

The **PHANTOM** detective

FALL  
25 CENTS

FEATURING  
**CANDIDATE FOR DEATH**

*A Mystery Novel of Politics  
and Mob Rule*

by **ROBERT WALLACE**



A THRILLING  
PUBLICATION

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Occupation \_\_\_\_\_

Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

# The PHANTOM **detective**

Vol. LVIII, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Fall, 1952

## A FULL-LENGTH PHANTOM NOVEL



## SHORT STORIES



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Senator John Midworth was at the peak of a presidential boom when the bombshell burst, hurling him into limbo and at the same time giving Detective Richard Curtis Van Loan a mysterious problem of crime to fathom!

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**EVERY STORY IN THIS MAGAZINE IS BRAND NEW**

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# Lee

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**N**EW YORK'S waterfront! The scene of strikes, riots, sabotage, smuggling, piracy, barratry—the haunt of the cringing underworld characters of the great city. To some—a place to be avoided. To others—the gateway to adventure and romance.

This teeming district is the locale of the next mystery thriller taken from my case book by Robert Wallace—**THE STARING KILLER**, a novel of New York which penetrates to the very core of the city within the city, the ghastly shadowland where dwell the denizens of crime and violence. It's certainly not a place for a woman to be alone—but Muriel Havens is no ordinary woman, and she chances it in **THE STARING KILLER**.

It is Muriel Havens alone who has seen **THE STARING KILLER** committing a heinous crime. She knows he has pushed a man off a subway platform to death under the train wheels—and what's more, **THE STARING KILLER** knows that she has witnessed the murder. For an instant, as he races past her, the killer gives her one glaring stare—a look she can never forget. It's a peculiar, frightening stare that seems to bore through her hypnotically. A stare that spells death!

The killer's staring eyes are a challenge that Muriel can't disregard. At great personal danger, she drifts into the waterfront district, posing as one of the waterfront babes—determined to find **THE STARING KILLER** and help unearth his sinister machinations. What happens to her in this seamy environment is told in **THE STARING KILLER**—a shocking epic of the waterfront!

Robert Wallace has fashioned a gripping, hard-hitting novel around this baffling and exciting case, and I know you'll enjoy it in the next issue of **THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE**—along with the other splendid stories the same issue will carry.

This letter is typical of many others we have been receiving:

I enjoy your short mystery stories in the magazine. And the long story in the beginning of the book. If you feel like reading a short story it's there, and the same with the long story. I also like the way the stories are all complete in one issue.—Herbert Erickson, McKeesport, Ind.

If you want to add your voice, whether in praise or criticism, please address The Editor, **THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE**, 10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y.

Remember—you may still join our nation-wide club to combat crime, **FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM**. To become a member, just send us a letter stating that you would like to belong. Enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope, so that we can send you your membership card, and state your name, address, age and sex.

There are no dues or fees. If you would like to have a handsome bronzed replica of the Phantom's badge, enclose 15¢ for postage and handling.

By joining, you express your interest in law enforcement. But we must sound a warning—it must be clearly understood that membership in **FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM** gives you no special privileges or police powers whatsoever.

Thanks, everybody, for your interest in this magazine and in the club. Let's all get together again next issue.

—THE PHANTOM.

# WHAT SECRET POWER DID THIS MAN POSSESS?



**Benjamin Franklin**  
(A Rosicrucian)

**W**HY was this man great? How does anyone—man or woman—achieve greatness? Is it not by mastery of the powers within ourselves?

Know the mysterious world within you! Attune yourself to the wisdom of the ages! Grasp the inner power of your mind! Learn the secrets of a full and peaceful life! Benjamin Franklin—like many other learned and great men and women—was a Rosicrucian. The Rosicrucians (NOT a religious organization) first came to America in 1694. Today, headquarters of the Rosicrucians send over seven million pieces of mail annually to all parts of the world.

**The Rosicrucians**

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Write for **YOUR FREE COPY** of "The Mastery of Life"—**TODAY**. No obligation. No salesmen. A non-profit organization. Address: Scribe I.A.W.

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ZONE \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_



**\$100<sup>00</sup> A WEEK in CASH**  
**PAID DIRECT TO YOU**

# FAMILY HOSPITAL PLAN

## SAVE MONEY!

There's a big advantage to buying this policy by mail. This method of selling is less costly for us—and that's another reason why we are able to offer so much protection for so little money.

**Policy Pays for a Day, a Week,  
 a Month, a Year—just as long as  
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## JUST LOOK

### The Large Benefit This Low Cost Policy Provides!

The Service Life Family Hospital Plan covers you and your family for about everything—for every accident, and for all common and rare diseases after the policy has been in force 30 days or more. Very serious disease such as cancer, tuberculosis, heart disease, diseases involving female organs, sickness resulting in a surgical operation, hernia, lumbago and sacroiliac conditions originating after the policy is in force six months are all covered. . . . Hospitalization caused by attempted suicide, use of intoxicants or narcotics, insanity, and venereal disease is naturally excluded.

The money is all yours—for any purpose you want to use it. There are no hidden meanings or big words in the policy. We urge you and every family and also individuals to send for this policy on our 10 day free trial offer—and be convinced that no other hospital plan offers you so much for your \$1.00 a month!

## TWO SPECIAL FEATURES

### MATERNITY

**Benefits At Small Extra Cost**  
 Women who will some day have babies will want to take advantage of a special low cost maternity rider. Pays \$50.00 for childbirth confinement either in the hospital or at home, after policy has been in force 10 months. Double the amount on twins.

### POLIO

**Benefits At No Extra Cost**  
 In lieu of other regular benefits policy pays these benefits if polio strikes—For Hospital Bills, up to . . . \$500.00  
 For Doctor's Bills while in the hospital, up to \$500.00  
 For Orthopedic Appliances, up to . . . \$500.00  
**TOTAL OF \$1,500.00**

## 3c A DAY IS ALL YOU PAY for this outstanding new Family Protection

Wonderful news! This new policy covers everyone from infancy to age 70! When sickness or accident sends you or a member of your family to the hospital—this policy PAYS \$100.00 PER WEEK for a day, a month, even a year . . . or just as long as you stay in the hospital. What a wonderful feeling to know your savings are protected and you won't have to go into debt. The money is paid **DIRECT TO YOU** to spend as you wish. This remarkable new Family Hospital Protection costs only 3c a day for each adult 18 to 59 years of age, and for age 60 to 70 only 4½c a day. This policy even covers children up to 18 years of age with cash benefits of \$50.00 a week while in the hospital—yet the cost is only 1½c a day for each child! Benefits paid while confined to any recognized hospital, except government hospitals, rest homes and clinics, spas or sanitariums. Pick your own doctor. Naturally this wonderful policy is issued only to individuals and families now in good health; otherwise the cost would be sky high. But once protected, you are covered for about every sickness or accident. Persons covered may return as often as necessary to the hospital within the year.

### This is What \$100.00 a Week Can Mean to You When in the Hospital for Sickness or Accident

Money melts away fast when you or a member of your family has to go to the hospital. You have to pay costly hospital board and room . . . doctor's bills and maybe the surgeon's bill too . . . necessary medicines, operating room fees—a thousand and one things you don't count on. What a Godsend this **READY CASH BENEFIT WILL BE TO YOU**. Here's cash to go a long way toward paying heavy hospital expenses—and the money left over can help pay you for time lost from your job or business. Remember—all cash benefits are paid directly to you.

