body, nor known of the death until the coroner had come and gone.

Burt Calhoun's smile was cordial. "I'm sorry of course, Dr. Dutton, to question a man of your standing in the world of science. But at a time like this—" he extended his hands in a deprecatory gesture. "You are obviously a man of great concentration to have failed to hear the excitement aboard."

"I have learned concentration through long years of research," Dr. Dutton explained quietly. "If I am interested in a problem I could easily be oblivious to a hurricane. In fact—" he smiled—"I frequently have been."

Burt Calhoun bowed. "I do not doubt it,

Doctor. Now tell me—just what were the boys doing when you retired to your cabin?”

Again Dr. Dutton's eyes peered with mild curiosity at his questioner. He seemed slightly puzzled.

“I really am not sure, Mr. Calhoun. I was so busy thinking I did not notice.”

Burt Calhoun reached for a cigarette. He said, “I understand from Captain Rence that you are interested in the determination of latitude by lunar time. Was that what you were working on?”

“Yes.”

“I'd be glad to have you explain it to me—that is, if it's not too much trouble.”

The doctor smiled. “I'm afraid, Mr. Calhoun, that it would be a trifle intricate for the—er—layman.”

“I don't doubt that,” Burt Calhoun said. “But I have heard of the theory. I know a little something about navigation myself—such simple things as dead reckoning, triangulation and all that. I can even repeat for you the formula for finding latitude by what is sometimes known as the 89' 48" Method. Of course, I have only the haziest of ideas on the lunar time theory. That is why I would appreciate hearing an authority on the subject.”

The eyes of Farnsworth Dutton brightened. Here was a kindred soul! Here was someone who might understand!

“It's something like this,” he said, and went off into a series of technical terms which included some Burt Calhoun knew and many that he had never heard of. The scientist spoke with enthusiasm for a good ten minutes before Burt Calhoun stopped him.

“I'm afraid, Doctor,” he said smiling, “that you were right. I thought I might be able to wade out a way with you, but you're over my head already! I'd still like to have you explain, even if I don't get it all, but I've got other people to question. Perhaps, some other time, if you'd bother with me—”

“I'd be delighted, Mr. Calhoun!” Dr. Dutton said.

Burt Calhoun said, “Now just one more question, Doctor, and I won't trouble you further. Where was young Dillworth when you last saw him?”

“Just outside the chartroom, near the port.”

Burt Calhoun nodded. “Thank you, Doctor. And let's meet again—in lunar time!”

QUESTIONED privately, Alice Seaton admitted with a simple dignity that she was in love with Dillworth. But she would not admit outright that she had invited Toby Roberts aboard merely to play her off against Miss Spiers.

“But,” Burt Calhoun asked softly, “if Toby Roberts *did* get him back from the other girl, you knew she wouldn't hold him, didn't you?”

“I thought that,” Alice admitted.

“And your father would have been very pleased to see you marry young Dillworth, I assume.”

“Yes, I guess so. I'm so tired and heart-sick. Can't I go to my room now?”

Burt Calhoun bowed. “Shortly. Just one or two more questions, Miss Seaton, please. In your opinion is Miss Roberts a girl who could commit a crime of violence in the passion of the moment? In, say, a jealous desperation born of what she assumed was a final quarrel with a man she loved?”

Alice Seaton passed a hand over her hair and pulled back two curly yellow locks. Her blue eyes met those of the detective with frank appeal.

“I—don't—know,” she said slowly. “It's a terrible thing to think of anyone—but she did have an awful jealous streak.”

“And isn't it true that she and young Dillworth quarreled repeatedly on this cruise—had quarreled particularly bitterly in fact, only this afternoon?”

“Yes.”

Burt Calhoun considered the deck awning above them in silence. Alice Seaton asked in a tired voice: “But how—even if Toby—if *any* woman would have done such a horrible thing—how could she accomplish it? How was it done?”

Burt Calhoun smiled. “That, Miss Seaton, is one of the things we have to find out. Could you give me a complete list of your guests, and a brief description of the background of each?”

She nodded and began to comply with his request, checking off on her fingers as she

proceeded. Most of them were names that often appeared in the society columns and rotogravures—names known to far less informed persons than Burt Calhoun. He listened attentively, stopping her occasionally to ask about the connections or financial status of someone. All were scions of social registerite families, though none had in his own exclusive right access to so many millions as John Dillworth, the detective noted.

She stopped at last. Burt Calhoun said, "And is that all, Miss Seaton?"

"No!" she said suddenly. "There's George Sessions. I know him so slightly I almost forgot—and he's the kind of a man it is very easy to forget."

The detective smiled. "A very valuable quality sometimes," he remarked. "Tell me more about him."

"As I said, I don't know very much," the girl replied. "I've met him once or twice before. He comes of a good family, I believe, but they lost everything in the crash. His father killed himself in 1929, and his mother died the next year. George was left absolutely broke. Nobody seems to know how he lives now, except betting on the races and cards. George is colorless, always on the make for any new girl, and I thoroughly dislike him."

Burt Calhoun rubbed his face. "You seem to have collected quite a few people you would not normally ask on a pleasure jaunt," he remarked. "Why did you invite George Sessions?"

"I didn't," Miss Seaton explained. "He was invited for me—by Sylvia Turnquist. She brought him along without permission, presuming on our old friendship, and rather than have a scene about it, I had to include him. What she sees in that sap I simply don't gather!"

Burt Calhoun was silent for a moment. His photographic mind was flashing back to a scene a year ago—more than a year—when he had dined privately with Deputy Inspector O'Malley.

HE and O'Malley had been close friends for years, and the Inspector had more than once shown proof of that friendship. Indeed, it gave Burt Calhoun the virtual run of Centre Street—something not accorded to

any other operative, the rest of whom came under the traditional enmity between the police and "private dicks."

Burt reconstructed now with faithful detail the talk at that dinner. O'Malley had related how there had been a hop-head questioned in the famous Fulton kidnaping, which was then rocking New York. Caged and deprived of dope, he had squealed, naming the Vincente "Snatch" Tullio gang, and mentioning a man known to him only as "George"—a "social guy," the snow-bird thought. Next day the hop-head had died, perhaps as the result of a too sudden cessation of dope.

The Snatch Tullio gang, cornered by police in a basement in the Bronx, had fought it out in a sensational battle. Three of the gang had died fighting, but Snatch Tullio himself had given his underlings the works, as usual, by escaping through a subway grating in the rear of the building and dropping twenty feet to the tracks, while his men stayed to take the ultimate rap of machine-gun lead. He had not been heard of since.

Nor had the police ever been able to find "George, the social guy," though scores of indignant Georges who were "social guys" had been adroitly questioned.

It was a long chance, a spectacularly long chance, Burt Calhoun admitted to himself, that George Sessions was the same "social George" of the Fulton case. But Burt Calhoun always played long chances, along with the favorites.

What *was* the name of that hop-head who had died? Oh, yes, "Snowey" Mullens.

He was recalled to his present position on the *Valhalla* by the voice of Alice Seaton. "May I go now, Mr. Calhoun? I'm simply dead, really!"

Burt Calhoun smiled apologetically. "Yes, in just a minute. You say this George Sessions doesn't do anything but gamble?"

"So far as I know."

"But he always has money?"

"Yes."

"Was he a friend of Dillworth's?"

"No, he'd never met John before, though he knew him by sight, of course."

"And is he liked by the other guests, exclusive of Miss Turnquist?"

"I don't think many of them like him, no."

Several of the men have told me they don't trust him. There's something sneaky about the boy."

"Is Sessions on deck now?"

Alice Seaton looked around. "I guess not," she said. "He's gone to his stateroom, probably. The second one aft from the main companionway, to starboard."

Burt Calhoun said, "Thank you, Miss Seaton. I'm sorry to have kept you so long," and went down the main companion.

He tapped gently at the door of the second stateroom aft, to starboard. There was silence, then a voice on the other side of the door said softly, "That you, Sylvia?"

Burt tapped gently again, mouthing soft sibilant syllables between his front teeth, as one might "wheesh! wheesh! wheesh!" at a cat. The door opened six inches and he gave it a violent shove.

There was soft cursing, and the youth in the yellow silk dressing-gown reeled back, striking his head against the edge of the upper bunk and slumping into the lower one.

Burt Calhoun stepped into the room and shut the door. The youth in the lower bunk hoisted himself out, cursing vividly.

"What the hell?" he demanded. "What do you want? Who the hell are *you*, anyway, coming barging into a gentleman's room? Get out of here, you damned interloper!"

The damned interloper smiled gently. "Sorry to have disturbed your prospective rendezvous, but this is important. Did you know that a murder has been committed aboard this ship?"

George Sessions sneered. "I heard that *you* had some such screwy idea, but nobody else seems to think so."

Burt Calhoun still smiled, but no longer gently.

"*You'll* think so, when you fry for it, Sessions! *Ever* hear of *Snatch Tullio*?"

The youth in the yellow dressing gown started, but he said crisply enough:

"Of course I've heard of Snatch Tullio. Who hasn't—and what of it?"

"Nothing. Only I thought you might be interested to know that Tullio, or somebody who works very much like Tullio, is on the prowl again."

"Not in the least!" Sessions retorted. "If

that's all you've got to say, will you kindly get out of my stateroom?"

Burt Calhoun said thoughtfully, "And then there was another man mixed up in the Fulton kidnaping affair. A dope who used to do some of Tullio's dirtiest work. And just before he died he named a third man—a society finger! Did you ever hear of Snowey Mullens?"

The last few words zinged like the bullets of an automatic emptied in the dark. But Burt Calhoun knew that it wasn't dark in the mind of George Sessions.

Their effect on the youth in the yellow dressing gown was like a physical impact. He swayed backward from the waist, and fear leapt into his eyes. Burt Calhoun had seen fear in men's eyes often enough to know. He went on swiftly:

"Snowey Mullens named a man he knew only as 'George.' *You* were the finger in the Fulton case!"

The youth took hold of the edge of the upper bunk to steady himself. When he spoke his voice sounded like a dried pea shaken in a pod.

"I—yuh-yuh-you must be crazy! I don't even—know what you're talking about!"

Burt Calhoun's smile was radiant now. He said, "I can *see* you don't, Sessions! And I'll let you in on a Headquarters' secret, if you're a good little finger. The only reason they haven't caught up with you is that they never questioned the right George. But they're catching up now!"

Sessions moistened dry lips with the tip of his tongue.

"I never heard of S-S-Snowey Mullens," he said shakily. "I think you're m-m-mad!"

But Calhoun stepped back and removed the key from the lock of the door. He said, "Not now! But I get mad awful easy, George, so don't do anything you shouldn't. Meanwhile, just to be sure, I'll take the precaution of locking you in."

HE shut the door, locked it and put the key in his pocket. Then, whistling "*I Never Had a Chance*," he turned to the main saloon where Gordon Seaton sat nervously talking to Dr. Farnsworth Dutton.

"I've just taken the liberty of locking one of your daughter's guests in his cabin," he

informed the owner. "George Sessions. And to make sure nobody lets him out, will you kindly have a sailor stationed outside his door?"

The soap manufacturer rubbed his hands together and looked at Dr. Dutton for support. Dr. Dutton calmly continued to inspect the glowing end of a cigarette.

"Is this—or—positively necessary, Calhoun?" Seaton asked. "I mean, locking Sessions in like that?"

"Positively. I have good reason to believe that John Dillworth was marked for kidnaping before he died. He'd been threatened before, I know that. But this job would have gone through, on this very trip, had not death intervened."

Seaton jumped from his chair with an exclamation. Dr. Dutton flicked the ash from his cigarette, and said:

"Really! Well, poor Dillworth is one rich man those gorillas will never get!"

Burt Calhoun turned to Seaton. "Have a sailor stationed, will you? I have other things to do." And at the owner's nod of assent he went aft to the stateroom occupied by the former fiancée of John Dillworth.

Toby Van S. Roberts proved as truculent as the detective had been led to believe. She refused at first to open the locked door of her stateroom until he threatened to break it down. Thereafter she sat with smoldering eyes, refusing to answer questions while he searched the room. In a drawer he found a hypodermic needle.

"Where'd you get this?" he demanded.

"Put that down!" the girl screamed, jumping to her feet and lunging at the instrument held in his hand. "You can't get away with this stuff! You're nothing but a flat-foot dick, and I'll have father settle you!"

Burt Calhoun pushed her away with one hand.

"Easy, easy, Miss Roberts!" he admonished. "You better answer a few simple questions *now*. It may save you an accessory-before-the-fact charge!"

She glowered and jerked back from his restraining hand. "It belongs to Captain Rence," she said sullenly. "He gave me a sedative a few days ago. I—I was feeling badly!"

"And he left this here? Wasn't that rather careless of the captain? I happen to know he has his in the medicine chest in his cabin."

"Well," the girl grumbled. "It's my own, if you must know. I sometimes take a sedative myself. He didn't know I had one."

"That's better, Miss Roberts. Now, is there anything else to tell?"

But the girl lapsed again into sullen silence, and taking the hypodermic with him Burt Calhoun left. Going up the after companionway he found Gordon Seaton now on the quarterdeck. Seaton's eyes were dull and his puffy features seemed to spread more than ever.

"I'll take a fast launch, if you don't mind, Mr. Seaton," Burt said easily. "I want to talk with the coroner in Longport, and there are one or two other things I'll have to do. I won't be gone more than an hour or two."

The owner nodded. "Help yourself!" he said. "Anything you want. What do you make of it, Calhoun?"

Burt Calhoun took out a package of cigarettes and matches, lit a cigarette and blew smoke over the rail into the still night. "Pretty hard to say now. But I think it will work out."

"What about this kidnaping idea you had?"

Burt Calhoun shrugged. "Can't tell yet. By the way, who were Dillworth's lawyers?"

"Payne, Preston and Payne. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Just wanted to know."

Chapter V

MURDER—AND A TELEGRAM

THE speedboat shot up to the foot of the gangway with a white-capped sailor at bow and stern. Burt Calhoun ran down the steps and into the swift little gig. There was a roar of the motor and the launch pulled away from the ship, throwing two fan-flanges of white water out in graceful curves under its sharp stem.

At Longport Burt Calhoun told the launch crew to wait, and then strode up the street in the direction of the coroner's office. He stopped in at a drug store before he reached that building and called Grace Clark, the

secretary and manager of his New York office, at her home.

"Grace? Glad I caught you in. Get on the phone right away and call Grover Payne, of Payne, Preston and Payne. He lives on Park Avenue—760 I think. Tell him to dig out the will of his client John L. Dillworth, if the boy has any. If not, I want to find out the provisions of the will of Bradford Dillworth, the chain store king, who left fifty million to his son John a few months ago. And call me right back at the office of Burton Bones, the coroner, in Longport. Got it?"

"Sure, Mr. Calhoun. Anything else? What's up?"

"Looks like murder. Young Dillworth died very mysteriously. No marks on the body that I can find. I suspect poison of some unusual nature, but I can't be sure yet. Anything new? You know I've been out of touch with the papers."

Miss Clark's voice came over the wire, sure and cool, as usual.

"Yes. There was a very queer murder three days ago. At least, the police thought it was murder, but the autopsy showed nothing. They've about given up the case, I think. An interesting angle is that no marks were found on this body either. I've clipped all the data for your files."

Burt Calhoun said, "What was the man's name?"

"They've just established that. A sea captain named Murchison. He—"

Burt Calhoun snapped, "Dig up everything on that case, too, and call me at Bones' office! I'm going right up there now!"

MR. BONES sat in his office with his square-toed shoes on a high-top desk, twisting a large cigar reflectively in his fingers. The smoke smelled highly expensive. He took one foot off the desk as Burt Calhoun entered, as if to get up, then apparently weakened on the effort involved. He left the second foot on the table, the first on the floor. He extended another elaborate-looking cigar from a deep-laden pocket.

"I was 'specting you," he said. "Hev one? They're old Seaton's—pretty slick stuff! I copped a few."

Burt Calhoun shook his head. He said,

"No thanks. Never use them!" and took a cigarette from his pocket. "What's new on Dillworth?"

The coroner sighed and settled himself more comfortably.

"Nothin' much. We ain't got th' complete autopsy yit, o' course, but Doc Higgins ken't find no trace of poison in th' stomach this fur. I think mebbe by mornin' we kin let old Seaton go. I bet he comes through with a nice lump o' sugar for us, huh?"

Burt Calhoun said, "Where's the body?"

"In thar." Bones jerked a deckle-edged thumb over his shoulder. "But thar ain't nothin' you kin do. No marks a-tall! I went over him, an' Hig certifies to that too. Hig's workin' on the contents o' the stomach. Might'z well set an' smoke. Nice out to-night, ain't it?"

Burt Calhoun said, "Got a razor here? I'm going bee hunting!"

Burton Bones looked blank. Grumbling he got the instrument and followed the detective into the next room.

"Trouble with you New York dicks," he complained, "is you're allers makin' trouble. Bee huntin' with a razor! You're nuts, all you fellers! Whatcha goin' to do now?"

The detective moved the dead man's head slightly and bent to examine it. The boy's rumpled black hair was long and matted over the nape of the neck. The second stroke of the razor cleared a little path to the base of the skull, and in the middle of this swathe was a small hole. Its edges were mottled, black and yellowish. Burton Bones stared.

"Looks nasty!" he said. "By cracky, it does!"

Burt Calhoun bent and sniffed the spot. He said, "There's his bee! But it isn't aconite. I wonder—"

The coroner looked on with wide eyes.

"Hypoed?" he inquired. "Some pizin' in th' blood?"

The detective shook his head. "Poison in his blood, all right. I ought to have thought of this before. But not hypoed. Not even by an amateur. That hole's too big for that—nearly as big as a match. And it's too close to the base of the skull. A hypo needle would have broken off. Better call Higgins."

As the coroner started lumberingly for the phone Burt Calhoun added, "Don't tie up

the only line into this office. I've got an important call coming in from New York."

Burton Bones bobbed his head. "I'll walk down. It's only a piece. Gosh, d'yuh 'spose old man Seaton had anythin' to do with it?"

Burt Calhoun shrugged. "Might have. And hired me on the job to try and tie my hands. It's possible. There's plenty of motive."

The phone rang as the coroner was about to ask another question, but Burt Calhoun waved him from the room. He picked up the receiver.

"Yes, yes—Calhoun talking. Put New York on, and be sure you don't break the connection!"

Again Grace Clark's voice came through, tinged with excitement.

"There's some new information on the Murchison thing—in the first editions this morning. It seems to hook in somewhere. The man was Charles F. Murchison, captain of the bark *Valhalla*, owned by Gordon Seaton, the soap manufacturer."

Burt Calhoun said, "I know that. What else?"

"Murchison went to the East Valley Hospital in New London on Thursday. He complained of pains in the stomach and he had a black eye which he refused to account for. The stomach pains proved nothing much. They pumped him out and put him to bed for two days because he asked them to. On Saturday he was discharged and left the hospital, presumably to return to his ship. At midnight he was found dead at the foot of the S. T. A. dock on the waterfront. All marks on his clothing had been removed. He was sent to the morgue and it took a couple of days to establish his identity as Charles Murchison. Easy Valley Hospital authorities finally identified the body."

Burt Calhoun said, "That all on that?"

"Not quite. A witness has been found who says he was in a New London bar on Thursday, a few hours before Murchison entered the hospital, and that a man who looked like Murchison, wearing a captain's uniform, had a fist fight with another sailor there. Murchison was knocked down. The witness thinks his opponent was a ship's first officer, but he's not sure. He says he could

identify the man, however. New London police are trying to locate the bark *Valhalla* which is cruising somewhere in the Sound or off the coast. She cleared from New London just after midnight Saturday, destination unknown."

"Fine work! Now what does Grover Payne say on the Dillworth estate?"

"I couldn't reach him, B. C. The butler reports he is out somewhere for the evening. May not be back till very late. I've left word to have him call me."

Burt Calhoun said, "Good! Keep after him. I've got to have a report on that right away, though there's plenty here to work with. I'll call you back."

HE racked up the phone, got to his feet and went out into the street. At the corner drug store he got the late afternoon papers from New York. The story of the identification of Captain Murchison's body was splashed all across the front pages. Much was made of the fact that no mark was found on the body, and that the autopsy revealed no poison in the stomach.

Burt Calhoun located the telegraph office and wired the chief of police of New London.

The wire read:

Autopsy Murchison again and shave hair back of head and neck stop Wire me coroner's office Longport what you find stop I have murderer and will deliver him to you before morning stop Regards

CALHOUN, CALHOUN INTERNATIONAL
DETECTIVE AGENCY.