**REMEMBER—\$100.00 A WEEK CASH BENEFIT IS ACTUALLY \$14.25 PER DAY!**

### Examine This Policy Without Cost or Obligation—Read It— Talk It Over—Then Decide

### 10 DAYS FREE EXAMINATION

You are invited to inspect this new kind of Family Hospital Plan. We will send the actual policy to you for ten days at no cost or obligation. Talk it over with your banker, doctor, lawyer or spiritual adviser. Then make up your mind. This policy backed by the full resources of the nationally known Service Life Insurance Company of Omaha, Nebraska—organized under the laws of Nebraska and with policyholders in every state. **SEND NO MONEY**—just your name and address! No obligation, of course!

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The Actual Policy Will Come to You  
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The Service Life Insurance Company  
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 Please rush the new Family Hospital Protection  
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 I understand that I am under no obligation.

Name . . . . .  
 Address . . . . .  
 City or Town . . . . . State . . . . .

## SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY

Assets of \$13,188,604.16 as of January 1, 1951  
 Hospital Department H-17, Omaha 2, Nebraska





# LAW AND DISORDER

By HAROLD HELFER

A THIEF REMOVED A PANE of window glass from the home of a Yonkers, N. Y., householder, then entered the house and thoroughly ransacked it. But he was nice enough to put the glass back in place and reputy it before leaving.

TIRED OF GATE-CRASHING Romeos, girls seized a youth who climbed through a window of a girl's school in Jutland, Denmark, and held him under a shower.

A THIEF DRESSED IN a surgeon's gown entered the room of a Rochester, Minn., hospital, told a patient to roll over and removed \$375 from his wallet, assuring the victim as he departed, "Your back looks O. K. to me."

ALTHOUGH HE STOLE \$50 from their office, two Norfolk, England, lawyers find it hard to hold any ill feelings against the burglar. He mailed back some personal papers he had taken, with an attached note that said: "Play Gambut on the nose at Yarmouth race track." The horse paid 5 to 2.

TO BACK UP HIS CHARGE that the neighbors' dogs kept him awake at night, a Louisville, Ky., man brought a recording of their yapping into court with him.

A WOMAN IN BERKELEY, CALIF., wishes she weren't such a sound sleeper. She woke up the other morning to find that a thief had removed the wedding ring from her finger.

IN MANHATTAN, police raided a pre-dawn poker game. The haul: Fourteen ladies, mostly middle-aged housewives.

AT NIAGARA FALLS, CANADA, Royal Canadian Mounted Police got their man—but there wasn't much they could do with him. Arriving with an income tax evasion summons against him, they found him in a cemetery, where he'd been buried for 20 years.

CHATTING AMIABLY for a few minutes with a sidewalk photographer was the undoing of a parole violator wanted by Massachusetts authorities, who had been living quietly for 15 years at Milford, N. H. Massachusetts gendarmes noticed his picture, with his alias and address, in the inquiring photographer's column of a Sunday newspaper.

A ST. JOSEPH, MO., STORE didn't have to move to apprehend a customer who had purchased a cigaret lighter with a bum check. He came back and complained about the way the cigaret lighter was working.

RETURNING TO HIS PARKED AUTO, a Bostonian amiably inquired of the stranger sitting in the front seat: "Well, what can I do for you?" "I'll tell you what," said the stranger, "you might get in the car and give me your money." Since the stranger promptly drew a revolver, the polite Bostonian had to hand over \$800.

A MISCREANT MADE an unfortunate selection of a parked auto when he tried to frighten a lover's lane couple at Vancouver, Canada, by rapping on the car window and announcing, "I'm a policeman." Indulging in some off-duty romance, the constable in the car put the culprit in the hoosegow for impersonating an officer.

# CANDIDATE



*Van Loan moved swiftly and grabbed the man's gun wrist*

I

THE huge, wood-paneled library was hushed and quiet on this particular mid-summer's morning, and the solid-built, shaggy-looking man standing motionless near the screened veranda doors was as immobile as the air hovering over the estate.

Off in the distance appeared the endless blue sweep of Lake Michigan. But the big

man did not appear to be staring at the water. Instead, his granite-gray eyes held a remote look, as if he were seeing something far and beyond the lake.

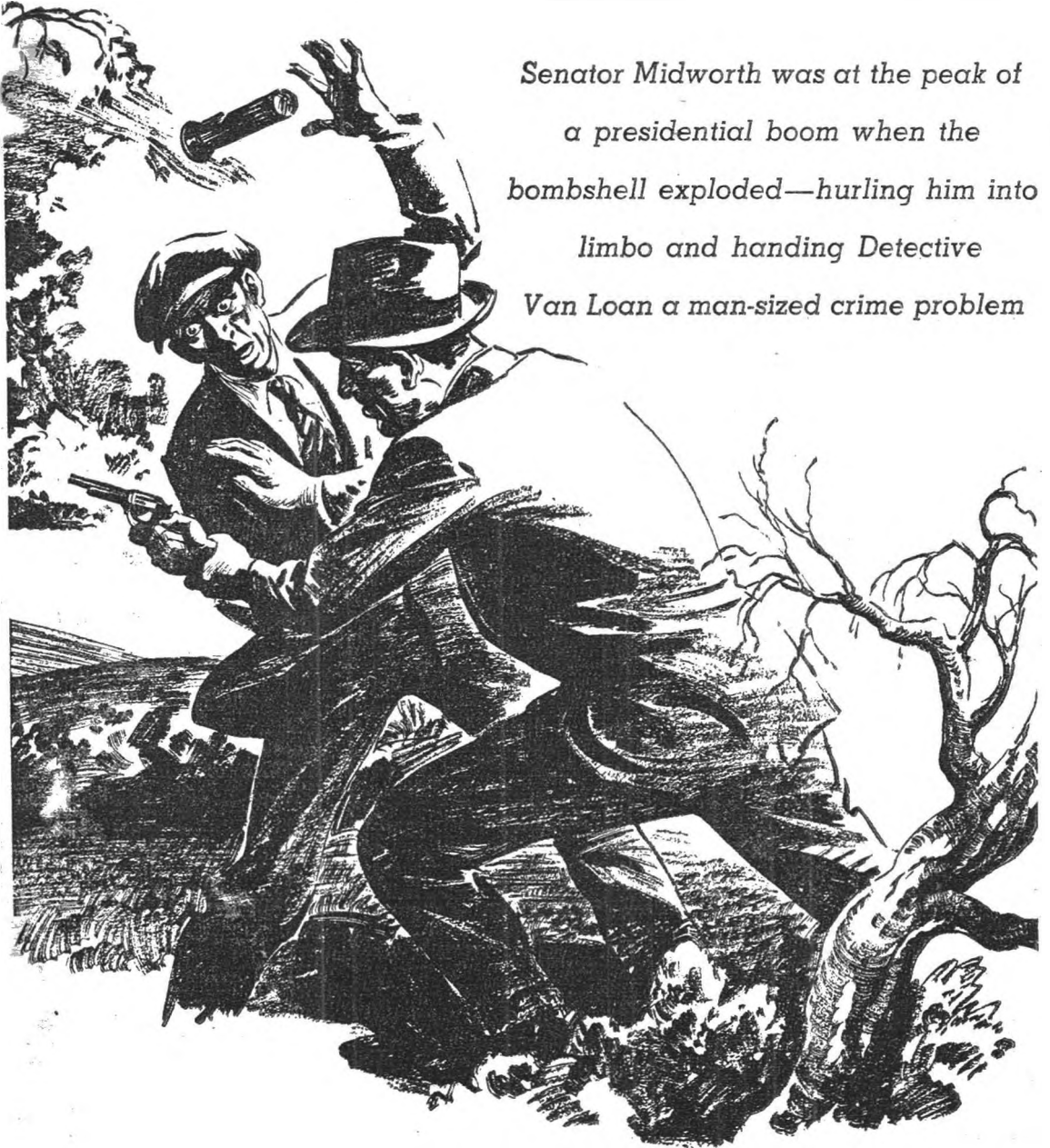
His heavy jaw was set in grim lines; his lips were compressed. Finally, with a movement of decision, he stepped to the mahogany desk located beneath a fireplace in the center of the book-lined room.