He returned to the coroner's office where he found Burton Bones and the doctor named Higgens. The doctor named Higgens thought it was probably poison that had killed the young millionaire, which did not surprise his interrogator much.

"Could that jab have been made with a hypodermic needle?" the detective asked.

Higgens shook his head. "Um-um! The hole's too large."

"But too small for a knife or a dirk?" Burt Calhoun suggested.

Higgens nodded. "Yes, unless it was one specially made."

Burt Calhoun said, "It could have been made by an ice pick." To this the doctor agreed. "Or," the detective added slowly, "a sail needle and palm. You know those big needles and the hunk of leather in the palm of the hand they drive it with?"

"Quite true!" Doctor Higgins replied. "I hadn't thought of that."

"I just sort of stumbled on the idea, being a sailor myself," Burt Calhoun apologized. "I suppose it's too late to get a blood test on that boy now?"

"Yes. But we can get a chemical and microscopic analysis of the wound."

"Better have it done, doctor, just as a check."

He returned to the outer room and called New York.

"Hello, Grace? Did you get Payne? Fine! What did he say?"

"Young Dillworth did not leave any will," his secretary reported. "Mr. Payne didn't have a copy of Bradford Dillworth's will, but he gave me a resumé of it from memory which he said was approximately accurate. The old man left his entire fortune to his son unconditionally, and in case of John Dillworth's death unmarried or without issue it was to be split three ways. One quarter was bequeathed to the United Charities, one quarter was to be divided among the employes of the Dillworth Chain Stores who had been in their employ five years or more, and the remaining half was to be turned over to the American Chemical and Biological Research Institute, to be administered by Dr. Farnsworth Dutton and his board as they saw fit. Outside of a few minor bequests these are the principal provisions of the instrument."

Burt Calhoun said, "Nice work, Grace! You better go to bed now and get some sleep. I may be in tomorrow and I may not. 'Night!"

He hung up the phone.

"**A**NYTHIN' in th' papers?" Bones asked without interest as Burt Calhoun picked them up and tucked them under his arm.

The detective grinned. "Nothing much. And you ought not to read, my boy! It's bad for your eyes, and worse for your im-

agination! You don't happen to know of any strangers in town in the last few days, do you?"

"By gollies!" Burton exclaimed. "How'd you guess that? Some strangers come in day b'fore yestidday. They're stoppin' at the old Franey place. Ain't been occ'pied in five years, an' that house is all run down; but they don't seem to be summer folks. I was sayin' to Chief Murphy only this mornin' that I couldn' figger out what they was doin'. They just set around an' play poker an' drink liquor all the time, and never hardly move outa th' place. But in these days when they ain't much trade, you're glad to have anybody 'bout!"

"Is one of them a short stocky man with arms like a gorilla and a lip pulled down at the right-hand corner by a scar?"

"Yea, that's right!" agreed Bones with animation. "How'd you guess?"

Burt Calhoun whistled the first few bars of "*Did You Ever See A Dream Walking*" between his teeth.

"Frien' o' yours?" Bones asked.

Burt Calhoun said, "After a fashion. But I imagine he'll be surprised if I call. Where is the Franey house?"

"Jus' down the road a piece—on th' outskirts o' town. Thinkin' o' goin' out there tonight?"

"I was, if I can get a car."

"Oh, tha's easy! Garradge's open all night. 'S kinda late to be payin' calls, but then they're a bunch o' night owls out thar. Setting up till all hours! I rode past th' other night jes' to see, and they was still up, with lights on, at quarter past twelve!"

"Wastrels!" Burt Calhoun grinned. He got explicit directions from the coroner how to reach the Franey place. Then he banished his host from the room while he made a call.

When he got Centre Street on the wire he asked for Deputy Inspector Joseph O'Malley. The Inspector's voice answered in a minute.

"Hello, Burt. What's on your mind?"

"Too much! Now listen carefully, Joe. I'm in the coroner's office at Longport. There's been a swell murder job, and while I was working on it I stumbled over a lead I thought would interest you. What would

you give to know the whereabouts of Snatch Tullio?"

The instrument seemed to tingle in the detective's hands.

"What would I give? A commissioner-ship! There's a little ten grand reward for a conviction on that baby, besides! Why?"

"All right. Then get this. Snatch and his gang are at the Franey house, a mile north of Longport and about five hundred yards to the right off the Belleport Turnpike. Shoot two squad cars out right away. But remember, no sirens—no radios! Cut the short wave length—they may have one in the house. Send 'em out quiet *and fast!* Got it?"

The Inspector's voice rose slightly as he answered.

"Cars will be there inside two hours. I'm coming myself. This is great work, Burt—even if we can't make any of the old raps stick!"

Burt Calhoun laughed softly. He said, "By the time you arrive, Joe, I'll have a nice, fool-proof case for you. You can wrap up Snatch and his gang, caught right with the kidnap victim! I'm on my way. I'll be out there in less than an hour!"

Inspector O'Malley swore. "Listen, Burt, don't do anything until we get there! I thought you were different, but I guess you private dicks are all alike. Trying to beat the police to it and grab off the glory!"

Burt Calhoun grinned into the mouth-piece. "You know better than that, Joe. I'm no publicity hound. But I've got some things to do before you come, or you won't have any case."

O'Malley said, "For God's sake don't tackle that gang single-handed, you fool! It's suicide!"

Burt Calhoun answered, "I'll be careful. You know I always have."

The expletives on the other end of the wire seemed to please him. He hung up, went to the door leading into the hall and called, "All right, Bones! You can have your own office now, for a while!"

THE coroner, a puzzled expression on his pink face, tramped down the hall from the stair-well where he had been waiting.

Burt Calhoun said, "You better stay close to this phone tonight, Bones! This is headquarters, and there's going to be a lot of action around this town. By tomorrow, if everything goes right, Longport'll be swamped with reporters and cameramen. You'll probably get your picture in scores of papers!"

Burton Bones gasped, "Goshamighty! What's goin' on? What's goin' to happen?"

"You'll find out soon enough!"

"I better wake up Chief Murphy!" protested the coroner. "He'd like to see his pitcher in the papers too, I betcha!"

The detective grinned broadly. "We'll wake the Chief all in good season. You just stay here and keep an eye on the phone, and don't go to sleep! If my office calls, or if Inspector O'Malley rings in from New York Police Headquarters, tell them I'll be right back. I've just gone out to kidnap a dead man!"

The coroner blinked. "Inspector O'Malley?" he said. Then, as the full import of the last sentence dawned upon him he croaked, "Kidnap a dead man! You're batty as a coot!"

Burt Calhoun said, "It's never been done, so far as I know. But there's a first time for everything, Burton. Remember, stick here! And just on the bare chance that I don't come back, tell Inspector O'Malley to look after the *Valhalla* end of the job."

Chuckling, he picked up his evening papers and hurried out of the office. As he reached the now darkened main street of the little town he broke into a swift, effortless run, heading toward the dock where lay the *Valhalla's* launch. In seven minutes he was boarding the *Valhalla*, nearly three miles down the harbor.

He jumped aboard with the papers still folded under his arm, nor did he unfold them as he came up the gangway. Rence, who was at the head of the ladder, eyed him with nervous suspicion. He put out his hand as if to clutch a paper, then recovered himself and drew back. Burt Calhoun grinned at him.

"I'd like to see one of those—those papers when you're through with them, sir," Rence suggested. "We haven't had a paper aboard in I don't know when!" His narrow eyes

flicked sideways and the mole on his nose seemed to twitch.

"You shall, indeed!" Burt Calhoun said with enthusiasm. "Just as soon as I finish with them!"

He turned aft along the deck which was now nearly deserted. A cool little breeze had sprung up from the south, and the waters of Longport harbor burbled gently against the *Valhalla's* big black sides. Lights from the yacht's ports made little gold snakes wriggling over the surface to lose themselves, before they reached the shore, in the shadows at the foot of the bluff. Several of Alice Seaton's crowd lingered in and around the dining saloon on deck, too awed and excited by the events of the night to go to their staterooms.

He went to the main saloon. Seaton and Dr. Dutton were just where he had left them, the soap manufacturer still nervous, the doctor still placid.

Burt Calhoun said, "Have you any objection to my borrowing one of your crew to go ashore with me, Seaton? I have more work to do there, and I want to tell you that you'll be in the good graces of Deputy Inspector O'Malley at headquarters for any help you may be able to give me. I'm going back to round up the Snatch Tullio gang."

"The Snatch Tullio gang!" Seaton gasped. "Did he have anything to do with poor Dillworth's death?"

The detective shook his head. "I don't think so. Snatch wanted Dillworth alive. Somebody on the yacht's responsible for his death, but that solution will have to wait. May I have the sailor?"

"Certainly! By all means! You can have the whole ship if you want it!"

Burt Calhoun said, "Thanks!" and went up on deck.

In the fore-castle there was more than one man who was willing to do anything for a third share in a \$10,000 reward. Burt Calhoun explained the danger in detail.

"You're taking a chance of getting bumped off before Inspector O'Malley gets there. Snatch Tullio and his gang are pretty bad medicine. But you'll be doing something worth while if we succeed, besides getting the money. Any volunteers?"

Three seamen stepped forward.

Burt selected the one who came nearest to young Dillworth in size and figure, and took him back to the dead man's cabin. The murdered man's clothes fitted him nearly perfectly. He was very young and did not look unlike young Dillworth, either, the detective noted with satisfaction.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Frank Victor," said the sailor with a ready grin. The prospect of excitement seemed to please him.

"Well, for the next few hours you are going to be a young millionaire named John Dillworth," said Burt. "Here, take the watch and cigarette case. They'll help pass you off to anybody who doesn't know Dillworth by sight, personally."

Burt doubted if Tullio or the regular members of his kidnap gang did know the dead boy. That was Sessons' job—to travel in high society circles, pick a prospective victim, and then tip off the gang when to make the snatch. The moment Burt Calhoun had definitely established Sessons as the mysterious "George" of the Fulton kidnaping and the friend of Snowey Mullens, he moved straight to the conclusion that Sessons' presence aboard the *Valhalla* forecast another kidnaping plot—and every indication pointed to young Dillworth as having been the chosen victim. Dillworth's unexpected death had ruined it, now; but that was something Tullio's gang ashore did not know yet.

"All right, Victor; come with me," he said. And he led the way to Sessons' cabin.

Chapter VI

"KIDNAPING'S KIDNAPING!"

WHEN they entered the cabin, George Sessons was white and shivering. He was afraid of Snatch Tullio, but he was still more afraid of Burt Calhoun. And Calhoun's threat now to pin the murder of the young millionaire on him if he didn't come clean left him shaking and abject.

"It was young Dillworth you were going to snatch, wasn't it?" charged Calhoun. Then, at the other's nod, "Have you got in touch with Tullio since you've been here?"

"Y-y-yès," stammered Sessons. "I sent

a letter ashore the minute we anchored here. But I haven't had any answer yet. I wasn't to do anything until I heard from him."

"They didn't, any of them, know young Dillworth, did they?"

"No."

"Well, they're going to see him now—or at least they'll think it's him." Calhoun pointed to Victor. "And you're going along to tell them it's him."

"What-t-t?" Sessions stammered in terror. "But Snatch'll kill me!"

"He won't know it isn't the real Dillworth—until too late."

"But—but what'll I tell Snatch? How'll I explain not waiting for orders?"

Calhoun thought a moment. "I've always heard the Dillworth boy was nuts on gambling—a sucker for cards. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, you tell Snatch that you found out Dillworth was planning to go straight back to New York, and you had to move fast. So you tricked Dillworth into coming ashore by promising to take him to a big game. Get the idea?"

Sessions nodded frightenedly. "That may work—but he'll kill me if he gets wise."

"Well, it's a chance you've got to take—it's either that or burn. And we're taking the same chance you are. Come on, let's get started."

Pushing the still shaking Sessions ahead of him, and with Victor following close behind, the detective headed for the gangway and the launch he had ordered to be ready. Ten minutes later the launch pulled in at the end of the Longport wharf where a broad flight of steps led down to the water. The detective motioned the two men out of the boat, instructed the launch's crew to "wait till I come back, no matter how long it is," and went up the pier.

At the local garage he routed out a sleepy night mechanic and rented a roadster into which he loaded the others, Sessions between him and Victor. Sessions already had his instructions, and so did Victor.

Burt drove rapidly up the Belleport Turnpike until he reached the narrow dirt road that led to the Franey place. He turned to the right, drove a few yards into a clump of trees and parked the car.

From his pocket he took a handkerchief and tied it carefully over Frank Victor's eyes.

"You can tell Snatch you explained to Dillworth the place was running without protection," he said in a low voice to Sessions, "so you had to take these precautions. We won't bandage his mouth or use adhesive tape. That would look phoney."

Even in the darkness he could see George Sessions shivering. Burt grinned and said deliberately, "If you happen to say anything about *my* being outside, Sessions, you *will* have something to shiver about!"

"I—I won't!" protested the "social guy."

"B-b-but what are you going to do?"

Burt Calhoun said, "Never mind that! Just go on in and tell Snatch you've brought his man. Drive the car right up to the house. I'll wait here."

He followed the car cautiously up the winding road. There were lights in the second floor of the Franey place, but the ground floor was dark. From a distance he watched Sessions stop the machine, lead the fake "John Dillworth" out, and knock at the door. A guard appeared from the shadows of the porch at the first sound of Sessions' knuckles on the panel. There was whispered conversation.

Dimly Burt saw the door open into a rectangle of darker blackness. Then both figures disappeared inside.

BURT CALHOUN worked his way silently around to the side of the house, opposite the lighted windows on the second floor. A big maple stood twenty feet away, its branches extending almost into the windows. He surveyed the tree thoughtfully, then swung himself into the lower branches.

He climbed to a point some ten feet above the lighted windows. Voices drifted out to him vaguely. He heard a voice he knew to be that of Snatch Tullio say, "So you wanted a big game, did you, Dillworth? Well, this is the biggest game you ever sat in! It'll cost you a cold million to play, and you've *got to play!* Get busy and write that letter!"

Burt Calhoun worked himself out along the branch on which he stood. He reached up and grasped the branch above him, put-

ting all his weight on it and testing it for strength.

The windows were closed, but the sash looked old and rotten. If he hit the lower half about in the middle—

Under his breath he whistled "*The Man on the Flying Trapeze*," and grinned joyously in the dark. He took the small automatic from his pocket and put the trigger guard between his teeth. Then he pulled back the branch as far as it would go, swung free and let loose.

His feet struck squarely in the middle of the lower pane with a splintering crash. He did not even feel the rip of glass against his face. As he landed sprawling inside the room, his gun was in his hand.

Two of Snatch Tullio's bodyguards were reaching under their armpits. Burt Calhoun fired twice and the two men slumped limply. The hand of a third thug stopped on its way toward his coat pocket.

Burt Calhoun said, "Anybody else that moves is just as out of luck—as these two are!" He jerked his head toward the two men on the floor. Then he said, "Hello, Snatch! Long time no see, hey? Not since that Brooklyn job you pulled."

Snatch Tullio glared out of deep set eyes. He sat in a dilapidated Morris chair, his arms hanging loosely over the edges. The scar at the corner of his mouth gave him a perpetual sneer. Only his eyes moved as he looked at George Sessions, standing to one side. He said, "So that's the way it is? I *thought* it looked phoney! You'll settle this check, George!"

There was the noise of feet on the stairs. More of Tullio's gang were coming up—in a hurry! Burt Calhoun had no means of knowing how many of them there might be. He said to Sessions, "Lock that door!" and moved out of range of the shattered windows.

Shakily Sessions obeyed. But Calhoun grinned. He said to Tullio in a low voice, "Tell 'em it's all right—you were just having a little target practice!"

Snatch Tullio said, "To hell with you! Tell 'em yourself!"

There was hammering at the door. A voice said, "Whassa matter, Chief?" Another said, "Y'all right, Chief?"

Burt Calhoun emptied his clip through the door and reached for his other gun. Cursing and a dull thud sounded in the hall beyond. Burt Calhoun said, "Mr. Tullio is in conference and can't be disturbed. Make an appointment for tomorrow—at the Tombs!"

He turned to the young sailor who was impersonating the dead John Dillworth.

"John, how would you like to pay this rat a million dollars for the freedom which the Constitution of the United States guarantees you?"

"I would not like it!" the fake John Dillworth reported succinctly.

The sound of swift motors roared up from the grounds below. Shots rang out. Burt Calhoun grinned at the dazed kidnap king.

"The best part of it, Snatch, is that this isn't young Dillworth at all! You kidnaped an able-bodied seaman, but you *thought* it was Dillworth! Kidnaping's kidnaping, whether it's a sailor or a millionaire. Now let's see you beat *this* case!"

He began whistling "*Waiting at the Gate for Katy*" through his teeth, as Inspector Joseph O'Malley and half a dozen men thundered up the stairs.

Chapter VII

THE POISONED NEEDLE

AS soon as he had delivered Snatch Tullio and his men, Burt Calhoun took Frank Victor, got his rented car and drove back to Longport. He went directly to the wharf, parked the car and returned to the *Valhalla*. There he found Gordon Seaton mixing a drink at the miniature bar in one corner of the luxurious main saloon.

"Have one?" Seaton urged, holding out the bottle.

The detective nodded. "Thanks. I think I need it." He took the proffered drink and sat down. "Mr. Seaton, I want a few straight answers to straight questions. I have proof that you owed young Dillworth one hundred grand which you stole from his estate—and that's grand larceny, embezzlement, malfeasance of your office as trustee, and almost anything else you want to name."

The face of the soap manufacturer looked suddenly like a cake of his own product,

subjected to fire. It seemed to melt and bubble. His hand shook and sweat leapt to his white brow. He set down his glass with a rattle on the table, spilling half the drink.

"Good G-G-God, Calhoun! How did you know that? You can't s-s-suspect *me* of—of killing Dillworth?"

"Take it easy, Mr. Seaton! I don't mean to alarm you unnecessarily. I'll admit there are other suspects—others, perhaps, who had a motive more powerful than yours. But it is part of my job to suspect everybody until the case is broken. So let's discuss you right now. You admit your—er—culpability as far as I outlined it?"

Seaton sat forward in his chair, his fat, trembling hands clutched between his knees, drops of water trickling from his face.

"Yes, God help me, I must!" he said. "But I swear I never touched that boy! I never would have! Why, he was going to give me more time to raise the money! He even offered to loan me more, if I needed it. I'll pay it back into the estate within a few weeks now—if I don't have to bear this disgrace and go to jail for it! Are you—are you going to give me up? I'll make it right with you—"

His tones trailed off at the expression on the detective's face.

Burt Calhoun's voice was cutting. "Let's get this right, Seaton. You can't bribe me, understand? As far as your—shall we say, speculations?—are concerned, I am not responsible for your actions. Nor am I ethically bound to report my findings to the authorities, so long as I can prove you did not commit the murder. But in a murder case I *am* ethically bound to report anything which might contribute to its solution."

"I tell you, young Dillworth told me himself it was all right—that he'd give me all the time I needed!" moaned Seaton. Then he let his face fall in his hands. "But the boy's d-d-dead!" he stuttered, "and there were no w-w-witnesses! Nobody but myself knows he forgave me, and offered me more!"

Burt Calhoun looked with a mixture of contempt and pity at the quivering mass of the man. "Exactly!" he said. "But I'll let you in on something else. I really don't suspect you of this crime—not now—

as I do some others. Here, look at this!"

He tossed the copies of the evening papers on the table. With a visible effort Gordon Seaton steadied his hands sufficiently so that he could get out gold-rimmed glasses to look at them. Almost immediately his face changed. Relief shone on it like a searchlight on a sand dune.

"There!" he almost shouted. "Don't you see? Murchison murdered—and it must have been by Rence! I knew there was hard feeling between them, but I had no idea it went so deep. It had something to do with Rence's daughter, I think." He tapped the paper. "And the method of the killing seems the same. Rence must have killed the boy, too!"

BURT CALHOUN smiled. "A conclusion, like a moving train, is a bad thing to jump at! Superficial evidence points to your solution, all right. But there is evidence against it, too. For one thing, I talked with your second officer. Purposely I talked with him before I questioned Rence, and before Rence knew he *would be* questioned. Therefore I'm inclined to accept his corroboration of Rence's story—that Rence had left the chartroom, gone forward and was on his way aft again when the scuffle started. If that is accurate, it would eliminate Rence from one murder, at any rate."

The soap manufacturer mopped his face and stared at the detective in a bewildered fashion.

Burt Calhoun continued calmly: "Another weak point in pinning the Dillworth murder on Rence is that he had no sufficient motive, so far as we know. Merely because he was fired from Dillworth's yacht isn't enough. You have to have a pretty strong incentive for murder. Such an incentive—pardon me—as you yourself had. But there was one person aboard who had *even stronger* incentive than yours. As I figure it, just two hundred and fifty times stronger! Do you know the provisions of Bradford Dillworth's will?"