# for DEATH

A Novel by ROBERT WALLACE

*Senator Midworth was at the peak of  
a presidential boom when the  
bombshell exploded—hurling him into  
limbo and handing Detective  
Van Loan a man-sized crime problem*



Sitting down, he picked up his pen and started writing again. His eyes took on a troubled expression now, but the lines of his heavy jaw became even more determined. Words flowed out on the sheet of note paper.

"... and so, Havens, I cannot tell you the terrible shock it was to learn the truth. Everything I have worked for, the long years in working honestly to attain this position—are for what? 'Honest John' Midworth people have always called me. And it was true, as you well know. Today, at the convention, I am going to tell them the truth. I shall reveal exactly what I have learned in the past few days. And since you are a newspaper publisher with a reputation, too, for absolute honesty, I want you to have the complete story. You, as my friend, will understand. Your great Chicago paper here has the means and the influence to get to the bottom of this awful situation which threatens every citizen in this country."

J. Martin "Honest John" Midworth paused in his writing, thought a moment, then went on:

"I am late now. In a few moments we leave for the city. There probably will be no opportunity to see you at the convention hall, for Lord knows what confusion will take place when I make my announcement. So I shall drop this letter off at your office on the way through the Loop. Contact me later. . ."

Again the big man paused in his writing, but this time it was in response to a discreet knock at the closed library doors.

"Yes, Judson?" J. Martin Midworth called out.

ONE of the solid doors opened. Immediately there was the sound of a radio or television set in the background, coming from across the wide hall of the mansion. You could hear cheering and the sound of many hundreds of voices in a great, constant murmur that reached even this sheltered part of the house.

"I dislike intruding, sir," said the elderly, somewhat stooped man in the doorway, "but the car is waiting." The butler

glanced at his wrist watch. "You have less than an hour, Senator, to reach the city."

"I know, Judson," said Midworth, reaching for an envelope. "Tell Harry I'll be right there."

He added a few more lines to the letter, folded it, and placed it in the envelope. Midworth scrawled the name "Frank Havens" across the long envelope, then underscored the word "*Personal*" beneath this.

Sealing the envelope, he placed it in his inside coat pocket, rose and hurried toward the hallway. He was already dressed in formal striped trousers and morning coat.

The aging butler handed him his hat as he moved through the hallway. Judson's lined face was smiling.

"Good luck, sir!" He motioned toward the sprawling living room across the center hall. "Hear that crowd, sir! They are completing the roll call on the first ballot. Without a doubt you will be nominated, sir!"

The grim, troubled look swept across Senator Midworth's face again. Then, turning to look at his old-time employee, the lines of his face relaxed for a moment and he placed a friendly hand on the butler's shoulder.

"Thank you, Judson," he said with warmth.

He started toward the front door again.

Trailing him, the butler added, "Mrs. Midworth said to tell you she will be waiting at the reception, sir. I believe you know about the suite at the Hotel Blake?"

The Senator merely nodded this time as he strode quickly through the doorway and down the wide stone steps to the waiting limousine. Getting into the car, he said quickly, "We'll have to hurry. But we'll have to take a moment to drive by the *Enterprise* newspaper offices, Harry. I have an important errand to do there first."

The chauffeur touched his cap, started the big car smoothly as the rear door closed.

Midworth settled back for the quick ride

from the North Shore into Chicago. But his face still showed the trouble that gripped him. He stared fiercely ahead in deep thought.

He told himself, *Frank Havens is the only person, now, that I can trust. Even though this letter to him isn't complete, it must reach him—because I'm afraid something is going to happen.*

As the powerful car sped along wind-



**RICHARD CURTIS VAN LOAN**  
(The Phantom)

ing Sheridan Road, the Senator rehearsed his brief speech.

Within an hour the delegates—everyone in the nation—would know!

**T**HE massive colosseum was located not far from noisy Chicago's downtown Loop. It sprawled over an entire square block. As far as one could see in any direction cars were parked bumper to bumper along the curbs, in alleyways and in parking lots. Police tried to regulate the traffic which crawled through the narrow lanes which were now the only arteries left in the various routes to the colosseum. Somehow they managed to let a few cars through—mainly those carrying license plates of important state and city officials.

Waves of sound, voices cheering and

roaring applause reached the ear within two blocks of the high stone structure, and all around the building the sidewalks were packed with listeners.

For even outside the colosseum, loudspeakers had been installed so that the gigantic overflow crowd could hear what was going on inside. Every side street bar had its television set tuned in to the convention broadcast. Each drinking place was jammed with customers watching the TV screens.

One could hear the phrase that traveled through the crowds. It spread like the rapidly enlarging circles caused by a stone dropped into a mill pond:

"Ohio has just voted for Midworth!"

"Midworth's still way out in front!"

"Midworth's going to get the nomination for president!"

Inside the vaulted dome of the colosseum itself the uproar vibrated against the eardrums. Wave after wave of cheers went up as the various state ballots were tabulated. Bands broke in with clashing music. Wherever the eye roamed there was an undulating sea of waving arms, flashing placards and huge boxlike signs mounted on poles.

And in the center of this, set like a prize fight ring, was the high, big platform crammed with officials moving in and out, up and down steps, shaking hands, back-slapping. Banners waved and the blinding lights of television cameras seemed to be everywhere.

One of the television cameramen aimed his lens back and forth, catching various highlights, spotting various celebrities in the audience. Several rows from the stage the cameraman spotted a distinguished looking man and a vivacious, beautiful girl who sat with him. He recognized the man as Frank Havens, publisher of a string of important newspapers across the country. Havens also owned the influential Chicago *Enterprise*. The attractive young woman with him must be his daughter. The cameraman had often seen pictures of her in the newspapers. He trained his camera that way. . . .

• Havens was aware of the TV camera



trained upon him, but he continued talking to his lovely daughter Muriel.

"Our good friend Senator Midworth should be putting in an appearance any minute now. It looks like a unanimous nomination for him. Any moment they will announce it as official. Then wait till you hear the uproar." He had to lean close so that his daughter could hear the words, for even now the noise was slowly building up.

Muriel touched her father's arm. He was a handsome man, mustached, looking not unlike General Pershing when that famous military man had been in his prime.

Muriel said excitedly, "I'm so glad for the Senator, father. He's a fine man."

"None better."

"Do you think he'll become president of the United States?"

"I'm sure of it, Muriel. Not only in this state, but the country over he has a reputation for absolute honesty. He'll put a quick end to crime, political favoritism and money-grabbing by officeholders. Everyone will vote for him."

Muriel stared in awe at the thousands of people packed into the convention hall. "I wish Van could have come out from New York with us."

She referred to Richard Curtis Van Loan, wealthy sportsman and man about town, who was their very close friend.

Havens gave his daughter a sidelong look, then grinned. "Maybe he'll drop in. He isn't going to be happy in New York with you out here in the Windy City."

Muriel studied her father's face. "You say that as if you knew he might be coming. Is he? Have you heard from him?"

Her voice quickened as she spoke, and her pretty eyes became animated. She clung to his arm.

"I—" Havens started to say, then his voice was suddenly drowned out by the din which followed.

The loudspeakers had announced that Senator "Honest John" Midworth's unanimous nomination was official. This was quickly followed by the statement that Midworth himself was now on his way to the platform.

**B**EDLAM broke loose. Twenty thousand voices screamed as one, and there was stamping of feet, shouting and whistling. The din became so continuously shrill and penetrating that Muriel was forced to cover her ears. But like everyone else in the jam-packed auditorium, she rose to her feet to get a glimpse of the Senator himself.

The one TV cameraman who had momentarily aimed his camera at them now swung it back to the platform. From his vantage point above a specially built, high, narrow platform, the cameraman had a clear shot of the stage.

But even there people milled about and there was confusion. It appeared as if at least two hundred officials were crammed onto the stage itself. The TV man watched for the appearance of J. Martin Midworth. He swung his camera back and forth, back and forth. . . .

Without actually thinking about it, he saw something that later was to return vividly to his mind. It was only a moment ago that he had seen a large silver water carafe placed at the speakers' stand. Now it was being replaced with another. It seemed that the first bottle had not yet been touched.

The cameraman saw only a hand and coat sleeve as the bottle was replaced. Too many people were on the platform for him to see anything else.

Then the minor incident was forgotten as the roar of the crowd increased to a crescendo. A burly, solid, big figure in smart dress had finally reached the platform.

It was Senator "Honest John" Midworth. He worked his way slowly to the array of microphones. TV lenses held on him; movie cameras ground away.

The roar of the crowd continued like the thunder of Niagara. The chairman kept rapping futilely with his gavel. But for two long minutes the mighty wave of sound continued.

Then, slowly, it started to lessen. Silence dropped over the colosseum and the abrupt quietude was almost as unnerving as the pandemonium of a moment before.

Thousands sat quietly now, waiting for the Senator's words. Finally they boomed slowly over the loudspeakers.

"Ladies and gentlemen. . . I have something very startling to tell you. . . I. . ."

There was a long pause. The listeners sensed something wrong. It was evident in the Senator's strained voice, in the harsh, grim lines of his strong features.

A murmur ran through the great hall. People were puzzled. This was a time for a cheery wave of the hand from the Senator, of a broad happy smile at news of his nomination.

Instead—

Thousands of pairs of eyes watched intently as the big man reached for the silver water carafe. He poured a glass of water, drank it down, then slowly turned toward the microphones again.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began again, "within the past few hours I have made a terrible discovery. . . a discovery that means I must give up any kind of public office forever. I cannot accept this nomination for President of these great United States."

A single, horrified gasp went up from the thousands listening. The murmuring started again, and the chairman rapped for silence.

Senator Midworth continued, "I have learned that for the past ten years now. . . that. . . that. . ."

**IT APPEARED** the Senator was fumbling for words. Each person in the audience waited breathlessly. They saw the big man's hand go to his chest, as though it pained him to say what was coming next.

But no further words came. Both hands went to his chest now, and Midworth bent over as if clutched by pain. He fell against the speakers' stand and the many loudspeakers crackled with the choking gasps that came from his throat.

Then he fell to the floor, still holding his chest.

Immediately people were on their feet. Someone leaped to the microphones and called for a doctor. Figures milled around

the fallen man. Confusion spread rapidly.

Muriel Havens grabbed her father's arm. Her eyes held horror. "It must be his heart—" she started to say.

Frank Havens said sharply, "Honest John is as strong and healthy as an ox. Nonsense. There's something—wait!"

His hand closed over his daughter's arm. They stood watching. There was a professional looking man bending down over the Senator. Moments crawled by as everyone waited.

Then a murmur started near the stage. It spread like a fanned forest fire. It reached the ears of Frank Havens and Muriel.

"He's dead!"

The word leaped from tongue to tongue. "Dead. . . dead. . . dead. . ." On and on, through the vast building.

A woman screamed. Others picked it up. Panic started to grip some of the audience. Police appeared suddenly from doorways and passages leading into the vast hall.

Muriel looked around suddenly as a young page boy approached her father and asked, "Mr. Havens?"

When the publisher jerked his head, the young man said, "An important phone call from your newspaper, sir. Someone over there has been shot. They're trying to reach you."

Havens thanked the boy briefly. He took his daughter's arm. The publisher's face was sharp and grim.

"I don't like this," he said fiercely. "I don't like this at all."

He glanced once toward the stage as they started pushing their way out, and there was a thoughtful look in his eyes.



**T**HE cameraman atop the high, narrow TV platform happened to glance down and see the newspaper publisher and his

blond-haired daughter leaving—or at least trying to leave, as they slowly inched their way through the standing, packed, stunned thousands of people. He forgot his camera for a moment, which was still trained on the stage, where confusion and excitement reigned.

He became aware of a voice screaming up at him above the uproar.

"Hey, Johnnie. Knock it off. Come on, come on!"

He looked down.

It was his chief, and the boss was waving his arms frantically. Johnnie cupped a hand to his ear to catch the words. He heard the chief electrician yell: "Cut the telecast—now! We can't let *this* stuff go out over Channel 8!"

Johnnie, a lithe young man in his late twenties, cut switches and then was agilely climbing down the narrow ladder to the floor below. He grabbed his boss's arm.



STEVE HUSTON

"What do you make of it, chief?" Johnnie waved a hand toward the platform, where police, politicians and big-wings milled about. In the center of the stage, beneath the microphones, there was a tight knot of people bending over watching a doctor at work.

"Orders from the cops," said the chief. "No telecast. You might as well shove off. Get some lunch. This place'll be a madhouse for hours. You know what?" Johnnie's boss leaned close to whisper something, not realizing his words wouldn't have carried a foot in the noisy, excited talking that was going on everywhere.

"What?" Johnnie demanded.

"I heard them cops say it," said his immediate superior. "I guess the doctor up there made some remark, and already the word's leaking out!"

"What's leaking out?" Johnnie asked.

"Poisoned!"

Johnnie gave a jerk. Something clicked into place in his mind, but for the moment he didn't realize just what it was.

"You mean—" he started to ask.

"I mean just what I heard. Senator Midworth was poisoned. And you know what that means?"

"Murder!" gasped Johnnie.

His boss nodded knowingly, then motioned toward one of the aisles. "Get out of here and keep your mouth shut. It's not for us to decide or spread rumors until they're *sure*. Get some lunch. Come back later."

Johnnie started out, pushing his way, and now the thought was suddenly clear in his mind. That hand and arm he had seen moving, replacing an already fresh water bottle. And he recalled focusing on Senator Midworth as the man had drunk a full glass of water from that second jug. . . .

Abruptly Johnnie knew what he had to do. The police would not listen to him. Probably a dozen people up there on the stage right now had a dozen different theories. But Johnnie was remembering news stories he'd read in the *Enterprise*, especially editorials written by the publisher himself.

Havens had gone all out in backing Senator Midworth for the nomination. From the tone of his editorials, Johnnie knew that the two men must have been close friends.

Johnnie would tell Havens himself what he had seen happen just before Senator



Midworth started to speak.

He finally reached the street. Outside the loudspeakers had stopped their blaring. But thousands of people milled around, waiting to hear further announcements. They, too, had heard the horrible news of the Senator's untimely death.

It was impossible to locate a cab. Traffic was at a standstill. So Johnnie set out walking in the noonday heat. In ten minutes he could reach Wacker Drive and the towering Press Building alongside the Chicago River, where Haven's Chicago paper was located.

He quickened his steps, unmindful of the sultriness that had settled over the city. . . .

FROM the twenty-fifth floor of the Press Building you could see Lake Michigan off across the crowded Loop. Windows were flung open along the wide, long corridors, and there was some slight breeze.

Havens and his trim blond daughter left one of the corridors, passed through an inner, narrower hallway that skirted the main offices of the *Enterprise*, and reached the publisher's private office located in a corner of the vast twenty-fifth floor. Deep-piled rugs now muffled their footsteps; the large room was richly furnished with heavy, comfortable furniture. Havens instantly moved toward one of the row of buzzers on his desk.

Before he reached them, however, a side door in the room opened and a thin, neat, prim-looking woman came in. She said at once, "You got my message at the colosseum, Mr. Havens?"