Seaton nodded. "Yes, broadly speaking. I never saw it, but Brad told me about it. His lawyers drew the will. I was only a

friend of the family, and executor of the estate."

"Precisely. Well, in considering motives I have found it wise to give great attention to all who may profit by a death—and just who may profit *most!* You stood to get yourself out of a possible prison term and make \$100,000. But Dr. Farnsworth Dutton stood to make twenty-five million!"

Gordon Seaton stared in amazement. "Great heavens! You can't imagine—Why, Farnsworth Dutton is a big figure!"

Burt Calhoun bowed and his grin was broad. "I know the doctor's reputation well," he admitted. "And you yourself, my dear Seaton, would have cleared yourself of guilt in registering such surprise—for frankly, you would make a lousy actor! It's often a splendid asset to one who is under suspicion—being a lousy actor! That is, provided he is innocent."

The owner of the *Valhalla* stared, open-mouthed.

"Didn't Farnsworth Dutton cruise the South Seas on this ship a year or more ago?" the detective asked. "I saw something about it in the papers."

Seaton nodded. "Yes, he did. I lent him the ship for a nominal sum. I was well fixed at the time. The charter was paid, I believe, by the American Chemical and Biological Research Institute."

"And Dr. Dutton is quite an authority on Oriental poisons?"

Against the soap manufacturer nodded.

Burt Calhoun said, "Ummmmm! I think I'll go talk with Rence. Meanwhile, get Dr. Dutton up here. But say nothing to Dutton, understand, except that I wish to question him. That man is not as calm under the skin as he is on the surface. It won't do any harm to let him stew in his own juices for a bit."

TAKING two of the evening papers from the limp hand of the soap manufacturer, Burt ascended to the deck. Captain Rence was nowhere to be seen. He went forward to the captain's quarters and knocked. Rence opened the door. He was without his uniform jacket and his narrow eyes looked haggard. His pallor was such that the mole on his nose stood out blackly.

Burt Calhoun tossed the papers on the captain's bed. He said, "I came to bring you the evening papers, Rence. Look them over!"

The skipper of the *Valhalla* approached the bed gingerly. He stretched out an unsteady hand and said, "Thanks! I'll—I'll look at them later, sir!"

"Look at them *now!*" the detective ordered.

The paper trembled as Rence opened it. He read the whole story with hypnotized eyes. He tried for a smile and came up with a grimace.

"Melodrama!" he said weakly. "But what has it to do with me?"

Burt Calhoun's lips barely moved. "Everything, Rence! They've got you on this Murchison murder, sure as hell! That witness will be able to identify you. Probably they'll have other witnesses now. The fight—your daughter—all that. You probably had motive. I don't know. But what I *do* know is that if you've got any defense at all, you can get off light—if you come clean! I know you didn't kill young Dillworth, but who else will know it? I know Dutton killed him. Now, do you want to help me pin it on Dutton, and dodge a double rap, or do you want to stand trial for both murders?"

Captain Rence stood for a moment looking at the wall above his head, where hung the pictures of two remarkably pretty women, remarkably alike. One was that of a girl in her late teens, the other the reproduction of that girl at thirty-six or eight—a tall, splendid looking woman with finely chiseled features, big eyes and a soft mouth. Captain Rence wheeled suddenly and sat down on the edge of his bunk.

"All right—I did it!" he said. "You've got me. I killed Murchison—and I'm not sorry. But I had nothing to do with the murder of young Dillworth! You've got to believe me on that! Nothing to do with it whatsoever, sir—any more than I had anything to do with your being slugged over the head, though I admit I was scared of you and tried to steal your papers!"

Burt Calhoun said, "Sure, Rence! I figured that after a while. Go on!"

The First Officer hardly seemed to hear.

His words harked back to his murder, tumbling out in a flood, almost of relief.

"Murchison was a tramp!" he said. "He ruined Dorothy!" His eyes turned to the photograph of the younger and prettier woman on the wall. "Maybe getting a girl in trouble isn't so much these days to some men—and some girls!—but it never was that way with me. Or with her! I had the fight that day in the bar with Murchison, but they pulled me off him. He got away and I couldn't find him. Then I had to take the *Valhalla* up to Gloucester to pick up Mr. Seaton. Seaton wanted to come back to New London to pick Murchison up when he got over being sick. Sick! So I went in to the dock alone to get him.

"I didn't think of poisoning him, though, till we were coming down the Sound one day—Saturday. I was off duty and was sitting on deck, forward, trying to read and to stop thinking about what I was going to do. The book was Dashiell Hammett's '*The Thin Man*.' Dr. Dutton happened to come forward and saw what I was reading. He stopped to talk with me.

"He had murder in his heart, too—only I didn't know it then. He's clever! He must have guessed what I had in my mind, or what I would do if he sowed the thought. He knew I hated Murchison, and something of the reason why. As I look back on it, he was planting the idea in my head, and the way to do it—so's he could kill Dillworth afterwards and throw the blame on me."

Rence stopped and groaned, and then went on:

"Anyhow, we got talking of poisons, and he spoke of *pokok ipoh*. Maybe you know. Dr. Dutton knows all about it. It's a poison made from the juice of the Upas tree. It's Malay stuff—what they use to tip their darts with. He said all you'd have to do would be jab a guy under the hairline and he'd be dead in three minutes without anybody knowing how he died.

"'Jab him how?' I said. 'With a hypo?'

"'Any sharp instrument,' he said.

"'Like a sail needle?' I said, before I thought. And he just nodded and smiled. I see now he was framing me, but I didn't see it then!

"The idea sort of went to my head. I

never suspected *him* of planning murder at the time, of course. I wondered how I could get the poison. I knew he had some of it with him, from his cruise sixteen months ago. So I put on a great show of interest and finally asked him for a bit of it to try on rats in the hold—smearing it on sharp pins stuck through pieces of cheese and stuff, see? He gave me some—and that's the whole story!"

Burt Calhoun said, "I think I can save you from being tried for Dillworth's death, Rence. But I'll have to lock you in your cabin until I come back. I'll have to turn you over to the New London police, too; but you may beat the case. You've certainly got a defense!"

HE went out quietly, locked the door and slowly walked down the deck, his head bent in thought. When he arrived in the main saloon, Seaton and Dr. Dutton were waiting. The scientist smiled affably.

"Lunar time determination again, Mr. Calhoun—at so late an hour?"

Burt Calhoun returned his smile.

"Not tonight, Doctor!" he said. "I have a few more questions to ask. But first let me explain that we have discovered the manner of young Dillworth's death. A devilishly clever job. Poison—administered in the back of the neck, under the hair."

Dr. Dutton looked casual. "Interesting! And how may I serve you?"

"Just this. I know you are an expert on poisons—or perhaps I should say a student of poisons. Rence tells me that when you cruised the South Seas a year or more ago you brought back one or two very rare specimens from Malaysia. Some very potent poison from the Upas tree, used by the natives to tip darts from their blowguns. Is that correct?"

Dr. Dutton crossed his hands in his lap and peered through his glasses owlishly.

"That is correct. Rence should know. I gave him some of the poison three days ago, at his request. It is *pokok ipoh* in Malay, but it is mixed with the powdered fangs of a venomous snake known as the *Ular bla-lang*. Rence said he wanted it to kill rats in the ship's hold, or some such cock-and-bull story."

Burt Calhoun's smile matched the doctor's in unbelief. He said, "Sounds fantastic. Like sea-serpents!" He paused a moment. "Tell me, doctor, how long does this *pokok ipoh* take to work after it enters the blood stream?"

"From three to five minutes, depending on the amount of animal poison the natives have mixed with the vegetable matter. The amount, of course, is infinitesimal, as most poisons are measured. It is a member of the digitalis series, but experiments have yet to determine its proper place in that series. It acts on the heart, shows a marked rise in blood pressure from constriction of the arterioles, and also acts upon the muscles of the intestines."

Burt Calhoun said, "That is most instructive, doctor. You have some of this poison in your possession now?"

The doctor nodded.

"And you have a hypodermic needle?"

"Naturally!"

The manner of the detective underwent a sudden change. He sat forward, his searching eyes on the face of the scientist, his mouth hard, the muscles along the line of his lean jaw tightening perceptibly.

"You killed John Dillworth!" he challenged. "You had the opportunity. You had twenty-five million dollars to gain by Dillworth's death! Answer me this—what was to prevent you from administering the poison?"

Dr. Farnsworth Dutton's mouth quirked.

"Isn't that a bit foolish, Mr. Calhoun?" he asked. "Why would I have opened myself to suspicion by using a hypodermic? Naturally, would I not have used some other instrument—say, a sail needle?"

BURT CALHOUN sat back in his chair. His smile was thin again, and his mouth was set.

"The case is closed, Dr. Dutton!" he said. "Twice, before witnesses, you have trapped yourself. *First*, when you pointed out so elaborately that you concentrated on your lunar time determination theory to such an

extent that you did not notice what occurred on deck when you left the chartroom. Yet you told me afterwards *exactly* where young John Dillworth was standing—*just outside the chartroom near the port!*"

The doctor's eyes were pinpoints behind his thick glasses.

"*Second*," Burt Calhoun continued, "you admitted at this moment that you would have used a *sail needle or some other instrument!* By your own previous testimony you did not see the body after it came aboard. Yet you *knew* a sail needle had been the cause of death—and I am the only man aboard this ship who knows that fact, except yourself! You were trying to throw the blame on Rence, and you have convicted yourself! Dr. Dutton, you stood inside the chartroom and jabbed that poisoned needle through the port into the back of Dillworth's head!"

Farnsworth Dutton showed no sign of emotion whatever, save that his hand went from his lap to clutch the arms of the chair. He leaned forward.

"Brilliant, Calhoun! Very brilliant! Yes, I killed Dillworth. Why not? He was a spendthrift, tossing away inherited wealth in selfish pleasures when, by the terms of his father's will, it might go to science. I asked him for the twenty-five million, or any considerable part of it, and he refused. So I killed him. He was a fungus on the tree of humanity. With that money I could serve human knowledge! I could save thousands of lives! Is it more important to the human race that thousands should live, or that John Dillworth should live? Is it justice that these thousands should die to preserve the useless life of one rich man's son? Answer me that!"

Burt Calhoun said softly, "It may or may not be justice, Dutton, but it *is* murder!"

There was silence in the main saloon of the bark *Valhalla*. Burt Calhoun whistled "*Little Man, You've Had a Busy Day!*" gently between his teeth. Then he said, "Well, Doctor, I guess we better go in to Longport and wake up Chief Murphy!"

THE MURDER ROOM

By

OTIS ADELBERT KLINE and E. H. PRICE

Seven Bankers Murdered in the City's Busiest
and Best-Guarded Bank!



Chapter I

ADJOURNED BY DEATH

"I WILL not pay the million dollars!" stormed Eric von Ludens. His powerful bulk suddenly heaved from the massive, hand-carved chair. He drew himself up to his full height, pounded his desk with a huge fist and reiterated, "By God, I will not pay!"

His bull neck was corded, and his military pompadour bristled as his small wrathful eyes regarded the wizened, mild-mannered little man who sat primly in his chair and twiddled his thumbs.

"I admire your determination, Mr. von Ludens," said the little man. The horn-rimmed spectacles on his thin, pointed nose exaggerated the piercing gaze of his steel gray eyes. Byrd Wright spoke as precisely as an old-fashioned school teacher. "But be pleased to let me examine that extortion letter again."

Eric von Ludens thrust across his desk a sheet of paper and said with a perceptible Prussian accent, "Here it is. And I will not pay!"

Byrd Wright—better known as "The Ferret"—leaned forward, his eyes snapping eagerly. Barely touching the sheet with the tips of his long, tapered fingers, he drew the paper closer, and read the typed message:

VON LUDENS:

Unless the Fourth Trust Bank pays one million dollars in cash, you and all the officers of your pirates' institution will be killed at exactly 2:16 P.M., during the board of directors meeting to be held Thursday, July 5, 1934, at which time I will come and take the million. Therefore pay and save your lives.

Mortmain.

The Ferret set the tips of his fingers together. "Mortmain, Mr. von Ludens, is French for 'Dead Hand.' It is very interesting to look into the psychology—"

"Ach, damn it, I do not want a lesson in French, I called you here for protection!" thundered von Ludens.

The Ferret was unperturbed. He glanced at his watch, compared it with the electric

clock in von Ludens' office, and scrutinized the calendar. Then he announced, "It is now exactly 1:46 P.M., Thursday, July 5, 1934."

"Of course, it is! That is why I haff called you! Ferret? *Weasel* that iss more like it!"

The Ferret suddenly left his chair with the lithe, flashing quickness of the animal for which he had been named. He grabbed up the telephone on the desk. His quiet ease of motion betokened tough, wiry muscles which made him a contradictory combination of scholar and acrobat.

Von Ludens blinked and wondered how the Ferret had so suddenly contrived to reach the telephone; and his eyes widened even more as he wondered what had happened to the prim, old-maidish voice. The Ferret was calling number after number, pouring orders into the transmitter in a voice that crackled. And when finally he replaced the instrument, it smacked like the sling of a rifle snapped from right shoulder to port arms.

The Ferret again glanced at his watch, then announced, "It is now 1:56 P.M.—"

"Und I suppose it is still Thursday, July 5th, also?" interrupted von Ludens. Usually the butt of his elaborate sarcasm wanted to smack him one, but stayed his hand because von Ludens was a big man. The Ferret, with one swift jiu-jitsu application of finely co-ordinated strength, could have tied the bull-necked bank president into a knot—but von Ludens was a client; so the Ferret smilingly agreed to the date.

"Do something about it!" demanded von Ludens, irritated by the smile.

The Ferret turned to the door of the president's office and said, "Come in, Abner, and meet Mr. von Ludens."

The Ferret's assistant, Abner Sikes, was almost as large as von Ludens, but instead of being bulky like the middle aged financier, he was big boned and rangy. He was evidently well muscled and powerful, though his huge hands and feet looked awkward. Slung from his broad shoulders was a black leather case.

"I haff no time to meet the rest of your detective agency. I am—" Von Ludens reached for the extortion letter.

But before his thick fingers could pluck it from the desk, the Ferret in some inexplicable fashion crossed from the threshold to the desk and by a split fraction of a second beat von Ludens to the paper, all without any visible sign of haste.

"Let me retain this, please. I will have to scrutinize it as a clue to apprehending the blackmailer—"

"Apprehend! It is protection we want, not apprehension. Look—two o'clock, and in sixteen minutes—"

But the Ferret kept the paper, saying, "You are already protected. Abner and I are representing the Pyramid Insurance Company; our private patrol is surrounding the bank. And if you will be pleased to look out of the window, you will observe a cordon of police about the building and the entire block. We have been watching your bank ever since you received this demand, three days ago. Now, as to this letter—"

"But I need it. For the directors," maintained von Ludens, after a glance confirmed the Ferret's contention. "They will not believe me if I do not show them the paper. I have kept this secret, to avoid alarming our depositors, but now I must tell the directors, since you have not found the extortioner."

He reached for the note to pluck it from the Ferret's hand; but the Ferret's hand was elsewhere. And Sikes, the overgrown lout with the over-frank, boyish face, had taken a Grafex camera from his black case, racked out a lens as large as a saucer, and with surprising deftness focused it.

Click!

Abner began racking back the lens. The Ferret handed von Ludens back the letter.

"Now what?" demanded von Ludens.

"We have photographed it," explained the Ferret.

"*Dummkopf!*" grumbled von Ludens as he snatched the paper and stalked from his office to the board room. "You should photograph the criminals for a change!"

ABNER SIKES caught his superior's eye and grinned. "What do you make of it?"

The Ferret glanced at his watch, then replied, "In exactly twelve minutes someone is going to kill von Ludens and the board of

directors—if that letter is right. Let us sit outside the board room. With such general destruction going on, it might be dangerous inside."

Abner caught the shrewd twinkle of the Ferret's sharp eyes, and listened to him continue: "With police guarding the other door of the board room, and us watching the inner entrance, I think the directors will be safe."

The directors' room—or board room—with the other bank offices, was on a mezzanine floor which, like a big balcony, ran all around the inside of the building. At the inner side was a railing, looking over which one could see down below the main floor of the bank, with the public lobby, and the tellers' windows and cages.

Stepping out of von Ludens' office which adjoined the directors' room, the Ferret and Abner pulled up two chairs which they cocked back against the wall, one at either side of the directors' door. Abner drew out his service automatic, an awkward bludgeon of a weapon, but it seemed lost in his huge fist.

The Ferret smiled and said reprovingly, "Abner, use your head and your eyes. On a case like this we are seeking information. Let the police do the shooting. And you might even use your ears—*ach, verdammt Esel!*" he concluded, mimicking the irate von Ludens. "Shut up!"

Abner grinned, cocked his head to listen, but did not return his pistol.

Inside they heard von Ludens' booming voice reading the threatening note. Chairs scraped, the directors exclaimed incredulously; then there was a muttering.

"They are now in a huddle, studying the paper," announced the Ferret. "That's as plain as though I were looking."

They continued listening. Abner caught only garbled snatches of controversy; but the Ferret's sharp ears kept the blurred words untangled. He explained in a low voice that did not interfere with the sounds that came through the heavy door:

"The board of directors is heartily tired of von Ludens' arrogance. They are going to vote him out of office. They feel that this threat against the bank is levelled mainly at von Ludens, and that he has well earned the resentment of some fanatic—but they have

discounted the threat. Listen now, Abner—”

By straining his ears to the utmost, Abner was able to hear von Ludens's booming voice from the directors' room:

“You are jackasses! You laugh at the menace—and you wish to vote me out, do you? Go ahead and vote—I control the majority stock—I will break you, one at a time! I will—”

A bell rang. A telephone. Von Ludens's low muttering escaped even the keen-eared Ferret. Then heavy footsteps thumped across the board room.

“You wait! I will show you who is president! I have proxies. I will vote the stock owned by my ward, Sue Marlborough!”

As he launched that parting shot, von Ludens flung the door open and stamped down the hall toward his private office. At the door he turned to glare at the Ferret.

“So you have been eavesdropping, yes? I hope it does you good. You are here for protection, not listening. Loafer!”

He slammed the door of his office. The Ferret grinned, and glanced at his watch. “One minute to go,” he murmured, “and they will all be killed.”

He listened, and heard the directors declaiming in high wrath against von Ludens. The threatening letter had been dismissed as the work of a crank.

“That fat headed blusterer!” scoffed one director's voice. “He was ready to cough up a million in cash. He might have served with distinction in the war, but his courage must have evaporated. He's a hell of a soldier, if you ask me!”

The voice that followed was muffled. Abner tipped his chair forward. He decided that the Ferret's keen ears would no longer put him to shame. But the Ferret interfered.

“No, Abner, you must not eavesdrop,” he reproved. “Not unless your ears are so keen that you can do so without applying them to a keyhole. It would be very, very awkward if one of the directors were to jerk the door open and catch my assistant thus engaged. It would place me in a most embarrassing position.”

Abner grinned boyishly at the thought of the Ferret's being embarrassed. But that grin faded. He received a startling reminder that a minute had elapsed.

A TERRIFIC, deadly chattering suddenly crackled from inside the directors' room. Men cried out in amazement and agony. But their cries were cut off short. The room shook with the diabolical rattle of machine gun fire. The panels of the door at which Abner would have listened were torn to slivers. A row of bullet holes blossomed across its width, at the height of a man's waist. And bullets, whining and screaming, sang across the hall, spattering to pieces against masonry, burying themselves in plaster. Acrid, choking fumes leaked through behind the bullets, and the sickening, heavy chunking sounds within were followed by an ominous silence.

All in a brace of awful seconds. The Ferret, still keeping clear of the door of death, looked down from the mezzanine floor and onto the banking floor.

A tall, masked man in a flowing black smock and carrying a machine gun was just forcing the surprised guards below to toss their weapons into a heap in the center of the mosaic floor. Still commanding their silence, the solitary robber backed toward the vaults in which the reserve currency was stored.

Abner dropped his automatic into line and snapped a shot at the hooded unknown. He saw the peaked hood jump from the impact at shoulder-height. Instantly the robber's machine gun nosed upward, swept the railing of the mezzanine balcony with a stream of lead. Abner ducked. The Ferret ducked with him.

From outside the building came yells, the crackle of pistol fire, the ringing of alarm bells, and the scream of sirens. Private agency guards and police poured into the bank, weapons drawn, gas bombs ready to overcome the bandit their watchfulness had failed to keep out of the building.