The publisher jerked his head. "What's this about someone being shot here?"

"It was one of the elevator operators—Henry, his name is. They've rushed him to the hospital." The woman's voice rose somewhat and she raced on. "They think—his spine—the bullet must have injured his spine. He—he's unconscious and—paralyzed!"

"Good heavens," gasped Muriel.

Havens was frowning deeply. "But—why? Why was he shot?"

The middle-aged woman stared at her

employer. "Mr. Havens, I didn't know about it until after it happened. I mean, the letter for you from Senator Midworth and that Henry had it and was supposed to deliver it to you personally and be sure—"

"Wait!" Havens exclaimed. "Letter? What letter, Miss Burr?"

The secretary was deeply upset now. She twisted a small handkerchief between her fingers. "If I'd only known—" She drew in her breath in a jerky sigh, rushed on, "The way I understand, the elevator starter says that Senator Midworth stopped in here a little over a half hour ago. Apparently he made arrangements with the starter to have this letter delivered to you personally. The starter assigned Henry, the elevator operator I'm speaking about, to bring the letter up to you. Then—"

"Yes?" Havens urged.

"Then—a few moments later someone found that poor elevator boy lying outside in the corridor. Shot!"

As the secretary had talked, she had not caught the glance that went from Havens to his daughter as the name of Senator Midworth was mentioned. Now Havens asked quickly:

"The letter—where is it?"

Miss Burr was trembling now. She looked from one to the other. Then she stammered, "We. . . don't. . . know, sir! Henry didn't have it when he was found out there in the hall. It—it was nowhere around at all. It's simply—vanished!"

Frank Havens groaned. Then he moved thoughtfully toward his desk, suddenly lost in concentration. He sat down, reached for the phone, then paused to look up at his secretary.

"Miss Burr," he said, "have you heard . . . about Senator Midworth?"

The woman shook her head. "We've been so terribly upset around here, Mr. Havens, that—"

"Tell her," Havens said to Muriel.

His daughter put her arm gently on Miss Burr's shoulder, said quietly, "Let's go out to your office a moment, shall we?"

Havens sat silently a moment. Then.

coming to a decision, he picked up the receiver and spoke to the newspaper switchboard operator.

"I want to call New York. Get me Long Distance."

The side door of the office opened again. Muriel looked in and said, "Father, there's a man here who wishes to see you. He says he's from one of the television stations and that it's rather important."

Havens appeared deep in thought again. He said somewhat absently, "Have him wait. This is more important." He looked directly at his attractive daughter. "I'm calling Richard Curtis Van Loan."

Muriel's eyes flashed at sound of the name. "Van!"

Her father nodded.

Muriel closed the door firmly behind her and leaned against it with her trim, straight back. Both father and daughter knew, without putting the thought into words, that Frank Havens was referring to the Phantom Detective. Even now with the door carefully closed behind her, Muriel did not mention the Phantom by name.

She said, "You mean, you're calling him about Senator Midworth?"

"Yes—that, and about a letter from Midworth that has disappeared. Muriel, as soon as I complete this call, we must see about that boy Henry, the elevator operator."

"But can't the police—"

Havens had been connected with Long Distance, was giving a New York City telephone number. Then he looked up again. He said slowly, "Muriel, there's something very mysterious about Midworth's death. It's going to turn this city and this state upside down. Perhaps it will go even higher than that. Muriel, I think Midworth was murdered. We'll soon know. And in my opinion it is going to take someone working undercover, someone without any police or political connections out here, to get to the bottom of it."

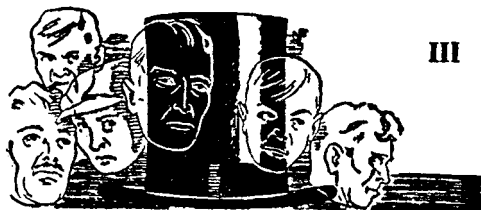
Muriel nodded. She spoke softly, even though her voice could not possibly have been heard beyond the heavy walls of the

big room. She knew who Havens meant. "Van?" she asked.

"Yes."

Again, neither mentioned the Phantom by name.

Abruptly the call was completed and Frank Havens started talking.



THE mammoth picture window overlooked Manhattan's towering spires. There was not a single nearby building, however, tall enough to interfere with the breathtaking panorama, for this window was built into the very penthouse apartment of the building. Midday sun gleamed off the new TV masts of the Empire Building in the distance.

Within the quiet living room of the penthouse apartment, Richard Curtis Van Loan sat watching the wide screen of the television console located across the room. There was a tenseness about his tall, rangy figure; he listened intently to each word spoken by the well-known news announcer visible on the screen.

"We're sorry," the news reporter was saying, "that our television broadcast direct from Chicago had to be taken off the air. But we feel that under the circumstances you will realize we could not continue the broadcast from the Convention Hall. You have all heard of the shocking, sudden death of Senator Midworth just as he was ready to make his acceptance speech there in Chicago. The moment we have any more news—"

Van Loan had stepped across the room to shut off the broadcast. He had been listening to various comments on the Senator's death for some moments now. It was quite obvious that things were in a state of confusion out there at the Chicago Convention headquarters. . . .

He turned toward the wide window,

staring out, but absorbed in thought.

Only a few moments ago Richard Curtis Van Loan, millionaire sportsman and debonair man about town, had returned from a morning walk preparatory to changing to a lighter summer suit and visiting one of his exclusive clubs for lunch. There had been a certain restlessness about his usual easy-going, relaxed manner. Though he never would have admitted it to his wealthy acquaintances about town, he missed Muriel Havens, since she had gone with her father to attend the Chicago Convention.

Havens, owner of the influential *Clarion* in New York, had recently acquired controlling interests in several other important newspapers across the country. One was the Chicago *Enterprise*, which had long campaigned for Senator Midworth's nomination for the presidency of the United States. The two men had been old friends.

At her father's request, Muriel had accompanied him. "After all," she had told Van Loan before leaving, "it's only for a few days. Will you miss me?"

Van had grinned easily. "This will give me the opportunity to catch up on some of my other social engagements."

"Stinker!" Muriel had chided.

"Have fun," Van had called as they started out the ramp toward their plane at La Guardia.

But all the time he had known that she knew that he was jesting. In public, with either Muriel or Frank Havens himself, Van maintained his role as a wealthy playboy without a care in the world. And it was only recently that Muriel had learned the real truth about him—that Van was in reality the Phantom Detective, a cool, efficient person often times engaged in his unending, dangerous campaign against crime.

The knowledge that Van was the Phantom had brought them much closer together. There were moments recently when he had been on the verge of showing Muriel how much he really cared. But each time something deterred him. Was it right to ask Muriel to share a life



MURIEL HAVENS

that was dedicated to fighting evil? The underworld—and others—had long since put a price on the Phantom's head. Van continued to stare out the window, thinking. . . .

FINALLY he turned away. The tension was still evident in his manner as he moved restlessly about the room. This business about Senator Midworth's sudden death upset him—for the reason that it must have deeply upset Muriel and her father. Both had been so enthusiastic about Senator Midworth becoming president if he won his party's nomination.

"A finer man never lived," Havens often said. "Just watch the way he'll clean up corruption and confusion."

"He won every primary across the country," Muriel had added. "He'll win like Bold Prince."

And now. . . .

Van shook his head. In the news broadcasts about Senator Midworth's death, during the past half hour, he had detected an undercurrent of mystery. There was something about the Senator's death, he felt, that had not yet been told to the public. Perhaps he should call Muriel and her father. . . .

As if to remind him, the telephone rang in the quiet of the big room. Van stepped to a secretary desk to answer it.

"Just a moment, please," the operator said. "Chicago is calling."

Next, Havens himself was on the line.

"Van," asked the newspaper publisher, "how soon can you be on a plane for Chicago?"

"Just a minute . . ." Van said, talking with the abrupt quick efficiency of the Phantom. He knew, now, the reason for his restlessness of the past few minutes. There was something wrong out there. He reached into a drawer of the desk, found an airlines time table, talked as he flipped its pages with his right hand. "Something's wrong." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes."

"Not Muriel—" Van started to say, concerned for an instant.

"No, Van. Muriel's right here in the next office." Swiftly, then, the publisher told about Senator Midworth's sudden death on the convention platform. The Phantom caught the tension in Havens' voice.

"It wasn't a heart attack?" he said.

He could almost see the publisher shake his head. "Van, there's something sinister about the entire thing. I've learned that Senator Midworth himself was here looking for me just before he went to the Convention Hall. He left a letter . . . gave it to an elevator boy here—"

"What did the letter say, Frank?"

"I haven't seen it!" Briefly, Havens explained about the elevator operator being found shot. "I have an idea that letter contained something mighty urgent, Van, otherwise Midworth would not have gone out of his way to deliver it here in person. He was even late arriving at Convention headquarters. But now that letter has vanished! All we found was that poor lad—shot. He's still unconscious in the hospital. I'm going there right away. Then I'll meet you at the airport here. . . How about planes?"

The Phantom had been checking flights as he talked.

"I can be on a DC-6 non-stop flight within the hour," he said. "Another three hours to Chicago. Flight 16. You can check at that end about arrival." He named the airline.

"Van?"

"Yes."

"You'll arrive as 'Mr. Grey,' understand?" The publisher added, "I'll tell them here that you're one of our reporters from New York, coming out to work on the Midworth story."

The Phantom understood. In his famous role, Van Loan often took the identity of a "Mr. Grey," a gentleman from Cleveland about whom inquisitive people knew absolutely nothing. In Chicago, especially, and after he had changed his appearance somewhat, no one would ever connect him with Richard Curtis Van Loan.

Sharp eyes now thoughtful, the Phantom asked a question. "What about Senator Midworth's death? Do you think—"

"Yes!" exclaimed the publisher. "I won't keep you, Van. You'd better hurry. See you out here at the airport."

Moving swiftly after he had hung up, the Phantom went to his bedroom, stepped into a deep clothes closet and opened a cleverly concealed door. A hidden room was revealed beyond.

Here, with the simplest of changes, he became a new identity.

THE secret room contained clothing used for various disguises. He selected a sport coat and summer flannels somewhat on the rakish side, and a slightly battered hat that was in keeping with one worn by a typical newspaper reporter. With deft fingers, the Phantom next used a few creams and dyes to change the color of his skin, or to add a few lines which gave him a slightly dissipated look. A touch of wax beneath the skin dye changed the appearance of his nose; it seemed broader and flatter now.

There was nothing spectacular about the manner in which he quickly changed his appearance—no wigs, cloaks and fake beards. Yet he appeared now as an older, ordinary sort of man you would never



pick out in a crowd. Which was what the Phantom desired.

Next, he quickly threw some additional clothing into a bag, added a compact kit of burglar tools and an underarm holster holding a well-oiled, blue steel automatic. The small leather badge case he slipped into a specially created pocket of the sport coat he was now wearing.

The case contained a badge designed in the shape of a domino mask and set with precious jewels. That badge was familiar to law officials everywhere. It was the emblem of the Phantom, crime fighter.

He picked up the suitcase, glanced around, then locked the door to the hidden room behind him as he hurried back to the bedroom. There, he used an extension phone to call the airlines terminal on 42nd Street and made reservations for Flight 16. The airport limousine would be leaving for La Guardia Field in twenty minutes. He had no time to lose.

From the exclusive penthouse apartment, a private self-operated elevator shot him down to a side door of the building. He reached the street by way of a little-used emergency exit. It was a route that permitted the Phantom to go and come at will without arousing any curiosity.

On a cross street, he picked up a cab and was quickly whisked to the airlines terminal. It required only a moment or two to pick up his ticket, which he had ordered in the name of "Mr. Grey." He was seated in the limousine before anyone else climbed aboard. This was an hour of the day when plane travel was lightest. Later, after the business day was over, New York-Chicago flights would be crowded.

Seated in one of the wide seats at the rear of the limousine, he watched a dynamic-looking young man with red hair swing in through one of the side doors. The fellow, slipping into a seat two rows ahead of his own, slapped a brief case on the cushion. Then he used a forefinger to tilt his hat to the back of his head, hooked an elbow over the seat and glanced at the Phantom.

"Plenty hot," he said breezily.

"You bet," said the Phantom, remembering to change the tone of his usually soft-spoken voice, adding a touch of the man's same offhand manner.

"Good day for flying, though," continued the fellow. "Air's still as a mill pond. Clear, too."

"It sure is."

The young man turned back as some other passengers started boarding the limousine.

The Phantom chuckled silently to himself. This had been the supreme test of his simple disguise, for the dynamic-looking young man was Steve Huston, ace crime reporter for Havens' New York paper—and a real friend of the Phantom's. On the various cases on which they had worked together, fearless, energetic Steve had always been in the dark as to the Phantom's true identity. Like others, he only knew the Phantom as a mysterious "Mr. Grey." And he was amazed each time when the Phantom apparently appeared from nowhere in a completely different character role.

He had not recognized the Phantom now.

Van thought it best not to make himself-known to the reporter until they were on the plane. If he identified himself now, here in the limousine, someone might become curious. There were dangerous underworld enemies of the Phantom's in Manhattan who had for many years been trying to corner this amazing man who relentlessly opposed them. And so, whenever he assumed the role of "Mr. Grey"—no matter how subtle his impersonation of a run-of-the-mill person to whom you would not give a second glance—the Phantom nevertheless realized there was always the danger of being spotted.

ONLY six people had boarded the limousine when the driver appeared from the terminal. A porter locked up the last piece of baggage in the spacious trunk compartment at the rear of the long car. A moment later they were winding their way toward the Queens' Tunnel and the airport. . . .

Ten minutes before flight departure at the air terminal itself, the Phantom lingered in a quiet corner of the sprawling building and watched Steve Huston. The reporter was outside, near the gates that separated the observers' walk from the ramps leading to the big planes. He spoke to an attendant who was moving toward the ramp with a flat truck loaded with suitcases. Steve was checking to be sure that his bag was tagged for the right flight. The Phantom recognized his own bag on the truck. And he had been standing near the reporter when Steve checked in at the reservations desk.

Steve was on the same flight, which the Phantom had suspected. Havens had lost no time in contacting his top reporter, ordering him to Chicago. The Phantom was anxious to learn what further news Steve might have heard from Chicago.

He saw the reporter pat his coat pockets, then suddenly stride toward the waiting room. He'd probably overlooked buying cigarettes. As the Phantom watched Steve through the wide glass windows, his sharp eye caught something else. He tensed.

It was obvious that a short, thickset man with the mashed ears of a former wrestler was following Steve Huston. There was something furtive yet purposeful about the man's movements. Now that the Phantom thought of it, he had seen the same man near the reporter when Steve went out to the observer's walk.

He watched the fellow mingle with a group of sightseers as Steve stopped at the cigar stand. But the heavy-shouldered man wasn't losing track of the reporter for a single moment. He had cold, pale gray eyes that remained constantly on the newsman.

Steve Huston glanced at an overhead clock as he left the newsstand. It was only seven minutes until the departure of Flight 16. A loudspeaker was announcing the flight. Outside, the ramp gates had opened and some passengers were starting toward the huge four-engined plane. Steve looked once again at the clock—then started in an opposite direc-

tion than the doorway to waiting planes. He disappeared down a stairway, probably headed for the wash room.

The Phantom's eyes narrowed. The thickset man followed down the stairs too!