The gas protection devices of the bank had already been set in operation—presumably by some quick-witted teller—but the blinding, choking fumes hampered the officers and checked their advance against the robber. The gas protected the bandit rather than the law. It drove the Ferret back from the rail of the mezzanine floor. He ran gasping to a window that opened to the street.

He was just in time to see a man plunge

from a window at the right. The man carried a bulging brief case. The Ferret's pistol jumped into line—but eyes smarting with tear-gas see double, if at all. Despite his fire, the solitary fugitive boarded a waiting automobile. And then a roaring spray of lead poured from the banking room below, and shotguns bellowed as the guards, drawn indoors by the disturbance, realized that their game was now on the outside and escaping.

The driver of the escape car outside gave it the gun. Police and private snipers opened fire from doorways, but the car sped on.

"He got a million dollars!" coughed a gas-choked teller. "Went right to the thousand-dollar-bills—one million—"

The Ferret, turning from his loophole, heard the cry. His face was grave as he said to Abner: "We lost the first round—but wait till the bell rings again."

Chapter II

WHY KILL THE JANITOR?

THE hell of rushing gas and flame-spurting weapons subsided. The police took charge of the banking rooms. City and private detectives crowded into the vault to check up the loss announced by the teller. An ambulance drew up to take charge of a clerk riddled by the bandit; and the Ferret, turning from his sniping post at the window, pocketed his pistol and went toward the board room.

The door of von Ludens' private office at the same moment crashed open, and the bank president, pale but raging, charged out, smoking pistol in hand.

"*Schweinhund!*" he roared, "your protection—we are robbed under your nose! Lucky I was called to my office—and I got a shot at the bandits from the window! Your agency is a loafer—"

"Pray calm yourself, Mr. von Ludens," was the Ferret's mild reply. "Something is wrong in the board room."

Von Ludens' eyes followed the gesture toward the door. He saw the bullet-riddled panel. Abner Sikes jammed his shoulder against the door and heaved. The wood creaked—cracked—splintered as the latch tongue tore the socket of the lock from the jamb. They crossed the threshold, but there

halted, aghast and horrified at the grisly spectacle inside.

Men lay about the large circular table where they had dropped. Their torn bodies were grotesquely sprawled, and some were literally cut in half, as though they had run athwart a buzz saw. The walls were gouged by the hail of bullets that had in a terrible second chopped seven men to bleeding, mangled masses of flesh.

Von Ludens swallowed, licked his lips. Abner Sikes turned as white as his collar, and would have bolted toward the door, but for the prim, precise voice of the Ferret who was saying, "Unusual—hmmmm! Truly striking, killing seven men in this fashion. Extraordinary dexterity on the part of the gunner. But how could he have gotten into the room—guarded at both entrances? To say nothing of the difficulty of getting out—"

"While we were shooting over the mezzanine railing," suggested Abner, "he could easily have escaped."

"But that still does not explain how he entered," persisted the Ferret, as though he were admonishing a stupid child.

Von Ludens' bluster had left him. He failed to damn the Ferret for having let the slayer escape.

"Maybe," hinted the Ferret, "someone disguised as a director killed the members of the board."

Von Ludens started. His small eyes sharply scrutinized the Ferret's brown, wrinkled face.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Mr. von Ludens," explained the Ferret, "that the killer—Mortmain, the Dead Hand—must have been in the room when you left it to go to your office. And thus we can explain the seeming impossibility of seven men chopped down in a room into which no killer could possibly have entered. His escape, during the excitement, would be easy. How many directors are there?"

Von Ludens answered, "Eight. And I make the ninth."

"But there are only *seven* here! How many were there in the board room when you entered?"

"Ach . . ." Von Ludens closed his eyes for a moment, then answered, "How should I know? I am not a detective, trained to

observation. I did not remain long enough to count them. They were trying to vote me out of office as president. I was angry. I left the room to answer the telephone. My private telephone. And I was going to show them who had the controlling interest. I would have voted the stock of my ward, Miss Marlborough. Those loafers—deposing me, Eric von Ludens—!”

And then he remembered that they were all dead, torn to pieces by a machine gun fired by the mysterious Mortmain.

“*Ach*, the poor fellows. I might be dead with them. We can not ask any of them how many were present at the meeting.”

“But who is missing?” wondered the Ferret.

Von Ludens made a circuit of the room, scrutinizing the faces that were branded with agony and amazement.

“It is Carter Morton who is missing! Morton was the most opposed to me.”

The Ferret pondered for a moment.

“Abner, look up Mr. Morton at once. See why he did not attend the directors’ meeting—or if he did attend it. Right now, Abner!”

Abner jumped at the last crackling syllables.

THE Ferret turned once more to von Ludens.

“Who called you to your private office? It must have been something important, to take you from a directors’ meeting.”

Von Ludens was plainly embarrassed. His heavy features flushed angrily, and he said, “That is none of your business. It was important, and that is sufficient. You investigators with foolish questions! Must you know why I left? Has a banker no privacy? Have you no sense to realize that there are confidential transactions?”

“Oh, quite so, Mr. von Ludens,” assured the Ferret. “I can readily assume that it must have been important. But you can see that I must be thorough.”

“Yes—that is so,” conceded von Ludens. “Thoroughness. A virtue so badly neglected these days.”

He turned to his private office. The Ferret did not follow him. Instead, he watched the police, who were beginning their examination of the slaughter house that had been a di-

rectors’ room. But despite his sharp, restless glance that followed every movement of the medical examiner, the fingerprint specialist, and the staff photographer as the positions of the mangled bodies were recorded by camera, tape line measurements, and pencilled notes, he could find no trace of the threatening letter which the mysterious “Mortmain” had mailed to von Ludens.

“Maybe,” he reflected, “von Ludens stuffed it into his pocket when he left the board room.”

The Ferret closely examined the circular table about which the victims of the mass murder had been sitting. It was exceptionally massive throughout, with thick top and moulded sides, ponderous central support column, and bulky pedestal with far-reaching, clawed feet. The heavy side moulding hung down from the table top well toward the floor all around. The table itself was ornately carved, by hand, as the Ferret decided, noting the tool marks never to be found in machine-manufactured furniture.

The top was inlaid in arabesques of pale wood that contrasted with the dark, heavy tropical hardwood of a variety that even the Ferret could not at once identify. Along the deep edge of the circular top was a band of brass rings, cunningly fitted into the wood. Altogether it was an unusual table, and would have been such even though seven men had not just dropped dead about its circumference, riddled by a flare of rifle fire.

The Ferret stooped to pick up a bullet which by some odd freak had ricocheted about the room without having been completely shattered. While deformed, the copper-jacketed slug was enough for a ballistic expert to study. That done, the Ferret went to the basement of the building. He had no reason to expect any clues in the basement, but the Ferret was thorough.

It was only then that he realized how widespread had been the savage, devastating flare of destruction that had swept the bank. He found Jens Olson, the janitor, lying near the boiler that furnished steam for the building.

The janitor’s square, amiably dull face was a mask of surprise. Had he lived another instant, slow-witted Jens might have begun to protest. As it was, one grimy hand

clutched at his chest. He had been expertly drilled through the heart. A red froth drooled from his lips and mingled with the tobacco juice that trickled from his mouth.

Near him lay the long slice bar with which Jens habitually chopped clinkers from the grate. He religiously cut the clinkers. In twenty years he had never once burned out a set of bars.

The door of the boiler was open. Jens apparently had been interrupted at his work.

"Who would shoot this harmless janitor—and why?" the Ferret asked himself. "The poor fellow couldn't possibly have made an effort to stop the bandit. Anyone moving that fast would have left Jens goggle-eyed. Even if the bandit escaped by the basement—which he didn't."

The Ferret peered into the firebox of the boiler. He saw an object that struck him as unusual fuel. It was a machine gun. The stock was briskly aflame.

There would be no fingerprints left on either wood or metal now. Someone had used a simple means to thwart identification. And by that same sign, someone was confident that the serial numbers on the imperishable steel of the weapon would afford no clue. The Ferret took the long slice bar and fished it out.

There was something else in the furnace besides coal. A shapeless bundle of cloth lay against the wall of the firebox, but it could not be touched without utterly destroying the shape which the ash still maintained. That would have to wait for more careful handling. It might be a pair of Jens' discarded overalls—but it might also be the hood and smock worn by the daring robber. And though charred cloth would thwart his skill, a metallic clasp or unconsumed button might give the Ferret a clue.

He stood for a moment scrutinizing the gun. Then his sharp eyes flashed about the boiler room, seeking something in which to wrap the clues. He saw a piece of burlap. He reached for it.

The Ferret's swiftness, starting without warning and ending without a jerk, had disconcerted Eric von Ludens little more than an hour previously and now that same uncanny fluence of motion saved the Ferret's life as he turned to get the burlap.

Even his sharp ears had not noted the silent opening of a door behind him. Pre-occupation had momentarily dulled his hearing. A pistol cracked—but the slug instead of boring the Ferret squarely between the shoulders, zipped through the loose drape of his coat. His motion toward the burlap was not halted, but merely converted into a continuous flash as he whirled, drew his pistol and fired.

His shot did not reach the lurking sniper. It bored through the corner of the partly opened door, and chunked into the jamb. The sniper's second shot went wild. The Ferret charged; but the door slammed shut as he reached it. The latch clicked, and the Ferret knew that before he could batter it down with the slice bar or run around to enter the passage from the other end, his assailant would have vanished.

He holstered his pistol, pursed his lips, and pondered for a moment.

"Someone," he said aloud, as though addressing a class of freshmen in mathematics, "objects to my getting those trophies. Therefore one concludes that they have not been burned enough to ruin them as clues." And he smiled quietly.

Chapter III

A NEW SUSPECT

HAVING obtained some substantial exhibits, the Ferret hastened back to the mezzanine floor. He found the police detectives, as well as one of his own men, still at work in the board room. He reported the death of Jens Olson, but said nothing about the shot that had so narrowly missed him.

"For cripes sake!" roared burly, red-faced John Healy, the chief inspector, thrusting his derby well back and scratching his bald head. "Who'd kill a harmless dope of a janitor? Why, you're nutty, Wright! The bandit took a nose dive out of a window opening on Farley Street. How about it, Clancy?"

"Sure as hell did, chief," affirmed the detective who had led the futile police cordon.

"Oh, very well, gentlemen," agreed the Ferret. "Then Jens Olson of course wasn't killed, and it was George Washington I found lying dead in the boiler room!"

He walked deliberately from the room. At the door he halted to have a word with Abner Sikes, who had returned from his investigation.

"That other director—Carter Morton," said the big fellow, toying with the sling strap of his combined camera case and investigation kit, "says he wasn't at the board meeting."

"And so, of course, that proves he wasn't there." The Ferret shook his head, sighed sorrowfully. Then he thrust his bundle of burlap into the huge hands and said ironically, "Get busy on this at once, Abner. Scrutinize it very, very carefully, Abner. And do not lose it or leave it lying in a street car."

The Ferret then stood aside to give John Healy gangway, and watched his broad shoulders block the hallway as he strode toward the door that led down to the boiler room.

"Hmmm . . . he does believe that something happened to Jens," murmured Byrd Wright. Then he turned toward the door to Eric von Ludens' private office.

He made no effort to be stealthy; but his footfalls were inaudible, and his twist on the doorknob was so deft that there was no betraying click. And thus for a few seconds the Ferret stood in the doorway, eavesdropping, although in full sight of anyone who cared to look. But both occupants of Eric von Ludens' office were engrossed.

Von Ludens was striding impressively back and forth as he thundered, "I am your guardian! You are a minor. You will vote your stock in this bank as I say! Is that plain?"

The girl in the office with him was young, blonde, and would have been exceptionally lovely, had her eyes not been tear-reddened and beginning to flash with anger. One slender white hand gripped the arm of her chair, and in the other she still clutched a handkerchief. The Ferret judged from von Ludens' tirade that she must be Sue Marlborough, his ward.

"It is plain," she defiantly retorted, "that you want to get control of my inheritance. To say nothing of making yourself obnoxious with your attentions, which are as unwelcome as they are out of place. A man of your age!"

Von Ludens flushed at her scornful jab at his age.

"I am old enough to have good sense!" he retorted. "That loafer, Jack—"

"Yes, and you ran Jack out of the country!" she interrupted. "I could claw your eyes out, you two-faced meddler! Now I know why you wanted him away—"

"Jack Grebner is a loafer!" flared von Ludens. Sue Marlborough dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief. Von Ludens finally sensed an audience and turned toward the door.

"Eavesdropping again? You—you—*defective*, that is what you are! You, with your protection—and all the directors killed under your nose! Get out of my sight—"

But the Ferret stepped into the room, closing the door after him. He smiled blandly at the irate bank president.

"As a representative of the Pyramid Insurance Company, I am entitled to inspect the scene of the crime," he explained.

Von Ludens backed down. He turned to Sue Marlborough and said, "Wait until tonight. I am busy with the insurance company. We will discuss your stock after dinner."

Sue's blue eyes flashed; but before she could voice her angry retort, the Ferret's glance made her change her mind. She regarded his wizened face for a moment, found that she could form no opinion as to his age, and was at loss to decide whether he was amusing or impressive. So she smiled—which Sue did charmingly—and left the room.

THE Ferret came to the point at once. "Carter Morton very positively asserts that he did not attend the board meeting—"

"So? But can he prove it?" demanded von Ludens. "Why would he miss a board meeting with a chance to vote me out of office? *Ach*—he is a liar! But none of those poor fellows can testify that he was there. That scoundrel! He turned them against me. Me, the President and founder of this bank! When my brewery was closed by prohibition, I took the remains of the von Ludens fortune and organized this bank. And now those traitors try to force me out of it."

Indignation and grief were in constant conflict. Von Ludens was obviously shaken by the wholesale butchery, but he could not forget the revolt of the directors, nor his wrath against Carter Morton.

"Miss Marlborough seems to object to your voting her stock," said the Ferret.

"More ingratitude! She is stubborn because I ordered Jack Grebner out of the house. The son of my old friend, Paul Grebner—one of the founders of the bank. He served with me in the war, as my lieutenant. He died of wounds received in action; but he lived long enough to make me guardian of his son. But the boy accuses me of misappropriating his inheritance—me, Eric von Ludens! When he knows that his father's investments in other banks failed, and the court seized his stock in this bank to meet the assessments! But the girl is bewitched by him. Sol! Now you know why Sue Marlborough objects that I vote her stock to keep me from being deposed from the presidency of my own bank."

As he listened, the Ferret's steel gray eyes had been shifting restlessly about the richly appointed private office. They strayed for an instant toward the open window, and noted that the pane was cracked. He wondered why it had not been replaced. And then his glance shifted toward the broad desk, and the filing cabinets in the far corner. Their tops were adorned with odd bits of wood carving: small elephants, a full rigged ship, and a man on a horse. The detailed execution was strikingly faithful.

"So—you admire the carving, yes?" said von Ludens, noting the intent scrutiny of the Ferret's keen eyes.

"Mmmm . . . yes, very much," said the Ferret. He stepped to the cabinet and examined the miniature elephant. "Most unusual, such manual skill."

"Unusual? *Ach*, it is nothing. I can do anything when I try it. Operate the brewery until that stupid prohibition kept it closed for years. Found a bank. Or execute masterly wood carving. That is what exasperates me—those people who try to vote me out of office as president of the bank! *Verdammt dummköpfe!* Fools, that is what they are, thinking they can do things as well as I can."

The Ferret, fingertips meticulously placed together, nodded his agreement. Then he said, "I have much work to do, Mr. von Ludens. You will be so good as to excuse me. But do not have the board room disturbed, even if the police are through. I wish to scrutinize it more carefully."

"That is good," agreed von Ludens. "But you should scrutinize also that Carter Morton who was not there."

"Pretty big contract for one man," murmured the Ferret, "killing seven directors, robbing a bank, and killing the janitor."

"Mmmm . . . what? Kill *who?*" demanded von Ludens, who in his preoccupation had seemingly missed the last casual remark.

"The janitor," repeated the Ferret.

"*Ach*, poor Jens! Who would kill him, and why?"

"That," said the Ferret, "is something that has puzzled me. I am really more interested in Jens' death than anyone else's. There were some clues in the furnace—"

He abruptly turned toward the door and with precise, deliberate steps walked down the hallway and to the stairs.

"Von Ludens," he reasoned, "may still be in grave peril, even though he escaped the wholesale murder. He should have protection at his house. And this Jack Grebner, whoever he is, will bear looking up. He has a grudge, and so has Sue Marlborough evidently. She might have stirred this Grebner up to almost anything."

At the side door the Ferret suddenly checked himself. He had forgotten to ask von Ludens for the letter that the mysterious "Mortmain" had mailed, demanding a million in cash and promising to come and get it if it were not forthcoming.

However, he paused only for a moment, then decided to wait until later. And as he took the wheel of his car, Byrd Wright, the Ferret, was smiling and whistling softly as he did when he was toying with an interesting thought.

Chapter IV

THE FERRET TAKES A PRISONER

THAT evening found the Ferret driving unobtrusively down the quiet streets of the suburb of Glenwood. He was there be-

cause Abner had reported that Carter Morton, the eighth director, who had by such an odd chance missed attending the fatal meeting of the bank, resided here.

The suburb had evidently once been fashionable but now had fallen into decay. And Morton's spacious white-pillared colonial house toward which the Ferret drove, was also on its way to decay. The untrimmed hedges, the rough lawn and the perceptible scaling of the paint on the house, indicated that the house owner was no longer as well off as he had once been.

The Ferret drove up the unkept drive, stepped out of his car and knocked at the old-fashioned door-knocker. A minute later he was in the rambling library, facing the man he had come to see. The furniture of the room was all old, massive.

Morton, tall, lean, and saturnine, regarded his wizened little visitor with ill-concealed annoyance.

"So you're another one of them, are you?" he greeted. "All right, have it over with. As I told your office boy, I didn't attend the board meeting because I was fairly certain that I would plaster that fat-head von Ludens. He and the bank hold too much of my paper. I was heartily in favor of a new president but I couldn't afford to antagonize him by voting for a new deal. Now you sing your lines."

Morton's dark, sombre eyes challenged the Ferret to dispute him.

"Your frankness, Mr. Morton, is most commendable," the little detective precisely enunciated. "But I wonder if some of your household—your servants—anyone at all, could substantiate that statement?"

"Oh, dry up!" snapped the bank official. "I'm a bachelor, and I have no household nor servants—barring a part-time housekeeper. I eat out, drive my own car, and mow my own lawn for exercise. And because that damned von Ludens gave me several bum steers on the market and I've not yet recovered, I suspect him of selling the stock he counselled me to buy. So you'll have to take my word for my staying away today. Or if you can't, what will you do about it?"

Morton was in an ugly mood. But despite his financial straits, the Ferret judged

from his breath that he drank good whiskey.

"The guards at the stairs of the bank, Mr. Morton," said the Ferret, "know that no one but members of the board entered. Yet someone in that room killed seven men. And very oddly, Mr. Morton, they were all shot from the front."

"Well?" Morton glared belligerently.

The Ferret looked at him quietly.

"Mr. Morton, what I came to ask you about was a peculiar thing I noticed in the board room. The table there is most unusual—a huge circular table with a very large moulding that comes well down toward the floor. A man with a machine gun could easily have concealed himself under that table, beneath the cover. All he would have had to do would be to swing the gun around in a circle to mow down every man around the table."

"Well, what about it?" demanded Morton.

The Ferret's eyes were narrow and piercing as he resumed.

"I also found fairly recent marks on the floor. Marks left by the four legs of another table—the more ordinary long rectangular table usually found in directors' rooms. Now I wonder just when that old table was replaced by this new and unusually shaped circular table with its long moulding."

Morton changed both in color and expression. He said in a strained voice, "So that rat of a von Ludens has been hinting things, has he?"

The Ferret's smile was exasperatingly innocent as he countered, "And what would *he* hint? I thought that perhaps you could tell me if you knew anything about that unusual table. When was it installed? You, as a director—"

Morton swore violently.

"That dirty skunk! Well, I'll tell you. I sold that table to the bank. It came from the house here—an antique—"

"Ah . . . *you* did!" interrupted the Ferret. "Then you see how important it is for me to know where you were this afternoon—"

"Say! Wait a minute, you little shrimp!" snarled Morton. "Are you hinting that I hid beneath it and killed the directors? If I were a crook, I'd have a ready alibi. As it is, I have no such thing."

He glared at the little detective. The Ferret smiled back.