Concerned, the Phantom followed. The man with cauliflower ears certainly bore every resemblance to a hoodlum. There had been a strange glint in his stony gray eyes, an expression of elation as he saw the reporter move toward a less-populated area of the big air terminal.

The Phantom noted something else. The muscular-built man's right hand slid toward his suit coat pocket as he went down the stairs. A too-prominent bulge of that coat pocket clearly indicated that a gun was concealed there.

Steve Huston was in real danger!



IV

UNAWARE that he was being closely followed the redheaded reporter reached a lower-level hallway, and moved in the direction of the washroom. He hurried along the momentarily deserted hallway, was a half dozen feet from the washroom door when, without warning, something jabbed into his back.

His first impulse was to swing around. But experience flashed a warning to his brain. This wasn't the first time in his career as a top crime reporter that he'd had a gun shoved into his ribs.

And even as the split-second reaction took place in his thoughts, the hard voice said close behind him, "Just keep walking, doc—straight down this hall."

Steve Huston followed orders, his mind quickly estimating that he had less than five or six minutes until plane departure time, that he had to be aboard that plane when it took off. How could anyone have learned, so swiftly, that he was going to



*Steve's fist lashed out in a power drive that caught the man on the jaw*

Chicago? He remembered the urgency in Frank Havens' voice during the long-distance telephone call. "It's plenty serious, Steve. Get out here as fast as you can!"

The unseen gunman behind must have sensed the quick tension that flowed through Steve's wiry form.

"Don't try it, doc," he warned softly.

They were well down the long hallway now. There were no doors along here that opened to rooms used by the general public. Steve's eyes had caught such signs as "Keep Out" and "Storage—No Admittance."

Then, at the end of the long passageway, there was a door marked "Porter,"

and the gun barrel in his back suddenly jabbed viciously.

"Right here," his captor snapped. "Open it!"

Steve reached for the doorknob, hoping that it would be locked, then experiencing a profound dismay as the door swung open easily. Another vicious jab of the gun drove him inside the room. Pain shot through his ribs where the barrel of the weapon had punched into him.

The room was small and crowded with porter's supplies—mops, pails, brooms, cleaning materials. The place wasn't more than a dozen feet square.

"All right, Huston, turn around," the

man behind him rasped.

The reporter turned warily. His quick eye took in the stocky, powerful build and the mashed ears. A tough character under any circumstances, he told himself, even without a gun. The fellow's unusual pale gray eyes gave him the most uneasiness however. They bored right through him in a cool, relentless way.

The man stood just inside the door, training his gun on Steve, his left hand going behind him to reach and close the door. The reporter was thinking rapidly. *He even knows my name. How did he know I was going to Chicago?*

And in the same heartbeat of fleeting time Steve was telling himself that if a porter *did* come in here, the gunman would bat him down with the weapon as if he were no more than an annoying fly.

*He's going to shoot,* Steve thought. *It's in his queer eyes.*

The man's left hand, still outstretched behind him, was now closing the door. But his penetrating eyes remained fast on the reporter.

Then—a sudden thing happened.

**A**NOTHER hand flashed in the doorway before the door could shut completely. That hand seized the gunman's left arm, as it was stretched out behind him, yanked it upward in a painful hammerlock between his thickset shoulder blades.

In the same smooth movement the arrival's free hand closed like a vise over the gunman's wrist, twisted the gun arm down and to the right, so that the weapon aimed away from the reporter's body.

The stocky gunman grunted with pain, tried to double forward in order to relieve the elbow-snapping pressure on his left arm. He dropped the gun when the pressure was increased. He tried a wrestler's trick of bending far forward to break the hammerlock.

Then, suddenly, he found himself released. He pitched forward.

"Hit him, Steve," said the Phantom, "hit him hard!"

For the second time within a moment

Steve Huston was astounded that complete strangers knew him by name. But he had already moved quickly, even as the order was given. His fist lashed out in a power drive that caught the thickset man flush on the jaw.

The man's head snapped sideways as he stumbled and clutched at the reporter's agile body. Steve's right came up in a smashing uppercut.

That did it. The man collapsed, spread out on all fours on the floor.

Steve turned quickly toward his benefactor, a tight grin on his face. "Thanks," he said. He gave a quick, explosive sigh. "That was close. He might have—"

"Hurry," the stranger said. "We have only two minutes to catch the plane." Already he had slipped the gun beneath his belt, was reaching for a small coil of baling wire hanging on a nearby hook. The wire was no doubt used for opening clogged drains.

Steve stepped in to help, surmising the stranger's purpose. He swiftly rolled the hoodlum on his side, pulled the fellow's heels up behind him. Working together, the reporter and his good sumatran friend wired the gunman's hands and legs behind him. When the man came to he would be unable to move.

"There's no time to call the police—now," said Steve's helper. "We'll handle that from the plane."

As both men straightened up, ready to leave the room, Steve's eyes had sharpened and he looked closely at the other man.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed softly. "You're Mr. Grey!" His eyes became bright with interest. "The Phantom!"

Van jerked his head briefly. "And I'm aboard that Chicago-bound plane with you. There's no time to be held up answering questions for an airport cop now. Let's go, Steve!"

Closing the door behind them, they returned through the long passageway, took the stairs three at a time, slowing to a walk when they reached the main concourse of the waiting room. Their steps were quick, but no more so than anyone

moving to catch a departing plane. The loudspeaker had already announced the last call for the flight as they came up from the lower level.

An instant later they were moving across the ramp. Outside the air-conditioned building the air was warm and still. An airline attendant in natty uniform waited for them at the foot of the portable steps leading up to the cabin doorway of the plane. "You almost missed us, gentlemen," he said, smiling courteously.

At the top of the steps the trim, pretty stewardess also stood waiting, her passenger check sheet fastened to the clipboard in her hand. She greeted them with a quick smile, said, "Mr. Grey?" Mr. Huston?" and checked the names off the list she held. She nodded toward a double seat just ahead, near the rear of the huge airliner. "Would you mind fastening your safety belts right away? We're all ready to take off."

Van Loan delayed an instant to say something quietly to the stewardess. The backs of the other passengers in the plane were toward them, and a second stewardess was busy near the small food galley just across from the entrance doorway, as he handed the first stewardess his small leather case, saying, "Show this to the captain."

The girl nodded, turned back to the open door, gave an all-clear signal to the attendant below.

Then the heavy door was shut and the portable steps rolled back out of the way. As the stewardess locked the door from the inside, the Phantom went to his seat.

Steve looked at him as he sat down, but said nothing, for it was quiet in the plane. The light was already on at the front of the cabin. "FASTEN YOUR SAFETY BELTS. NO SMOKING, PLEASE."

Then one engine coughed, vibrated, and finally started, followed by the other three at brief intervals. They started taxiing toward the main runway.

**B**ELOW the rumble of the plane as it trudged like a giant, bulky monster down the field, the Phantom spoke quiet-

ly to Steve Huston.

"As soon as we're airborne, I'm going to call the tower here at the field and have a message relayed to Inspector Gregg at Police Headquarters here in New York. Let's hope our trussed-up friend is still there when Gregg assigns some men to pick him up. I want to know who that fellow is and what his connections are."

"It beats me," said Steve in a voice soft enough to be covered by the rumbling engines. "Havens called me less than an hour ago. No one except him knows I'm flying to Chicago."

Van Loan and the reporter checked on times of the call. It appeared that Steve had been contacted right after Van had heard from the newspaper publisher.

"I gather," said Van Loan, "that Senator Midworth's death there at the Convention was not a natural one. Our friend Havens hinted at foul play. But he had no time to go into details."

Steve looked at him sharply. "Didn't he tell you about the television cameraman?"

It was the Phantom's turn to look curious.