Apparently the smile was all that was needed to provoke the bank official. He suddenly scowled and made a lunge at the Ferret that, had it landed, would have knocked the detective through the glass window behind and well out onto the lawn. But it did not land. The Ferret, feet still in place, swayed lightly aside. And as he did so, his hands caught the oncoming fist, at the same time that his body twisted and he gave a heave.

Morton looped the loop, landing in a sitting position and facing the opposite direction. The impact shook the walls. He was too dazed even to speak.

"When you can control yourself, I will be pleased to hear the rest of your statement," said the Ferret. "And unless I am mistaken, you will be glad to make it. Good evening, sir."

BOWING formally, the Ferret picked his way to the door. He stepped on the starter of his coupé and headed for von Ludens' residence on the other side of town.

The banker's home was a large house within a magnificent estate. A high wall inclosed extensive grounds. On the opposite side of the road, also inside a high wall with almost park-like grounds, was the huge brick bulk of the old von Ludens brewery, now dark and empty. It had been the brewery builder's whim to have his home close to the establishment that had built his fortune.

As the Ferret expected, he found a police guard posted at the entrance to the von Ludens estate. As a representative of the insurance company, the Ferret, of course, could have secured admittance without having to detail his reasons, but he elected otherwise. Without pausing long enough to be recognized, he rounded the block, parked in a dark driveway, and busied himself with a case he took from the turtleback of his coupé.

Presently he emerged from the drive. He now wore overalls of pre-war vintage, and a cap that was even older and grimmer. His small feet were lost in shoes literally six sizes too large, although, through stuffing the excess space with rags, he managed to navi-

gate. He walked with a peculiar, shambling, shuffling gait which with his now stooped shoulders made him a grotesque creature. And finally, his face and hands were black.

In daylight the illusion, if viewed face to face, might not be utterly convincing, but at night, as it now was, it would serve the Ferret's purpose; not that of posing as a Negro, but simply to make himself less visible. And finally, if his presence were noted, the observer would report a colored prowler, and not the Ferret.

He doubled about and approached von Ludens' estate from the off side. As he passed the side entrance, he noted a parked roadster. A well built, blond young man sat at the wheel. He was obviously waiting, and anxiously so, judging from his impatient glances at his watch and then at the gate. The Ferret shuffled over to the curbing.

"White folks, can yo'all tell me whut time 'tis?"

The young fellow looked annoyed; then seeing an old Negro bent double over a gnarled, home-made cane, he grinned and said, "About quarter after eight, Sam."

The Ferret effusively thanked him and shuffled on; but once in an angle of the wall, the Ferret, noting that there were no passers-by, acted decidedly out of character. His black hands shot out, touched the crest of the wall. Then followed a swiftly moving blur: the Ferret clearing an obstacle.

As he picked his way through the maze of foliage inside, the Ferret was speculating as to the identity and purpose of the young man who waited at the side entrance. But, approaching the von Luden house, a three-storied specimen of Victorian architecture at its very worst, he dismissed his query for the time and stealthily circled the building.

He slipped down a passageway which, running along beneath the veranda, paralleled the rear of the house. A screen door, hooked on the inside, checked the Ferret only for an instant; and then he was in a basement hall which ran from front to rear.

To his right was the kitchen and pantry; to his left, laundry rooms, store rooms, and, judging from a locked door, a wine cellar. But the room beyond, unlocked and at the foot of the stairs leading to the basement, proved more interesting.

It was a workshop where von Ludens followed his hobby of wood carving. In a corner was a typewriter desk at which, presumably, during his odd moments, von Ludens would abandon his carving to type memoranda or outline some of his more devious bits of planning.

The Ferret's eyes flashed from point to point. He paused to inspect a war-time relic, a machine gun—or, more strictly speaking, a military automatic rifle—that hung on the wall. It had hung there a long time. Dust and kitchen fumes had plainly outlined its shape against the wall. The Ferret was uncommonly interested in machine guns and gunners. He lifted the weapon from its pegs.

It was a wooden dummy, cunningly carved to the most minute detail. The dark, subdued metallic lustre of blued metal was simulated with graphite and finely powdered iron filings, well rubbed into the wood. But even more appealing to the Ferret was the certainty that the dummy was new! This he deduced from the wood of the stock, and some shavings near the work bench. He thrust a handful of shavings into his pocket, returned to the gun, and noted that the sling strap was of old, seasoned leather.

"Mmmm . . . most unusual," pondered the Ferret. "Someone tossed a machine gun of this very type into the boiler room at the bank, this morning. Most ingenious. Who would suspect that it had been stolen from von Ludens' workshop . . . and who stole it? Morton? Jack Grebner?"

But this was no time for study. The Ferret resumed his insatiable prying. He sat down to the typewriter desk, reached for a sheet of paper, and lifted the lid. But no typewriter rose into view.

"Maybe," reflected the Ferret, "he uses a portable—or maybe this old desk serves as a general purpose work-table."

His observations were abruptly cut short. The door to the workshop was opening.

SUE MARLBOROUGH, carrying a light suitcase, stood in the doorway. The Ferret judged from that, as well as her dark, tailored dress and simple hat, that she was travelling; and her attitude of alertness and caution hinted that von Ludens, her guardian, was not in on the secret.

But why of all places should she be entering his workshop?

She turned toward the typewriter desk, and for the first time saw the Ferret—not a wizened, kindly-faced person of uncertain age, but an exceedingly black, disreputable Negro.

She screamed, whirled and fled down the passageway. The Ferret heard the screen at the rear slam. He leaped the desk, pausing only to swing the lid into place so as to leave no trace of his intrusion. Sue Marlborough thus far had no direct bearing on the bank robbery, but in view of her stormy interview with von Ludens, and her accusing him of sharp dealings, the Ferret decided to follow her.

He heard Sue's footsteps as she ran along the passageway beneath the veranda and up the concrete steps to the ground level. But swift as the Ferret was, he was unable to gain enough distance to get sight of the lovely fugitive before she vanished in the tangle of vegetation and winding paths of the grounds. However, he heard her, and speed rather than stealth now seemed to be her aim. She was heading toward the side gate of the estate.

Despite his cumbersome shoes, the Ferret was fast on his feet; and though not familiar with the grounds, he was gaining, and his approach was as noiseless as it was swift. Sue was just around a curve hidden by foliage.

Then the Ferret heard a crash. She had stumbled. Then a scream—not of pain or annoyance, but of terror.

He bounded forward, a streak in the gloom. There was a second outcry, but this was abruptly stifled. The Ferret caught the whitish blur of the girl's face. She was struggling with a dark, shapeless form that towered in the darkness. The Ferret saw the slender girl crumple as though a blow had knocked her unconscious.

He stretched out in an incredibly swift lunge as her assailant bent over her. The fellow was bulky and well muscled; yet, caught off guard, the Ferret's assault sent him pitching sidewise and crashing into a hedge.

Thus far, the Ferret held all the aces; but as he shifted to get a hold that would in one move pull his quarry from the under-

growth and paralyze him to submission, there was a crashing from the right, and a low, inarticulate snarl as a second broad-shouldered man in a light suit suddenly came out of nowhere and launched a flying tackle that carried him and the Ferret smashing into the thicket.

The shock dazed the Ferret and knocked him breathless; nothing less than a man of iron could have endured the impact of that hard shoulder. His assailant was likewise numbed for a moment by the crash, but recovered first.

He seized the Ferret by the throat, dragged him clear of the tangle of undergrowth, and with one powerful hand held him on unsteady feet as the other hand doubled into an annihilating fist.

But the blow never landed. In one split second the Ferret exploded into action. Hands, feet and shoulders moved simultaneously. The unknown assailant yelled with pain, but the terrific thump as he hit the ground hammered him breathless. Part of the force of the thump came from the fact that the Ferret was on top of him when he landed. With a deep sigh, the unknown man in the light suit quivered and went limp—knocked out cold.

Immediately the Ferret was up again. He turned to look for the first man, the one who had throttled Sue Marlborough.

But there was no one in sight. Not even the girl. Her suitcase, smashed open, lay in the center of the walk. Then beyond, in the bushes, the Ferret heard a crackling, tearing sound. He plunged that way, pistol in hand.

The crackling suddenly ceased. But the silence was more ominous than the noise.

The Ferret suddenly realized that if the kidnaper—or kidnappers—were to be stopped, he had to have assistance. Flashlights, and men to search the brushy grounds.

He blew a shrill blast on his whistle, then drew his pistol and fired three shots.

After a moment or two, feet came pounding down the walk toward him. Flashlights showed.

Stooping, the Ferret quickly rolled his still unconscious assailant into the cover of a thick bush. That done he jerked out his handkerchief and hurriedly mopped the

black from his face as a policeman from the guard at the gate, summoned by the whistle and shots, came pounding forward.

The patrolman recognized the Ferret, having worked with him on other cases, and listened, wide-eyed, to his account of the kidnaping.

"I'm going back to see von Ludens," said the Ferret as he finished. "That is, just as soon as I get the rest of this make-up off. You better get all the help you can and search the grounds."

The patrolman turned and hurried for the gate and the nearest call-box. The moment he was out of sight, the Ferret calmly dragged his still unconscious victim from the bush, shouldered him, and slipped out through the side gate. As he passed through he noted that the roadster that had been parked there was still there. But now the young man who had been in it was no longer there.

Reaching his own car, the Ferret deftly bound and gagged his prisoner who was now beginning to show signs of life. Then unceremoniously he crowded him down into the cramped rumble seat of the coupé, and closed the rumble seat lid tight over him.

Then, quite casually, the Ferret wet his handkerchief with water from the radiator, cleaned the rest of the blacking from his hands and face, climbed into his seat—and calmly drove the coupé back up the main drive of the von Ludens estate.

Chapter V

MONEY TO BURN

THE Ferret found the von Ludens mansion in an uproar. A police detective was at the telephone, pouring orders in to headquarters!

"She's gone without a trace—yeah, that private dick, Byrd Wright, ran into the jam, but the kidnaper got away with the Marlborough girl. . . . Say, what do you think we *been doing?* Cutting paper dolls? Sure, we searched the grounds from hell to breakfast. The tracks end suddenly, and we're up a tree . . ."

And then Eric von Ludens appeared, nailed the Ferret, and said, "*Ach, Mr. Wright!* Get that scoundrel! I am offering

a reward. Five thousand dollars. It's a kidnaping plot. Look!"

He thrust a sheet of paper at the Ferret. It was a brief, hand-written note addressed to Sue Marlborough; and signed "Jack." The Ferret picked out the salient lines:

I'm sick and tired of your being in von Ludens' house. I've tried to keep away from you ever since I was wiped out when that bank went sour, but I'm tired of stalling. Anyway, you won't be wealthy much longer, so your fortune won't stand between us to put me in a false position. I'll meet you at the side entrance tonight at eight fifteen. Be ready to travel.

JACK.

The Ferret pondered a moment, then said, "Sounds like an elopement. But what I ran into while I was patrolling the grounds didn't look so much like a lovers' meeting."

"It is a trap! It is a trick! He is kidnaping her! I was right when I ordered him out of the house. *Tauchenichts!* Bum! That is what he is, that Jack Grebner!"

And then a detective interposed: "Damn funny he left his car parked at the curbing. The ownership certificate shows it's Grebner's."

"You detectives!" snorted the irate German. "That is simple. With this alarm, he would be caught before he left town in his car. So he took her in some other car. Right under your noses. *Ach*, what dummies! Me, I am an old man, but I am a better detective!"

The Ferret saw no good reason for mentioning the prisoner he had in the back of his coupé. With kidnaping added to wholesale slaughter and daring banditry, he wanted to question his captive in his own way before turning him over to the police. So he said to von Ludens, "Maybe this is not Grebner's work. Perhaps that chap signing himself 'Mortmain'—Dead Hand—is back of it all. It bears all the earmarks of his daring work."

And so saying, the Ferret stepped to the door, leaving von Ludens and the detectives to digest this theory.

He took the wheel of his car and drove to his quarters.

There he found Abner Sikes awaiting his

return. The young giant shouldered the captive, at the Ferret's instructions, and carried him up to the Ferret's living room, where they unbound him.

The prisoner had regained his strength and wits, and was in a high fury. It was with difficulty that Abner Sikes restrained him.

"Calm yourself, my dear sir," said the Ferret to the struggling prisoner. "Husky as you are, Abner has the advantage. And if you will listen, perhaps you will be pleased to stay here as our guest."

"Where's Sue?" the prisoner demanded. His square-jawed, strong face was wrathful, and his blue eyes blazed.

"I'm about to get to that," was the Ferret's placid answer. "I fancy you are Jack Grebner?"

"I am! And I'll take the two of you to pieces—"

"Do save yourself the exertion, please. Your sentiment does you a world of credit. But listen just a moment."

In spite of his high rage, Grebner relaxed. The Ferret, he decided, was a harmless, kindly little freak. And at a word from the Ferret, Abner Sikes released his grip.

"All right!" snapped Grebner. "Sound off!"

"Miss Marlborough has disappeared. You wrote her a note—"

"Certainly I wrote her a note!"

"And you were waiting for her when a disreputable-looking Negro asked you what time it was." The Ferret placed his finger tips together, beamed as he saw Grebner's eyes widen, and then resumed, "I followed her through the grounds. When I overtook her, she was struggling with—"

"I heard her scream, and I jumped the fence," interrupted Grebner.

"Yeah—and you sure played the devil doing it!" said the Ferret peevishly. "You laid me out just as I was going after the fellow that really grabbed her. And while I was stopping to argue with you—they got away with Miss Marlborough completely."

The prisoner blinked. "Good Lord, was that you I tackled? It couldn't be! Why, I could break you in two—"

The Ferret smiled indulgently. "I'm afraid you couldn't. But then big men are always

over-estimating themselves. However, that's neither here nor there. The important thing is this: Von Ludens has the note you sent Sue, and he has turned it over to the police—and they are hunting you now as the kidnaper! So you had better hide out."

"Me—kidnap her!" The prisoner's face was dazed, then indignant. "But I didn't! You know I didn't! I tried to save her! But if that damned lying guardian of hers—that von Ludens—"

The Ferret's gesture checked the wrathful outpour.

"I'm sure you had nothing to do with it. For one thing, you don't look quite—er—cunning enough to have planned a thing like this. But letting the police think you are the kidnaper will be the very luckiest thing that could have happened."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that the kidnaper, seeing the police searching everywhere for you, will get careless—and he will give himself away. Am I right?"

"Yes." The answer, however, was a little dubious. "But suppose they catch *me*?"

"They won't. For one thing, because I am going to hide you where they will never find you. And even if they did, you could easily prove your innocence, couldn't you?"

Young Jack Grebner nodded. "Sure. Sue would come right out and tell them." He flushed. "We've known each other since we were kids. But von Ludens shut down on me, when he knew we planned to get married. He's not her personal guardian, though, thank goodness. He just holds her investments in trust, by the terms of her father's will. And he's stealing her money, now that he's grabbed most of mine. But Sue and I were going to slip out of the state tonight and get married, regardless."

Suddenly, with remembrance of the events of that night, he threw his hands up, cried out. "But now she's gone! And where will we find her—how will we find her?"

The Ferret shook his head. "We'll have to do the best we can—that's all."

"But who did it? Who could have done it?"

"It looks to me," said the Ferret slowly, "like the work of—Mortmain—the Dead Hand. But that remains to be seen."

HAVING finally persuaded young Grebner to make himself at home in one of the rear rooms and relax, the Ferret beckoned to Abner and led the way to his study.

"All right, lad, what did you dig up while I was busy?"

Abner Sikes' round face showed perplexity, as he replied, "I learned lots, but I can't digest it. For instance, I went to the basement of the bank on my way from the building. I saw the police scooping a bundle out of the firebox. It was ash, and it collapsed in handling. But I could still see that the bundle contained a good many packets of *thousand-dollar-bills*!"

"Hmram . . . extraordinary, Abner. Just fancy a bandit burning his loot!"

Abner shook his head. "That's what puzzled me. I've been wondering whether the robbery might not have been just camouflage, and the killing of the directors the real motive."

"And so," was the Ferret's ironic comment, "the butcher, being a high-minded person and not wishing any monetary profit for his work, killed poor old Jens Olson and then stuffed a million dollars in currency into the fire. And then, after the escape of the bandits, someone took a shot at me, which distracted me and kept me from salvaging any of the burning money. But what else, Abner?"

The Ferret's assistant thrust a huge hand into his pocket, fumbled for a moment, and dragged out a thousand-dollar banknote.

"I came near forgetting this," he explained, "I was so puzzled about the rest of them being burned. It was lying behind the door, and the police hadn't noticed it. And I figured you might make more sense out of such foolishness than they could."

The Ferret studied the bill for a moment, then thrust it into his desk, murmuring, "With times as they are—and yet some people literally have money to burn! Now what have you learned about the weapons I took from the fire?"

"That machine gun is of German manufacture. Looks like a war trophy. Can't trace it, as most of those that did come into the country were smuggled in by returning troops. Prohibited by army regulations, but company supply sergeants got around that

when they packed regimental property for shipment back to the States."

"Very good, Abner," approved the Ferret. "That's why this 'Dead Hand Mortmain' saw no harm in leaving the metal parts with the serial number. And now I want you to get busy with the microscope and do a little laboratory work—which is about all you're good for, being too big and awkward for prowling about."

He drew from his bulging pocket a handful of wood shavings.

"Study these," directed the Ferret, "and find out what kind of wood it is. I'm going back to inspect that tangled jungle of a garden around von Ludens' house. Unless the kidnaper took wings, he couldn't possibly have gotten Sue Marlborough over the wall before the police surrounded the place. If you wish, you may talk to young Grebner."

"How did you come out with Carter Morton?" wondered Abner. "He has the vilest temper—"

"Mr. Morton," explained the Ferret, "will not care to sit down for another day or two, I venture to say. But now that his wrath has had a chance to subside, I may interview him again. His dislike for von Ludens is positively rabid. He is in debt both to the bank and to von Ludens. And he sold the bank that circular table beneath which a gunner could have concealed himself to wipe out the directors. You may also ponder on that, Abner."

But the Ferret paused at the door to deliver an afterthought: "It may also interest you to know that thousand-dollar-bill is a counterfeit. And there, Abner, is food for thought. How did a man as busy as this Mortmain have time to pick out the counterfeits? And why did he insist on discarding them before he left the bank? . . . Obviously, the shot fired at me was to keep me from learning what kind of money was burning so briskly," concluded the Ferret. "We now have something to work on."

Chapter VI

SMOKED OUT

THE following morning the Ferret returned to von Ludens' house to renew the past night's vain search of the grounds.

He was certain there must be some revealing trace.

A special delivery messenger was coming out just as the Ferret arrived and von Ludens was opening the letter when the investigator was admitted.

"*Ach*, Mr. Wright—look!" he exclaimed. "It is just as I told you last night. That scoundrel, Mortmain, has kidnapped her. He demands ransom at eleven o'clock tonight—read it!"

The Ferret glanced at the note. Instead of being typed, it was made up of letters and words cut from a newspaper and pasted on a sheet.

VON LUDENS:

Bring two hundred thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills to Oak Hill Cemetery at eleven o'clock tonight, and I will release Sue Marlborough. If you fail, she dies! Likewise she dies if you send marked money, or notify the police.

MORTMAIN.

The name had been cut from the newspaper which had contained the account of the slaughter at the bank.

"What will you do, Mr. von Ludens?" wondered the Ferret as he returned the note.

He was also wondering why the astounding Mortmain had not typed the demand for ransom, as he had done in his threat against the directors of the Fourth National; but this query he did not voice.

"I must raise the money," moaned von Ludens. "He will kill her! *Ach*, what shall I do? The bank will not advance me two hundred thousand dollars. I am broke. That last stock decline has taken all my personal funds."

The Ferret pondered.

"You said that you were holding Miss Marlborough's legacy in trust, did you not?"

"Yes. That is so. I am so shocked that I did not think."

"Then," suggested the Ferret, "why not sell her stock in the bank?"

"That is good. You are a smart fellow! But such a terrible loss to sell now when the market is so low. That poor girl will be penniless."

"Better than being dead," said the Ferret. "And you had best not tell the police."

"But you, Mr. Wright. Will you watch the cemetery?"

The Ferret shook his head.

"No. Not when a young woman's life is at stake. Much as I want to see justice done, I would not put her in danger."

THE Ferret returned to his quarters after a lengthy conference with his friend, the Chief of Detectives. Burly, red-faced John Healy was wrathful and baffled; and the insurance company, despite the Ferret's efforts, was resigned to paying the ruinous claim that had resulted from the raid on the bank. But the Ferret had left them with a hint:

"That must have been an inside job. Now that the excitement is over, put a detective to work in the bank. As janitor, for instance. The insider, if there is one, will slip. . . . But do not enter the board room. I am not through there."

Later, the Ferret outlined the results of his conferences to Abner Sikes, concluding, "Now if you weren't such an overgrown clown, I could have worked you into the bank. But they all know you. However, I think you could be keeping an eye on Carter Morton."

He paused thoughtfully, and then looked up. "By the way, what kind of wood are those shavings I gave you?"

"It is odd hardwood," said Abner, "from the East Indies. It is at times used for furniture, though not to much extent, as it is difficult to work and more difficult to season. How does it fit into the picture?"

"So far, Abner," replied the Ferret, "it does not fit. I had at first thought that these shavings came from the piece from which that dummy machine gun in von Luden's workshop had been carved. But judging from the stock of the weapon, such is not the case. There is a similarity in color, but the machine gun was carved of an odd shade of black walnut. Thus we are off the track. But keep the shavings, Abner. They will make admirable kindling, if nothing else."

Abner grinned.

The Ferret began outlining his campaign for the evening.

"I had to reassure old von Ludens," he

said, "so that he would not be too worried about the possibility that my prowling would endanger the life of Sue Marlborough. Actually, however, I will be at hand. Von Ludens is a hot-tempered old fellow, and he may precipitate a fatal quarrel with the kidnaper's messenger. So we will cover Oak Hill Cemetery in this wise—"

And the Ferret outlined his procedure, which took fully into account the possibility that Abner's shadowing of Carter Morton might be utterly unsuccessful.

THAT night the Ferret's battered coupé slipped soundlessly into the darkness of a side street. Its decrepitude was purely external. The hood concealed a powerful engine instead of the kind that its lines indicated.

The Ferret parked his deceptive vehicle in the drive of a vacant house not far from the walls of Oak Hill Cemetery. The rendezvous was ideal, as the graveyard was extensive and its further edge was a considerable distance from the straggling outskirts of the city.

The Ferret, clad in a dark suit, moved as swiftly but unobtrusively as his namesake. Thus far he was playing a lone hand; but he knew that Abner Sikes would in due course be at the wheel of the coupé, ready to drive it into action at the first sign of alarm. He glanced at his watch; it was but nine-fifty-five, instead of eleven, the hour specified by the kidnaper. But the Ferret believed in promptness.

For an instant he was visible as he entered the gateway nearest the city; after that only a forewarned observer could have followed his silent, darting, progress among the tombstones that gleamed spectrally in the mist-dimmed vestige of moon glow. He paused to listen, to sniff the air for odors foreign to the locality. He caught a suggestion of tobacco smoke.

"According to theology," he observed to himself, "the less righteous of the dead do smoke—but in the passive rather than in the active voice. And the absence of feminine perfume excludes a necking party . . . hmmm . . . stale pipe fumes. . . ."

He veered off sharply, heading toward the far angle of the expanse.

"Fumes from a hot engine," he next ob-

served. "‘Bromptness’ is a virtue as well as thoroughness. . . . I wonder why he is early?"

He heard the soft purr of a motor, and then its expiring cough. The Ferret's stealthy advance became more deliberate. As he moved, he paused to listen and look for Mortmain's scouts. If the kidnaper had no scouts out to overpower possible police or private protection, then he was undoubtedly an ass, which last the Ferret could scarcely assume.

Suddenly three men, evidently from the newly arrived car outside, entered the cemetery. The Ferret saw that they were masked. He wondered if he had missed the scouts; and then he heard a low whistle. Then an answering note, and a mutter of voices. He distinguished von Ludens' thick voice:

"You will find the money correct. Here is the package . . ."

Another muttered comment. The Ferret shifted to catch a view of von Ludens, who was obscured by the bulky masonry of a tomb. Thus for an instant he lost sight of the three figures who were advancing. That instant proved critical.

He heard a sharp report, a yell of terror, then a rattling burst of fire. The Ferret broke cover, drawing his pistol as he bounded forward. Von Ludens, bulky and towering in the dim moonlight, was spraying lead at a single madly running figure racing for the car. Flame poured from the pistol that danced in his hand. He had dropped two in their tracks, and was determined that the third should not escape.

"*Ach*, you scoundrel, you *will* blackmail me!" he bellowed, charging after the survivor.

Next moment a motor roared to life. Gears clashed; and then someone in the waiting car shot a fusillade at the pursuing banker. The fugitive bounded to the running board. Ready hands jerked him in as von Ludens again fired.

The machine leaped forward with a lurch. The Ferret, clearing the gate ahead of von Ludens, just missed a chance to grab hold of the baggage rack. He poured a hail of lead into the rear end of the machine, then whirled as he heard von Ludens, cursing and grunting, slip a fresh clip into his pistol.

"Steady!" snapped the Ferret. "Don't get careless with that gun!"

VON LUDENS halted, his face blank with amazement.

Then the Ferret heard the familiar engine note of his own car. Abner was at the wheel and driving like the hammers of hell, heading toward the scene of the firing. Headlights flashed around the angle of the wall; an instant later, brakes squealed, and the door slammed open.

The Ferret bounded into place beside Abner. "Now step on it!"

Abner slipped the gears and tramped on the accelerator. The super-powered car took the gas, leaped forward like a panther, and landed in the highway. Far ahead of them a tail light winked, dipped out of sight behind a swell in the road, flickered into view again.

"We'll get 'em!" roared Abner, as the drumming of the engine became a high pitched, vengeful whine. "Had a hunch you might need it. I had it idling when you opened the show. Haven't lost more'n a couple seconds stopping."

The Ferret heard the distant scream of a police siren. Someone had phoned in an alarm. And then, looking back, he saw headlights far behind.

"Von Ludens must be trying to follow," observed the Ferret. "Step on it, Abner—don't let those fellows escape. *You've got to stop them!*"

Abner settled down to getting the most out of the engine; and the Ferret, trusting his assistant, slumped back against the cushions, reloaded his pistol, and began reviewing the odd features of the murderous exchange of fire in the graveyard.

The Ferret had noted inconsistencies which even his quick wits could not readily interpret; but presently he began to smile, and then he whistled softly and tunelessly.

"Drive like hell, Abner," he said. "We must catch them."

And Abner, startled at the Ferret's unprecedented language, outdid himself.

THE fugitive car, though powerful, lost speed at each turn; and the desperate driver, noting the glare of headlights behind

him, dared not slow down enough to cut into a side road. Abner, on the contrary, jockeyed deftly around the curves, wasting no time in braking and then regaining speed. The Ferret could now see the license number ahead.

"Look out for trouble, Abner," he cautioned as he saw the rear glass knocked out of the fugitive car. Even as he spoke, a black muzzle was thrust through the opening.

Abner swerved. The car ahead lurched as its gunner sprayed a volley of lead at the pursuers.

Slugs rattled against the Ferret's bullet-proof windshield like hailstones on a tin roof, but most of the fusillade went wild.

"Crowd them, Abner!" yelled the Ferret as the machine gun shifted. He levelled his automatic, and before the gunner could shift his weapon, the Ferret's pistol was chattering like a riveting hammer. His shots, however, did not disturb the gunner. They were not intended to. They were directed at the gas tank of the car ahead, and they riddled it in half a dozen places.

"Now fall back, Abner!" commanded the Ferret. "That fellow's gun is becoming annoying—our windshield's nearly done for!"

The gunner ahead saw them lose ground. He thumbed his nose. Then he ducked as the Ferret dusted a shot within a few inches of his ear.

"Operating a car on air, Abner," lectured the Ferret, "is at present confined to visionary scientists. Our friends ahead will not go much further. The holes in their tank are consuming more gas than that thirsty monster under the hood. Now listen carefully—we may have to chase them on foot, or maybe we will have to besiege them."

The Ferret outlined his play. The gunner ahead, thinking he had partially crippled their engine, had ceased firing. But presently the fleeing car began to sputter and miss fire. Then it jerked ahead for a spurt.

"Now!" commanded the Ferret as he reached into a compartment behind the back of the seat and drew out a khaki haversack.

THE brakes caught; the light car crunched to a halt. The Ferret bounded to the ditch at the roadside. Then Abner let in the clutch, and resumed speed. The fugi-

tive car ahead coughed, and its motor died. They were coasting; and then seeing that Abner was catching up, they braked to a halt, ready to hose him with machine gun fire as he approached.

The Ferret, dashing through the darkness of the roadside, saw Abner swing into the ditch on the left. His headlights played a blaze of light on the stalled car; but as the maneuver was executed, a burst of machine gun fire raked over the hood. The Ferret knew, however, that Abner had already slid to the floorboards and was now protected by the side door armor.

An instant later the Ferret was assured that Abner had properly timed his moves. He heard the roar of a heavy automatic. Abner was sniping from cover as the machine gunner poured a rattling storm of lead at the car in his efforts to smoke him out.

The distance the Ferret had to cover was considerable for a man on foot. But he knew that the enemy would not leave. They needed a car in which to make their getaway. Theirs was out of action, and they had to seize the pursuit car, for they dared not set out afoot, knowing that the police were already on the trail.

Abner was firing rapidly, first from the front, then the rear of the Ferret's car. His headlights had been blasted out by the machine gunner; but the radiator and engine were protected. The darkness was split by jets of fire, and the deadly rattling covered the Ferret's swift advance through the shrubbery lining the road. Concentrating on what they mistook for two men firing from cover, the enemy did not suspect the Ferret's approach from the flank.

But they learned of it, suddenly and dismayingly, when the little man emerged from behind a clump of shrubbery, wound up like a baseball pitcher, and hurled an egg-shaped object through their right window.

There was a yell—then a dull, muffled coughing sound. Dense white fumes poured from the car. Stifled, strangling men ran madly out of the corrosive cloud that now surrounded their machine. They clawed their eyes, they dashed aimlessly about. Then they crumpled, gasping and paralyzed.

They were easy game for Abner and the Ferret after that. It was like raiding a

chicken house after stupefying the hens with sulphur fumes.

Chapter VII

LOST—\$200,000!

IT took less than a moment for Abner and the Ferret to handcuff the two from the gas-filled car. By the time they had finished they found that the fumes of the gas grenade had thinned considerably.

"Well, let's get the loot, Abner," suggested the Ferret, leading the way and snapping on his flashlight.

To their surprise, however, when they opened the car doors, the first thing they saw was a man lying face down on the floorboards. The upholstery was stained with blood. Overcome by the gas attack and evidently deserted by his companions, he had slumped forward in a heap.

Abner lifted him to the roadside.

"This is odd," said the Ferret. "I'm afraid I'll have to revise my theories somewhat. I am sure that his face is familiar, is it not, Abner?"

It was familiar. The wounded man was Carter Morton. He was drenched with blood, but he was breathing. After a moment of expert appraisal, the Ferret continued:

"This is the man I saw running to the getaway car. Von Ludens dropped two of them in their tracks, and would have done as much for Morton had Morton's men not dragged him in. You will note that he has been shot from the front and also in the back. Von Ludens did very well. Very well, indeed, with a single clip of cartridges—bagging three men!"

"And so this is Mortmain?" Abner's question was voiced as a statement.

"So it would seem," agreed the Ferret. "But let us find the two hundred thousand dollars ransom."

They began a methodical search; but before they had made much progress, the glare of approaching headlights illuminated the interior of the car.

"Ah-h—company coming," said Abner, drawing his automatic and making for the ditch and the protecting shrubbery. "This fellow Mortmain's clean-up gang, maybe."

The Ferret followed him to a clump of shrubbery. The approaching car flooded the highway with light and threw the two halted machines into glaring relief. Then the headlights winked out, and the car came to a gradual halt. A tall, bulky figure leaped from the wheel and into the shadows at the left of the highway.

"Von Ludens!" the Ferret hailed.

"Ach—Mr. Wright! So you have overtaken those scoundrels! That is good. That is very good. I will give you a bonus."

As he emerged from the ditch, von Ludens thrust an automatic into his pocket, and resumed: "But I am very much worried, Mr. Wright. That poor girl! They will kill her. And I could not help it. I had the two hundred thousand dollars. Two hundred thousand, think of it! But they were not satisfied. They tried to kill me, so I could not give the alarm. You heard the shot, yes?"

The Ferret nodded.

"And then I fired. I killed two of them, but the rest would have escaped to tell that *Schweinhund*—and they will kill that poor girl!"

"I don't think so, Mr. von Ludens," said the Ferret quietly. He gestured toward the prisoners. "Because there they all are. Not a man got away."

"Ah-h!" Von Ludens stepped forward. Morton was stirring and groaning. Von Ludens bent over him, cried out as he recognized him.

"So! Did I not tell you, Mr. Wright? That is him—the loafer!—the scoundrel!—that is Mortmain! They are all dying?"

The Ferret shook his head. "No—just knocked out by gas. We had to heave a bomb into them to capture them. But they are still very much alive—or will be, when that gas begins to wear off."

Von Ludens' heavy features sagged perceptibly. He shook his head, muttered, then brightened up. "But I am not complaining, Mr. Wright. You did well. Very well. And it gives a bonus for this excellent work. Now where is the two hundred thousand dollars those loafers took?"

THE search was renewed. Von Ludens became more and more worried as the futile search progressed. Finally the Ferret

said, "You and Abner carry on with the search. I must hurry Morton to a hospital, and those two others to jail. With them in our hands, whoever is guarding Sue Marlborough will hardly dare kill her. And perhaps they will even offer to release her if we will agree to keep this matter quiet. That is, as quiet as possible, after your display of pistol marksmanship."

"That is excellent, Mr. Wright," agreed von Ludens. "But how will you haul the prisoners? Your car is too small."

"I'll take yours. You and Abner return in mine."

And without waiting for further discussion, the Ferret set about loading the three prisoners into the back of von Ludens' sedan.

THE Ferret scarcely expected to find the police still on duty when he repassed the cemetery on his way to leave his prisoners under guard at the hospital, but when he saw the criss-cross glare of many headlights and the gleam of nicked shields, and dark, uniformed figures flitting about among the tombstones, he pulled up at the gate. John Healy, Chief of Detectives, was personally in charge.

"Where the hell you been?" he grunted, seeing the little investigator primly pick his way through the crowd that had gathered.

"Kindly step to my car—I should say, von Ludens' car—and I will show you something." And the Ferret led the way back. "Look there, Inspector."

Healy stared. The cigar stump dropped from his lips.

"Well, fer cryin' out loud!" he exclaimed, recognizing Carter Morton.

"I'll give you the inside information on this," murmured the Ferret, "provided that you keep it confidential. If the truth leaks out, the Fourth Trust is sunk. Carter Morton was shot while escaping with the ransom von Ludens brought here to secure the release of Sue Marlborough. But the story you release must be that Morton *went along with von Ludens*, to help if he could—and the kidnapers shot him, thinking he was a detective. Do you follow me?"

Healy nodded.

"And see that the statements of the other two prisoners do not get out of your office."

Healy turned to a detective sergeant to issue the order. The prisoners were transferred from von Ludens' sedan to a police department car. And Healy himself, after leaving an assistant to continue the investigation, took charge of the prisoners.

"What do you make of it, Wright?" he demanded, pausing with one foot on the running board.

"On the face of it, Morton seems to be the mysterious 'Mortmain,'" said the Ferret. "And judging from the crew of thugs working with him, he could very well have perpetrated the bank massacre. It could not have been the work of a single desperado, however clever and daring he might be.

"Remember, one man wiped out the directors. Another, after looting the vault, was seen leaping from a window and running toward a getaway car. All these things happened simultaneously. No one man could possibly cover so much space in so short a time, and also make a detour to kill Jens Olson, the janitor. And now we have a motive for that angle. Jens probably recognized Morton as he removed his hood and gown and stuffed them into the firebox. Hence the killing of Jens. A stranger would not have bothered to kill a dumb, good-natured janitor whose main worry in life was to keep supplied with Copenhagen snuff."

"By God, that does hang it on Morton!" agreed Healy. "No outsider could have entered that room. It must have been Morton."

HEALY seated himself beside the driver. And as the car nosed into the road, the Ferret turned back toward the cemetery for a final look around.

He wondered at the thoroughness of the investigation. Flashlamps blazed as photographers shot one view after another of the two who had been dropped by von Ludens' remarkable marksmanship. Experts from the Bureau of Identification were making wax and plaster-of-Paris casts of every clean-cut footprint between the tomb where the battle had started and the point where Morton had made his desperate leap to the running board of the escape car. Strides were being measured, and the positions of cartridges ejected by automatic pistols were carefully plotted on a chart, and then were marked with num-

bered cards so that they could be identified in the photographs of the battlefield.

But the Ferret's sharp eyes observed one thing which had escaped the notice of the police investigators: a length of black enamelled copper wire. It had been looped about a pillar of the marble tomb before which the fight had begun. Its free end was straight, as though it had been drawn taut. The Ferret noted that the wire had been cut, not broken. This he determined from a glance at the long end.

"I wonder where the rest of that wire is?" he asked himself. "And what is this piece doing here?"

And then the Ferret thought of an old trick to guard against the unseen approach of enemies or spies. A very simple device used often during the Great War. Merely a tin can suspended on a tight-stretched wire. But at mere touch of hand or foot to the wire, the can would rattle and give the alarm.

"Now I wonder," he thought, "if von Ludens came out here and put that up, ahead of time, to keep the kidnapers from sneaking up on him from behind. Crafty fellow!"

Before leaving, the Ferret examined the empty cartridge cases that the police had collected.

"These five are from my pistol," he identified, recognizing them by the unusual caliber and the manufacturer's mark. "And, oh, yes, gentlemen, while I think about it—there's a bit of wire back there which I don't think you have charted yet. Right over there . . . Ah, yes. Good evening, sergeant."

The Ferret was smiling, and softly whistling in a quavering monotone. The sergeant stared at the Ferret's back, and after a moment muttered to himself, "Who'd ever think that funny little so-and-so could throw a yearling bull through a bay window—let alone have sense enough to empty a pint pot by turnin' it upside down!"

The Ferret, unconscious of the comment behind his back, turned toward von Ludens' car. But before he reached it, he heard the familiar, high-pitched note of his own machine.

He blinked in the blistering glare of the headlights, then leaped swiftly aside. But

the brakes were good, and Abner brought the car to a halt slightly less than a foot from where the Ferret had been standing. Von Ludens' eyes were wide, and his voice trembled as he piled out of the car.

"He is crazy!" stormed von Ludens. "He drives like Barney Oldfield! No, we did not find the money! Those prisoners have it."

He jerked open the door of his sedan. But the Ferret interposed.

"Maybe Morton dropped the money as he ran to his car," said the Ferret. "Why not ask the police if they picked it up?"

Von Ludens turned toward the cemetery entrance. The Ferret hustled Abner to their own car.

"Now step on it, Abner. I want to question those prisoners before too many people butt in."

Chapter VIII

EXTORTION—WITH VARIATIONS

AT the hospital, they found Inspector Healy already there, to get Morton's statement.

Morton had regained consciousness. His dark, smouldering eyes shifted from Healy to glare at the Ferret.

"You damned little shrimp," he groaned, "it's your fault that I'm accused of being—"

"Steady, Morton," said Healy, restraining his wounded prisoner who had attempted to rise and confront the Ferret. "Take it easy. You're in bad shape. We want to know how you got mixed in that jam at the graveyard. Where's Sue Marlborough?"

"I tell you, I don't know!" protested Morton. "I'm no kidnaper. I admit I was giving von Ludens a shake down—but that damned crook robbed me—gave me bum steers—induced me to buy stock which he was secretly selling! Cleaned me out! So when I got some dirt on him, I told him he'd better pay up, or I'd expose him."

He paused to catch his breath, and went on:

"The bank's short God knows how many hundred thousand. Von Ludens' been juggling the books. If I had exposed him, I'd have been sunk in the resulting crash. So I shut up, and bled him to recoup my own losses."

Morton sank back, his saturnine face sal- low and drawn. "But I'm not Mortmain—the fellow who did the killing—"

"Wait a minute, Morton," said Healy. "We know you *did attend* the board of direc- tors' meeting. The man at the cigar stand across the street says you bought cigarettes. Then he saw you go in the side door. Not long before the massacre. And that proves you are Mortmain!"

"But I'm not!" Morton was speaking with increasing difficulty—"even though I was in the board room to begin with. But I left after only a moment and stepped into von Ludens' office through the connecting door to collect my hush-money from him. I told him to pay off, or I'd tell the directors. That got him. He said he'd get the money right away. But just then the riot broke out. I remembered the crazy threat that fellow, Mortmain, had sent. So when I heard the machine gun in the board room right along- side, I jumped for the window—"

"And out it and into the car you had wait- ing!" said Healy. "You don't deny that was your car, do you?"

"No, it was my car. I left it there so that when I got the money I could pitch it out the window into it. I was afraid von Ludens might trick me—cook up some sort of story that he had caught me stealing it, and then grab me if I tried to get out through the bank with it. But I never got any money."

"Never got it?" demanded the Ferret.

"No. When that machine gun started, I jumped—and beat it in the car. But later that day I told von Ludens to bring it to the graveyard tonight."

"Pretty thin, pretty thin," said the In- spector, sniffing. "That's a hell of a yarn. Well, we're too old to swallow any such stuff, Morton—or rather, Mortmain. And now, damn you—where's Sue Marlborough? Where's that girl?"

"But I'm not Mortmain! Good God, don't you believe me?" Morton slumped back on the pillows helplessly. "I never touched the girl. Some of the crooks I hired to work with me might have done it—you see, I had to have somebody to help drive the car, and to see that von Ludens did not have any police planted in the cemetery. But I don't know a thing about the girl, myself."

"Well, then, what did you do with the money—the two hundred thousand that von Ludens carried to the cemetery?"

"I never saw it—never got my hands on it. I hung back a little behind, looking for a trap. One of my men reached for a parcel—I saw that much—and then the firing began. That's all I know—but I'm not this mur- derer—Mortmain—"

With the last words he began to gasp. His eyes opened wide in pain. He struggled for breath.

"Get the doctor back here on the job, quick!" snapped the Ferret. "He's going fast. We must have—"

And then he shook his head. The shud- der that racked Morton, and the rattle in his throat showed that he was beyond medical aid. Healy cursed in a low monotone.

"How about the other two? The two that were gassed?" said the Ferret.

"Just penny-ante crooks," Healy growled. "But they may know something. And in the meanwhile—"

The Chief of Detectives did not complete his remark. There was a thumping on the door, a peremptory order barked by the de- tective on guard, and then von Ludens' un- mistakable voice, raised in vigorous protest.

"Let him in," said the Ferret.

THE door jerked open. Von Ludens was in a high rage. He stood for a moment, groping for words and glaring at Morton.

"*Ach*, that loafer—that murderer!" Then he saw that Morton was dead. "But did he confess? Did he tell where is the girl? Quick—tell me!"

The Inspector shook his head. "No. He admitted that he had been blackmailing you. But swore that he had nothing to do with the kidnaping or the robbery."

Von Ludens gulped, gave a sigh. His bluster was gone. Finally he asked. "And is that all?"

"That's enough, don't you think, Mr. von Ludens?" said the Ferret quietly.

"But it is a lie—a damn lie!" stormed the irate banker. "Morton is this 'Mort- main'—Dead Hand! Even the names are alike—"

"Yes, I saw that from the first—the simi- larity of the name 'Morton' to 'Mortmain,'" "

said the Ferret. "And we can prove, too, that he was in the directors' room just before the killing—"

"*Ach*—so! What did I tell you!" interrupted von Ludens.

"But," said the Ferret, with sudden crispness, "he says that he was *in your office, demanding hush money which you were to pay because of irregularities in your banking transactions!* Well, it's strange, Mr. von Ludens, that you have never told us before that he was there!"

The Ferret's words seemed to strike von Ludens like a kick in the stomach. He caught his breath, went white. Then after a long hesitation he nodded his head. "That is true. He pretended to have proof that I was an embezzler, and he demanded money. But I refused to be blackmailed. He left my office. Then I suspected all at once that he was this 'Mortmain'—this crazy man who had been threatening us all—the whole bank. I reached for my pistol and started after him. But I was too late. The bank had already been robbed—"

"It would have been much better if you had told the whole truth at the beginning, even if your banking affairs were under suspicion," said the Ferret coldly. "As it is, the robber—and the murderer of seven men—got away! And not only that, but was able to kidnap Sue Marlborough as well!"

The ensuing silence was heavy. The Ferret's accusation had bitten in.

"But I could not foresee that," von Ludens finally mumbled.

Healy was muttering in his throat, but the Ferret nailed him with a sharp, flashing glance. "With Mr. von Ludens' help, I believe we can perhaps get a clue as to whether or not Morton really killed the other directors, after all," he suggested smoothly. "Mr. von Ludens, can you admit me and Mr. Healy to the board room now, tonight? It is a matter of a few measurements to prove, if possible, that no one but Morton could have perpetrated the butchery. I have copies of the police department photographs and records in my car. We will attend to it now."

"Certainly," agreed von Ludens.

"Very well," said the Ferret. "And I am sure that we will make our case without any

embarrassing reference to any irregularities in your banking affairs."

"*Ach*, but you are a smart fellow! But will Mr. Healy—?"

"Hell," growled the Chief of Detectives, "I'm not a bank examiner. You can stuff the whole damn Fourth Trust into your pocket for all I care."

"I will drive ahead and arrange with the night watchman," said von Ludens.

Before Healy could protest, the Ferret sharply kicked the detective's shin. Healy took the hint; but as the door closed behind von Ludens, he growled, "Listen, shrimp! What's the big idea? That guy's story is so damn full of contradictions it's funny! He claimed he went out to pay this Mortmain two hundred thousand bucks—and here we find his side kick in crookedness, Carter Morton, was to get the money! His claiming that Morton kidnaped the girl just don't click, either—"

"But it *could*," said the Ferret. "Remember, von Ludens claimed that he, personally, was broke. How then, could he raise money to keep Morton's mouth hushed? The answer is, he couldn't. But by fixing it so Morton could kidnap the girl, von Ludens could then sell her bank stock to raise the money for the ransom. Morton would get it—and whether you want to call it 'ransom' or 'hush money' makes no real difference to the man who spends it. Morton might very well agree to such a scheme—especially since, with von Ludens' help on the inside, it would be quite easy to kidnap the girl."

"Well . . . maybe," conceded the Inspector. "And maybe Morton did hide under the table with a machine gun and smoke those directors out, too. But it's funny how damn glad von Ludens seemed, to find Morton dead."

"Not so funny—if Morton had the goods on him for embezzlement," said the Ferret. "And if von Ludens happened really to be 'Mortmain,'—and Morton suspected it—"

"Hell, von Ludens couldn't have been the one that killed those directors!" exclaimed the Inspector. "You yourself say you saw him coming out of his own private office down the hall too quick to have possibly done the job in the directors' room. Nope—I'm betting it was Morton—though I

wouldn't be surprised a bit if this von Ludens had been monkeying with the bank customers' money a bit."

"Well, maybe we'll know more before we're much older," said the Ferret cryptically. "And don't worry about von Ludens. He'll be there waiting for us."

Sure enough, when they arrived at the Fourth Trust Bank they found von Ludens' car already parked at the curbing. The watchman admitted them, and led the way to the bank president's private office.

Chapter IX

DEATH'S ROUND-TABLE

THEY found von Ludens at his desk. Spread out before him was a filing folder.

"While I am sorting out the papers which may interest you in this investigation," he said, "you can be inspecting the board room. Nothing has been touched since the police have completed their observations. Come—I will show you."

He led the way down the hall and unlocked the door, remarking, "I haff of course repaired the lock and put in a new door, to exclude meddlers and curious employees. But you will find the old door in the corner."

Healy and the Ferret stepped into the room. The floor was stained with dark splashes, and littered with plaster knocked from the wall by the deadly storm of machine gun slugs. But to the Ferret this was an old, gruesome story. He was more interested in the top of the ornately carved Round-Table of Doom. He set his research kit on a chair.

"We will photograph this table by the rays of an infra-red lamp," he began. "The hot fumes of nitro powder have left their traces in the varnish; and while those marks are invisible to ordinary scrutiny, the infra-red ray will expose them, and thus give us the position of the gunner."

"That is remarkable," said von Ludens. "And while you gentlemen are engrossed in scientific studies, I will return to my office to assemble the papers that will expose Morton's trickery. But you will keep it confidential. I am trusting your honor as gentlemen."

"Go ahead," said Healy. "We're not bank examiners."

Von Ludens retraced his steps. As the door closed behind him, the Ferret seized Healy by the arm.

"Down!" he whispered. "To the floor—!"

"What the hell?" demanded Healy, perplexed by the Ferret's sudden tenseness of voice.

"Down, you idiot!" snapped the Ferret.

The Ferret was under the table. Healy followed him.

"Closer—hug the central support!" commanded the Ferret.

"Say, is this hide and seek? Of all the damn—"

But Healy's objection was startlingly interrupted. Something clicked. The table top, directly over their heads, was motionless; but the deep, carved moulding about the edge, and the heavy ribs that supported the top, began to move. They had scarcely perceived the inexplicable motion when the room echoed with the ripping, crackling reports of gun fire. Acrid fumes of nitro powder filled the room, and as the moulding spun around, now as swiftly as the flywheel of an engine, it radiated searing jets of flame. Bullets smacked against the walls. The air became thick with powdered plaster. Singing fragments of bullets smashed themselves to pieces on the now exposed steel girders of the building.

"Good God!" Healy croaked as the murderous rattling subsided. "If we'd been standing there, looking at that table top—"

The Ferret jerked the big detective to his feet, saying as he did so, "We would have been chewed to bits, as the directors were. Now you know how they died!"

But before they could reach the bullet riddled door, it slammed open. Von Ludens stood at the threshold. His face was pale and his eyes were wide. For a moment he groped for words; and when he broke the silence, his speech was an incoherent tangle.

"Ach—vot iss? Who was shooting—*Mein Gott!* That Mortmain iss notd dead—tell me, quick—did you kill him—how did you—"

Healy started to say something, but the Ferret kicked him on the ankle.

"Take it easy, von Ludens," said the Fer-

ret. "We were monkeying with that table, and something clicked, and we ducked beneath it just in time. Where did you get this table?"

"Morton sold it to the Board of Directors a year ago," said von Ludens. "Wait—I will get you the papers. I will show you."

But before he could turn toward the threshold, Abner Sikes had blocked the doorway.

"I heard the firing," he explained. "So I broke the glass panel in the front door and came on in."

He gripped a hefty pinch-bar.

"Ah . . . just in time, Abner," said the Ferret. "Give me that pinch-bar."

He plucked the pinch-bar from Abner's hand.

"WATCH," he said as he turned to the table. He walked around its circumference, eyed the brass rings that adorned the deep moulding, then raised the bar and brought the straight end down with a sharp, jabbing motion.

"Stop that!" roared von Ludens. "Are you crazy? Spoiling the antique table!"

But his protest was too late. Despite the thickness of the massive top, it yielded to the Ferret's sharp weapon. His keen eye had detected a scarcely perceptible joint and had unerringly probed it. Then he wrenched, and a segment lifted up. He flung it aside, and gestured toward the now exposed rib which supported the top.

"Well, I'll be damned!" exclaimed Healy. "A machine gun!"

The rib had been hollowed, and into the cavity the barrel and feed mechanism of a machine gun had been fitted. Coming up through the central column of the table was a belt that supplied the cartridges.

"That is how 'Mortmain' slaughtered the board of directors," said the Ferret. "Notice the slight upward incline of the barrel? Just sufficient to throw the bullets high enough to hit the victims in a vital spot if one of them happened to be standing instead of sitting."

The silence that followed the Ferret's explanation was oppressive. They stared in horrified fascination at the grim engine of destruction. Finally von Ludens spoke.

"Morton sold us the table to kill all of

us! Come into my office. I will show you the evidence of the transaction."

He gestured toward the door, inviting them to precede him. But the Ferret paused to look at Abner Sikes.

"Well, Abner," he said. "Did you see what you stayed to see?"

Abner nodded. "From that vacant office window over there opposite I could see right into von Ludens' office windows." He tapped the field glasses on the strap over his shoulder. "The damfool didn't turn out the light. I saw him press a button on his desk—it's under that ink-well that we thought was built into the desk. The minute he touched it, almost, I heard the machine gun here begin firing. When he lifted his finger, the gun stopped. There's no doubt who did the killings—or that, like you thought, he is 'Mortmain' himself! . . . Better get the cuffs on him, Healy!"

The Inspector stared. But von Ludens' face had gone as pale as death.

"It's a lie—a damned lie!" he panted.

"Wait—I will show you! I will stand by this table and one of you can work the button—the button that this liar says works the table! Go and press it! I will wait for it!"

Healy, handcuffs already in his hand, paused, undecided. "Try it, Abner," he said. "Maybe there's a mistake somewhere—"

But the Ferret suddenly stepped forward. "Stand fast, Abner!" he snapped. "The man is desperate. He'd like nothing better than to go out in a blaze, and perhaps take one or two of us along with him!"

THERE was that in the Ferret's voice and in the suddenly trapped look on von Ludens' face that convinced the Inspector. He stepped forward with the cuffs. "All right, von Ludens. Hold out your hands."

But as alert as he was, even the Ferret was taken off guard by the accused man's next move.

Von Ludens' powerful hands had been gripping the table top until the knuckles showed white. Suddenly they moved—but not toward Healy. Instead, he snatched the stripped machine gun from its mounting in the table. Belatedly Healy grabbed for his own pistol. But the Ferret, as quick of wit as of body, leaped aside, dragging the burly

detective inspector with him. At the same moment von Ludens leaped backward, toward the door leading to his private office—all in an instant.

The Ferret's warning cry was drowned out in the rattling thunder of the flaming machine gun. A hail of screaming lead blocked that side doorway, and sent flying chips and splinters, while smoke and spattering plaster dust obscured the view.

To have charged that doorway—even to try to get near enough to shoot through it, around the angle where von Ludens had disappeared, would have been suicide.

"Hold it!" shouted the Ferret. "He'll run out of ammunition and then we'll rush him."

The diabolical sputter of the machine gun for an instant hesitated, as though the operator's grip on the trigger had slackened. The spray of lead shifted, chewing great chunks out of the doorjamb. And then the firing abruptly ceased.

"That's bait!" warned the Ferret.

But a door slammed and a latch clicked somewhere in the other room. The Ferret leaped forward as he realized that von Ludens was escaping.

"Run around the front—to his car!" he yelled at Abner, as he himself plunged through the smoke.

But just as he and Healy leaped out through the side door of the bank, they heard the sputter of a starting engine. Healy looked out, and gave a howl of warning.

Von Ludens' car was in motion. And, resting the stripped machine gun on the sill of his open car window, von Ludens was spraying lead at them to keep them back.

Then the car leaped forward into full speed. Abner, running around the other corner of the bank, was just in time to fire twice at the rapidly accelerating machine.

"Get our car!" shouted the Ferret.

Police whistles were shrilling, and sirens screaming in the distance. And then Abner's full throated cursing drowned the tumult. A ricochet bullet had torn a hole into a front tire of their own car.

The Ferret seized a lug wrench. Abner took a flying dive at a jack. Then they heard the sputter of a motorcycle. As it swept around the corner, the rider, flattened to the tank, fed it the gas.

"Holy smoke!" exclaimed Healy. "That's a traffic department bike. But the guy on it—"

Then the traffic officer himself rounded the corner on foot, shooting as he ran.

"That's Jack Grebner, the kidnaper!" he roared above the futile blasts of his revolver. "He stole my bike, and he's getting away!"

Healy's comment was a masterpiece of cursing. But the Ferret merely grinned as Abner slapped on a spare tire.

"Jack's following von Ludens, and we'll follow Jack," he said. "I knew that boy had initiative and intelligence. It took me fully a minute to lay him out cold the other night. But I wonder how he got wise to von Ludens—especially after I'd told him to stick close to the house."

He leaped to the wheel. Healy mounted the running board, and the Ferret's combat wagon went screaming down the street half a block ahead of the police pursuit that had in the meanwhile been organized.

Chapter X

THE DEAD HAND DIGS IN

THE delay in taking up the pursuit, brief though it was, had cost the Ferret precious moments. At the highway fork at the outskirts of town, they had to pull up at a filling station to find out which branch the fugitive had taken.

"He'll lead us all over hell's back-yard!" growled Healy above the whine of the motor; but the Ferret shook his head.

"He'll lead us to where Sue Marlborough is imprisoned. Jack Grebner must have sensed that, or he would not have risked appearing in spite of my warning him to stay under cover."

"What?" yelled Healy, having been too busy cursing to hear the Ferret's previous remark. "You knew where Grebner was, all the time—!"

"Certainly," said the Ferret. "I captured Jack Grebner the night of the kidnaping, and kept him hidden to throw the real kidnapers off guard. Von Ludens must be the real kidnaper. Certainly he is the mysterious 'Mortmain'—Dead Hand—that wrote all those letters. He was just writing them to himself."

"But how—"

"How did I know that? Easy. You see, Abner photographed that first letter—and that made von Ludens suspicious. He got rid of the typewriter he had written the note on in a hurry, and after that he made up the ransom note from letters and words cut out of newspapers. He wasn't taking any chances on our tracking that million dollar demand back to his typewriter."

He grinned as Healy stared at him wide-eyed, and then went on: "And if you are still puzzled about why that stolen money was burned and Olson was killed, I'll tell you. That money was counterfeit! Abner found one piece of it. Von Ludens had been substituting counterfeit money in place of trust funds that he embezzled, and he had to rob the bank to get rid of it before anybody found it out. I was sure it was von Ludens, but I had to let him think it was Morton I was after."

"But— But how did you suspect, in the first place?" gasped Healy.

"I suspected Von Ludens from the minute I prowled around the cellar of his house. The shavings in his workshop were of the same rare wood of which that deadly table is made. That was a clue, but it was not *proof*. Because I didn't know then about that gun built into the table. Von Ludens bought that big table from Morton for the bank, all right—but he took it to his own cellar first and carefully built that diabolical murder machine into it with his own hands."

The Ferret stopped to shake his head disgustedly. "I should have known, long ago—the minute I saw those carved things in von Ludens' office. But von Ludens thought I was getting wise, and he couldn't resist the temptation to wipe me out tonight. And now—now he is hurrying to wherever he has the girl hidden, hoping to exchange her, alive and well, for his own life. It would be a good bargain for him—if he could make it."

Far ahead they suddenly caught sight of a red tail light.

"If that's Grebner, he's riding a hard race," said Abner.

"He ought to," muttered Healy. "He grabbed Tom Graham's bike—the fastest on the patrol. That's why your wagon hasn't overhauled him."

But the Ferret was interested in more than

mere speed. He had noted that the fugitive, despite the detours and doublings, was slowly but certainly bearing left in a curve which would finally lead back to the city.

"Head him off, Abner!" the Ferret finally commanded. "He's outracing us, not because his machine is so fast, but because every time he cuts a corner it catches us and Grebner off guard and we lose time in picking the right fork. Sue Marlborough must be hidden somewhere in town. Von Ludens has deliberately led us away out here to throw us off the trail. Now he's hoping he has shaken us and is trying to get back to his hide-out unseen."

Abner cut left at the Ferret's direction. They left the highway and plunged at a terrific clip down a dirt road. The whining little car zoomed up hairpin turns as it scaled a hill, and once over the crest, Abner outdid himself. He hurled it at the red dirt turns, recklessly feeding gas to the screaming motor beneath the hood.

"Damn you!" croaked Healy. "Slow down or I'll—I'll pinch you for reckless driving! You'll blow out the tires—tear out the rear end!"

"Nuts!" muttered Abner, once more tramping on the accelerator from which his foot had for the moment relaxed. "You ain't seen nothing this evening."

And Healy learned the truth of that statement before they emerged from the hills.

SOON they were again passing through the outskirts of town; and the Ferret directed, "Now to von Ludens' estate."

"Aw, you're nutty—"

But Healy's scoffing was cut short. Half a dozen blocks ahead of them a long, dark car suddenly thundered across their path from a cross street. And before they had covered half a block, they saw a motorcycle flash through the same crossing, outlined for a flickering instant in the glare of the overhead street light. The crackling they heard above the sputter of the motor was the chatter of pistol fire.

"It's Grebner!" roared Healy. "Give 'er hell, Abner! He's on von Ludens' tail!"

And then they heard a crash. No need to question its source. A heavy car had smashed into something heavier. They heard a yell,

followed by a single pistol shot. Then silence.

"Step on it!" cried the Ferret.

Abner swung right at the fifth corner. They saw a black sedan piled headlong into the stone wall that surrounded von Ludens' estate. Roaring flames enveloped it and overtopped the tall trees. Halfway down the block, just at the angle of the wall, they saw a motorcycle that was a tangled wreck. A man lay some yards ahead of it, sprawled in the middle of the street. Near him was a pistol.

Abner jammed the brakes; but before the car slid to a halt, Healy had leaped to the paving, and the Ferret after him.

The man lying in the street was Jack Grebner, battered and bleeding, and motionless. The Ferret bounded forward, knelt beside him for a moment, then said, "He's okay. Just concussion and bruises. Get a doctor—call an ambulance!"

"Von Ludens," said Healy, glancing at the tire tracks in the asphalt, "must have cut ahead of him, spilled him, and then cracked up his own car. And I guess the fire's settled his hash."

The burning car was a roaring furnace. Healy shuddered.

The Ferret frowned, then said, "Most unusual. That fire spread too quickly."

His eyes shifted, searching the paving, the sidewalk, and the wall.

"Look!" He pointed at a dark splash near the crest of the wall. "Blood! Von Ludens escaped, set his car on fire to deceive the police, then hurdled the wall."

Even as he spoke, a squad car came tearing down the block. Grebner's pistol fire and the roar of motors had turned out the reserves from police headquarters.

"Surround the grounds!" shouted Healy, taking command. And then he followed the Ferret over the wall.

Spotlights from the squad cars shot long beams across the crest of the wall.

"Here's where we lost the trail before!" growled a plainclothes man, who had evidently been there the night of the kidnaping.

The house was quickly surrounded; and the tramp of feet and slamming of doors marked the progress of the search indoors.

"Right in the midst of the excitement fol-

lowing Sue Marlborough's disappearance," reasoned the Ferret, who was the only placid person in the party, "von Ludens came bursting out of the house to inquire as to the disturbance. He must have had some way of coming from the hide-out and to the house without being observed."

He was interrupted by the yell of a detective at their left. He was kneeling in a cleared space scarcely two yards from a concrete walk.

"Here's a manhole!" he said. "And it don't open into a drain! Whiff that air that's rising. It's warm—and not sewer gas."

Eager hands jerked the manhole open.

"That's it!" exclaimed the Ferret. Then, peering into the opening he announced after a moment's inspection: "A tunnel leading to the old brewery! Before it was shut down, von Ludens' house was heated by steam from the boilers of the plant. Let's go!"

He dropped into the blackness. The beam of a flashlight followed him. And gleaming on the floor of the tunnel he saw a cartridge.

"Surround the brewery, Healy," said the Ferret. "But tell your men to lie low. If he thinks there's no escape, he'll kill the girl for spite."

Chapter XI

FIRE AND WATER

THEY followed the tunnel to an iron door that blocked further progress.

"Blow the damn thing down!" said Healy.

But the Ferret shook his head. "Make a raid on a garage or welding shop. Get a torch and some acetylene and cut it down. That'll do it quietly."

The Chief of Detectives issued the order. Then he saw the Ferret turn to retrace his steps.

"Where you going?"

"I will make a flank attack," replied the Ferret. "Von Ludens expects this barrier to stop us. In the meanwhile, we do not know what avenues of escape may be open to him. He knows every cellar and passageway of the old brewery, which gives him an advantage we lack. He may even be able to slip past the police cordon and cover a good many miles before we are through searching the place. But in the meanwhile, I may be able to block him."

The Ferret lifted himself up through the manhole, cleared the wall of the estate and strode rapidly toward the dark, towering bulk of the plant that once had furnished beer to a dozen states.

He was armed only with a pistol and his wits. He vanished in the blackness, and for a moment there was no sign to indicate his direction. Then a thin pencil of light stabbed the gloom for an instant, and when it was repeated, the Ferret was yards further into the dark silence.

Finally the Ferret found what he sought: a stairway that led into the maze of aging vats and storage vaults beneath the building. He no longer dared risk even the momentary gleam of his flashlight. He crept through that thick gloom, and like a blind man used his delicate sense of touch to guide him. He was in a tunnel now.

The Ferret followed the downward slope of the tunnel until a heavy door barred his progress. He paused to listen, but heard not a sound. He crossed the passageway, crowded against the jamb, reached forward and pushed against the heavy strap hinges. The leverage was against him, but bit by bit he set the ponderous door in motion. The silent, well oiled hinges warned him. Their smoothness was ominous. Then came a faint click.

For a full minute the Ferret waited, tense and alert; then he advanced with infinite caution. As he rounded an angle, he saw a glow of light. The passageway opened into a large chamber illuminated only by the wan, flickering flame of a single candle thrust into the neck of a bottle which sat on a rough table.

Lashed to a chair near the table was a slender girl whose hair gleamed like pale gold in the wavering light. The towel that gagged her concealed her features, except for her wide, terrified blue eyes. The Ferret knew that he had found Sue Marlborough.

Long, menacing shadows danced across the floor, and flitted over the ceiling; and beyond them were sinister depths of gloom. Somewhere in that blackness lurked von Ludens, the arch-assassin, ready to snipe the Ferret as he entered the zone of illumination. However important it was to capture the murderous fugitive, it was more vital to release Sue Marlborough.

The Ferret drew his pistol. A single bullet would blow out that candle. It was a hard shot, but the Ferret's unwavering hand and keen eye could direct a slug that would pass the girl by inches and shatter the flaming candle itself.

He levelled the weapon, crooked his left arm to support the heavy barrel. One slip, and he would kill the girl he sought to save; yet if through excessive caution he fired wide on the safe side, and missed the thin bit of tallow, von Ludens would be warned and the chamber would in an instant be swept by chattering death. Unaided by darkness, the Ferret could not save the captive.

Sue's eyes shifted as though she sensed the Ferret's arrival. He knew that she could not have seen him; and yet her glance was directed toward him, and her eyes were widening with alarm.

THE Ferret was now holding his breath, and his trigger finger was contracting. But, before he had taken up the slack, the candle flame suddenly flared toward him. He felt a faint breeze fan his cheek. The barely perceptible, momentary suction in the narrow passage warned him that the door behind, which he had left open, had suddenly closed, and soundlessly, because of the cushioning effect of the passage beyond.

The Ferret knew then that he had been trapped. Too late he realized that the girl's frantic eyes had been trying, not to welcome him, but to warn him!

The Ferret lowered his pistol. Though trapped, he was certain that he was for the moment between von Ludens and his captive. He bounded from concealment, intending to jerk the girl out of line with the passageway down which lead would come screaming when he and von Ludens shot it out. That, however, was an error.

As the Ferret flashed across the threshold, a stunning blow clipped him across his right forearm, dashing the pistol from his numbed hand and for an instant paralyzing him with pain.

The Ferret was caught off center. Despite his incredible quickness of motion, the lurker was upon him before he could whirl; and he had but his left arm to repel the attack. Von Ludens, lunging forward, sent

him crashing headlong to the paved floor, crushing him with his ponderous body. The Ferret's head struck the masonry with a stunning impact. And black singing dizziness swept over him like a cloud. . . .

THE Ferret was out only for a short time; but it had sufficed for von Ludens to tie him hand and foot.

"And now, Mr. Ferret, it gives a reckoning," von Ludens chuckled. "Blockhead! I was never at the door behind you—I was here, inside, in the dark, all the time. I closed that door by pulling a string—but it fooled you so that you thought I was behind you." He stopped to laugh. "I have been preparing for this ever since your assistant photographed the extortion letter which I wrote to myself and the directors. Do you understand now why you found no typewriter in my workshop? . . . And when my beautiful prisoner said a black man scared her so she ran out to meet Jack Grebner instead of walking, I knew who it was. You thought it was clever, pretending to hunt the two hundred thousand dollars ransom which I did *not* give that *Schweinhund* of a Morton. So far, you had not the evidence against me, and you pretended to be dumber than you are, jackass! But I knew you were suspicious. Tonight, my clever friend, Eric Johann von Ludens is going to die! And you and the girl will die also!"

"What do you mean?" the Ferret inquired as though the matter concerned him not at all.

Von Ludens laughed boisterously, and gestured toward the table. Beneath it were several wooden cases. The Ferret read the lettering, and knew that there was enough ninety per-cent blasting gelatin here to demolish the entire block, and to wipe out the police cordon as well.

"I will touch it off. They will say, '*Ach*, von Ludens was nutty, he committed suicide.' You cannot indict a hole in the ground."

"Wait a minute, von Ludens," suggested the Ferret, "I've got a better plan than that."

Von Ludens regarded him curiously. He wondered at a man whom several hundred pounds of blasting gelatin interested no more than a heap of rubbish.

"Why not bargain with the District At-

torney?" said the Ferret. "Tell him you will surrender the girl, provided he lets you plead 'criminal insanity'—that will let you off with a term in an insane asylum."

Von Ludens laughed. He drew a thick packet of bills from his pocket.

"Look. I have the two hundred thousand that blackmailer thought was for him. And I am going abroad to live. I forgot to tell you that I will only die *apparently*. The explosion will fool them. No one will be alive to tell them I escaped through a tunnel—"

"You're dumber than I thought you were, von Ludens," the Ferret interrupted. "We are cutting a hole into the iron door that blocks that tunnel from your house right now—"

"*Ach*, what jackasses!" chuckled von Ludens. "The explosion will wipe them out also. I am leaving by *another way*. By a drain sewer-pipe to the river."

VON LUDENS fumbled in his vest pocket and extracted a cigar lighter and turned toward the table.

The Ferret saw the projecting length of fuse. Despite his outward calmness, he shivered, and sweat cropped out on his forehead.

Von Ludens touched the tiny flame to the end of the fuse. It sputtered and jetted smoke. Then, suddenly turning, he saw that the Ferret had moved.

"Do not squirm, Mr. Ferret. You cannot get loose from the rope. Even a Boy Scout like Jack Grebner could not have tied it better. But to make sure, I will end your suspense. In my haste I left my pistol in the side pocket of the burning car, but I have something just as good."

He paused to glance at the burning fuse. Then, nodding as though satisfied that he had enough time to escape, he stepped into the corner and dragged from the shadows the same stripped machine gun which had wiped out the board of directors. It was now crudely mounted on a small beer keg.

The air now reeked with the acrid fumes of the smoking fuse. Sue Marlborough's eyes were wide with horror. Then she closed them, and shuddered as von Ludens glanced at the belt feed of the gun. The Ferret strained against his bonds until they cut into

his flesh. He knew that he had not a chance, yet he struggled to get one hand disengaged enough to reach for his automatic, which von Ludens, absorbed by his plans, had overlooked.

"Ach, Mr. Ferret, is it not remarkable, this persistence?" von Ludens said as he stooped to shift the machine gun. "I thought I had lost my chance to give you a taste of this weapon, but I was wrong—"

He suddenly raised his eyes. He noted the Ferret's intent gaze toward the far corner. The expression of Byrd Wright's desperate eyes had changed, and von Ludens sensed the meaning of their incredulous stare. He whirled around.

The manhole plate over the very drain which von Ludens had bragged would take him to safety had suddenly lifted. The Ferret had stared at it incredulously when he had first seen it move. But now the whole plate had lifted. And out of the black depths beneath, a fantastic figure had emerged.

It was dripping wet and black with filth and grime. Almost it would have been impossible to recognize it as a man, except for the white eyeballs of the glaring eyes—and the dark outlines of the heavy pistol in the upraised hand. Yet with sheer intuition, the Ferret knew it for Jack Grebner.

For one second von Ludens stared. Then, with amazing quickness, he leaped back, jerked at the machine gun on its keg, just as the pistol in Grebner's hand spouted fire and thunder. Once—twice—

Before the third shot, the machine gun burst into chattering fire.

The first ripping burst went wild. The gun could not be depressed enough to cut Grebner down as he bent from the waist and leaned forward to duck the murderous hail; but neither could Grebner get a shot into the bulky body sheltered by the keg. He had first to wriggle clear of the manhole.

"Drop your pistol, or I will shoot!" commanded von Ludens. But his voice trembled, and as he spoke his glance shifted toward the smoking fuse. "That dynamite under the table—go back, you fool!"

Grebner moved, but not back. He cursed wrathfully, and flinging his body aside, he wrenched himself clear of the manhole, but

pitched forward, off balance. Von Ludens, taking advantage of the slip, whipped about, jerking the machine gun into line and tilting the supporting keg. But before its deadly chattering began, the Ferret saw his chance.

Though still bound hand and foot, he drew his knees to his chin, and his two feet shot forward like the kick of a mule, sending von Ludens crashing into his gun. Grebner rolled out of the line of fire. Von Ludens, knowing that with his machine gun he could not outmaneuver a man with a pistol, hurled himself clear as Grebner's pistol crackled. And as he moved, von Ludens remembered the Ferret's pistol, snatched it, jerked it into line—

FOR an instant the Ferret did not know whose pistol had cracked first. Then he saw von Ludens slump to the paving as Jack Grebner struggled to his feet.

"Grab it! Quick!" yelled the Ferret. "That fuse—"

Grebner made it, but he was a very shaky young man when he saw how little of the fuse remained as he yanked it loose from the deadly charge.

"And now," said the Ferret, drawing a long breath, "you might cut us loose. There's a knife in my pocket, if you haven't got one. And then you might explain how you come to be crawling around in sewers when I thought you were on your way to the hospital!"

"That's simple," said Grebner as he released Sue Marlborough and then cut the Ferret's bonds. "I wasn't out as bad as you thought. So I simply got up and followed the cops on into the grounds. I was there when you started for the brewery here."

"But why didn't you come along with me, then—?"

Grebner shook his head. "I started to. And then I remembered how that old drain came in under the old brewery. The end of it used to be above water when the water was low. I remembered, because I used to swim in the river there when I was a kid. I thought that maybe von Ludens might be trying to get away that way. I hurried around to the end of the drain, but didn't

see von Ludens come out—so I started up the drain myself. Only it was half-full of water tonight—”

But Sue Marlborough interrupted.

“Jack, you’ve always said you’d go through fire and water for me, and it sounded so romantic. But you do look like the devil, and you’ve only been through water—”

“Only through water?” retorted Grebner. “Maybe you missed something—I know I nearly passed out when that machine gun

stared me in the face. And in case you did, have a look at this.”

He showed her the remaining scrap of fuse.

“It wasn’t a big fire, Sue—but don’t be little it.”

And then she did pass out.

“Just like a woman,” grumbled Grebner. “Here, give me a hand.”

“Carry her yourself,” said the Ferret. “She’s yours. And now let’s get out of here. I fear that Abner may be worried about us.”

THE END

Another New Headache for the Murderer

By THOMAS MORGAN

FOR many years the value of finger-printing as a criminal detector has been recognized throughout the world. It was only a few years ago, however, that it was learned that bullets fired from a gun were as definitely marked as the tips of a human’s fingers.

Thus far, however, it has been possible only to prove that a certain bullet was or was not fired from a certain gun. In such investigations, a couple of bullets are fired from the suspected gun into wads of cotton batting, so as to be as little injured by the impact as possible. Then they are compared microscopically with the murder bullet previously taken from the victim’s body. By the microscopic lenses and enlarged photographs it is possible to study and compare each minute groove, each scratch, each slight deformity made by the rifling on the bullet as it traversed the barrel.

Despite the fact that all guns are manufactured by machinery, it has been found that no two gun barrels are ever just alike. Tiny scratches in the grooves or the lands of the rifling—slight rust erosions—variations of ten thousandths of an inch in measurements—all these leave their mark unerringly on the bullet as it passes.

The great drawback, however, was that in all such cases the police had to have the suspected gun before comparing bullets.

Now, however, the excellent idea has been suggested that all the guns in the country be “bullet-printed,” and records kept by the authorities, just as all convicted criminals

or dangerous suspects are finger-printed and their records kept for future comparison.

UNDER the proposed arrangement, each state would call in for the registry every rifle, pistol, and machine gun, with a heavy fine and imprisonment for failure to obey. Then the police would fire two bullets from each gun, retaining one bullet and cartridge-case for themselves, and sending the other bullet and cartridge case to Washington for the files of the Federal Government.

Also every fire-arms manufacturer and importer would be compelled to provide the State and Federal Governments with a test bullet and cartridge-case fired from each gun manufactured or imported, before placing it on sale.

Then, if a man were found killed by a bullet anywhere in the country, all that would be necessary would be for the police to check it against the bullets in their own files or in Washington, and it could be immediately determined by the check-up that the fatal bullet was fired by gun number such-and-such, of a certain model, manufactured by such and such company and sold to a certain individual or dealer. As all dealers would be required to register the names and addresses of all gun purchasers, it would be easy enough for the authorities then to trace that particular gun and find out who had possession of it last, just as they are able to trace automobiles by license and engine and body numbers.

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20x6.50-20	3.50	20x26 1/2	3.55
20x6.75-18	3.55	20x27 1/2	3.60
20x6.75-19	3.60	20x28 1/2	3.65
20x6.75-20	3.65	20x29 1/2	3.70
20x7.00-18	3.70	20x30 1/2	3.75
20x7.00-19	3.75	20x31 1/2	3.80
20x7.00-20	3.80	20x32 1/2	3.85
20x7.25-18	3.85	20x33 1/2	3.90
20x7.25-19	3.90	20x34 1/2	3.95
20x7.25-20	3.95	20x35 1/2	4.00
20x7.50-18	4.00	20x36 1/2	4.05
20x7.50-19	4.05	20x37 1/2	4.10
20x7.50-20	4.10	20x38 1/2	4.15
20x7.75-18	4.15	20x39 1/2	4.20
20x7.75-19	4.20	20x40 1/2	4.25
20x7.75-20	4.25	20x41 1/2	4.30
20x8.00-18	4.30	20x42 1/2	4.35
20x8.00-19	4.35	20x43 1/2	4.40
20x8.00-20	4.40	20x44 1/2	4.45
20x8.25-18	4.45	20x45 1/2	4.50
20x8.25-19	4.50	20x46 1/2	4.55
20x8.25-20	4.55	20x47 1/2	4.60
20x8.50-18	4.60	20x48 1/2	4.65
20x8.50-19	4.65	20x49 1/2	4.70
20x8.50-20	4.70	20x50 1/2	4.75
20x8.75-18	4.75	20x51 1/2	4.80
20x8.75-19	4.80	20x52 1/2	4.85
20x8.75-20	4.85	20x53 1/2	4.90
20x9.00-18	4.90	20x54 1/2	4.95
20x9.00-19	4.95	20x55 1/2	5.00
20x9.00-20	5.00	20x56 1/2	5.05
20x9.25-18	5.05	20x57 1/2	5.10
20x9.25-19	5.10	20x58 1/2	5.15
20x9.25-20	5.15	20x59 1/2	5.20
20x9.50-18	5.20	20x60 1/2	5.25
20x9.50-19	5.25	20x61 1/2	5.30
20x9.50-20	5.30	20x62 1/2	5.35
20x9.75-18	5.35	20x63 1/2	5.40
20x9.75-19	5.40	20x64 1/2	5.45
20x9.75-20	5.45	20x65 1/2	5.50
20x10.00-18	5.50	20x66 1/2	5.55
20x10.00-19	5.55	20x67 1/2	5.60
20x10.00-20	5.60	20x68 1/2	5.65
20x10.25-18	5.65	20x69 1/2	5.70
20x10.25-19	5.70	20x70 1/2	5.75
20x10.25-20	5.75	20x71 1/2	5.80
20x10.50-18	5.80	20x72 1/2	5.85
20x10.50-19	5.85	20x73 1/2	5.90
20x10.50-20	5.90	20x74 1/2	5.95
20x10.75-18	5.95	20x75 1/2	6.00
20x10.75-19	6.00	20x76 1/2	6.05
20x10.75-20	6.05	20x77 1/2	6.10
20x11.00-18	6.10	20x78 1/2	6.15
20x11.00-19	6.15	20x79 1/2	6.20
20x11.00-20	6.20	20x80 1/2	6.25
20x11.25-18	6.25	20x81 1/2	6.30
20x11.25-19	6.30	20x82 1/2	6.35
20x11.25-20	6.35	20x83 1/2	6.40
20x11.50-18	6.40	20x84 1/2	6.45
20x11.50-19	6.45	20x85 1/2	6.50
20x11.50-20	6.50	20x86 1/2	6.55
20x11.75-18	6.55	20x87 1/2	6.60
20x11.75-19	6.60	20x88 1/2	6.65
20x11.75-20	6.65	20x89 1/2	6.70
20x12.00-18	6.70	20x90 1/2	6.75
20x12.00-19	6.75	20x91 1/2	6.80
20x12.00-20	6.80	20x92 1/2	6.85
20x12.25-18	6.85	20x93 1/2	6.90
20x12.25-19	6.90	20x94 1/2	6.95
20x12.25-20	6.95	20x95 1/2	7.00
20x12.50-18	7.00	20x96 1/2	7.05
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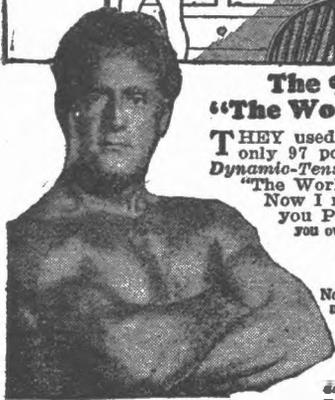
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