"What about him?"

Their soft-spoken words were well covered now as the captain revved up his engines preparatory to his take-off run. The mammoth plane strained against the brakes which momentarily held it fast until the engines were given this final check. The ship trembled from end to end.

Steve was saying, "This cameraman, whoever he is, came to see the boss at his office. I guess Havens talked to him just before he called me long distance. That was right after he called you. Well, the cameraman was there at the Convention, taking pictures for the TV network. Seems he saw something peculiar just before Midworth's death—a hand, visible through his viewer as he aimed his camera at the stage, replacing a silver water carafe that had been put there only a few moments before. Hell, the first carafe hadn't even been used!"

"So?" The Phantom waited for the explanation.

"Right after Midworth's death, during



all the confusion there in the auditorium, this cameraman apparently heard the word being whispered that Midworth had been poisoned. Don't you see?" Steve asked, tense. "Someone poisoned that second bottle of drinking water!"

"And," Van Loan pointed out, "perhaps he can describe the person who put the bottle there."

"That's what I'm hoping," said Steve



FRANK HAVENS

quickly, softly. "There was no time for the boss to go into more details. I barely had time to rush down to the airlines terminal."

The long, sleek Constellation was roaring down the runway now. Shortly the rumbling faded away and they were in the air. The engines continued to whine as the plane climbed steadily for a while, then as the pilot cut them back and leveled off a bit, the cabin became quiet again. In a moment the lights went off at the front of the long main cabin.

The Phantom removed his safety belt and stood up. He had watched the stewardess return from the cockpit to the rear of their cabin. He went back to speak to her.

She slipped him the small leather case,

gave him a quick look that said the plane's captain must have been quick to agree to the Phantom's request. She led the way forward.

AT THE cockpit she pushed a buzzer. The door to the pilot's compartment swung open. A flight engineer admitted him. He nodded toward the captain, seated at the controls on the left.

The captain turned his head briefly, busy at the controls for a moment, looking at the newcomer with a respectful regard. Then, asking his co-pilot to take over, he slid out of the seat. At the same time he took off his earphones and passed them to Van Loan. He also indicated a hand microphone hanging on a hook.

"The tower's waiting for your orders, sir," he said. "Use my seat here."

Van thanked him, sat down, contacted the control tower back at the field. The plane was already high above the Hudson River and climbing steadily into the bright sunshine over New Jersey.

Briefly, the Phantom gave directions to the man in the control tower. Someone was to hurry down and lock the porter's room door until Inspector Gregg's men arrived. Then the police would take over. He also mentioned an appropriate time that he would call Inspector Gregg at his office, later in the day. Would the tower please relay that message, and also urge Gregg to get all information possible on the gunman, especially his Chicago connections? The tower assured him that his orders would be expedited.

Standing up and passing the earphones back to the captain, Van Loan said, "You understand, of course, that all this is highly confidential?"

The good-looking pilot nodded, smiling. "I understand, sir. I flew some of the nation's top brass during the war. This seems like old times!"

Not once had he mentioned the Phantom, and yet he knew. The jewel-encrusted badge had told him plenty. Otherwise he would never have been permitted in the cockpit. It was strictly against airline regulations to allow a passenger in the

cockpit during flight.

Nodding to the co-pilot and flight engineer. Van Loan left the cockpit and returned through the long plane to his seat. He did not sit down. With an imperceptible nod of his head he continued toward the men's lounge at the very rear of the plane. Steve followed quickly.

Inside, Steve locked the door and asked, "You spoke to the control tower?"

Van Loan nodded.

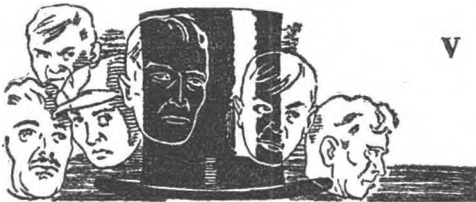
"What now?"

"Just sit tight and trust that Inspector Gregg shakes some information out of that hoodlum we left back there. I have an idea orders were flashed to the gunman from someone in Chicago. Why, and by whom, is what I want to know."

"There's nothing we can do, then, until we arrive out there and you contact Gregg again."

Nodding, Van Loan observed, "We'd better not even talk any more. Someone might spot you and ask questions. We'll be there in less than two hours now."

They left the lounge, returned to their seats, slumped down in the deep chairs and apparently slept for the remainder of the flight.



**IT WAS** only a little after four o'clock that same warm afternoon when the big Constellation touched the runway at the Chicago airport and moved smoothly toward a far corner of the sprawling airfield.

Frank Havens stood straight and erect, watching the plane roll far down the runway before swinging to make its slower approach to the unloading apron. He turned toward the man with him.

"There she is, Mr. Karrison!" he exclaimed. "In a moment, now, we'll have two of my ace reporters with us. If any-

one can get to the bottom of this horrible mystery, they can."

"You're sure they're on the plane?"

Havens said, "The airline reservations desk checked with their New York office—yes."

Karrison was a big man with strong, prominent features, heavy bushy eyebrows, a wide jaw. At the same time he was distinguished-looking and dressed in semi-formal attire. He had dark, glowing eyes that squinted against the bright sunlight.

Karrison shook his head as they waited the plane's approach across the field. "Anything they can do will be a help. Poor Marie."

Havens glanced at him quickly. "How is Mrs. Midworth? How is she . . . taking the Senator's death?"

"That woman," Karrison said proudly, "is a real thoroughbred, a genuine thoroughbred. Naturally she is grief-stricken, but Marie is not one to let herself go to pieces. She is now awaiting my return at the hotel—to hear whatever news we may have for her."

His steady dark eyes studied the publisher's face. "What are the police doing about 'Honest John's' death—anything at all? Even your newspaper here, Havens, had little to say in the first afternoon edition. Sometimes I think—"

Havens interrupted, "The police aren't giving out any news until they're *sure* Senator Midworth was poisoned, Mr. Karrison. After all, it has only been a few hours since he collapsed on the speakers' platform. They—" He broke off, asked, "Tell me, you were right there on the platform at the end, I understand. What do you think?"

Karrison spread his hands. Gold cuff links, each set with a large diamond, reflected the warm sun's glare where they showed briefly in his French cuffs. "A doctor was called hastily from the audience," he explained. "How good the man is, I don't know. He *says* the Senator was poisoned. We'll know for sure when we get the police surgeon's additional report. Marie—Mrs. Midworth has ap-

proved that. The investigation is proceeding.

"You've known that family a long time, haven't you?" Havens said.

The big, austere man nodded slowly. His face was grave now. "Ever since 'Honest John' first started out campaigning for a small town alderman's job. I've known Marie, his wife, since high school days. I knew the two of them when they didn't have a nickel to their names, right after they were first married."

Havens shook his head. He could understand how Karrisson felt.

There was a surge of people around them, many moving closer to the gates to greet arrivals coming off the plane, which was now stopped in the unloading area. Others were merely curious onlookers, thrilled by sight of the big plane.

Arriving passengers streamed toward the gate. Havens spotted his top reporter. He called Steve Huston a greeting, then looked for Mr. Grey himself. A frown touched his eyes.

Steve came bustling through the gate, a brief case swinging in his hand, a quick smile on his lively face.

"The assignments I get!" he said breezily. "Did I arrive here fast enough for you, boss?" He took Havens' outstretched hand, caught the frown on the publisher's face. His own eyes sobered. "Anything new on Midworth? When you phoned you hardly had time—"

"Where's . . . Mr. Grey?" asked Havens, peering past the reporter, trying to pick out Van Loan in the moving groups of people. Any one of the men getting off the plane might have been the famous crime-fighter; Havens was confused. He looked back at Steve again, eyes questioning.

The reporter glanced from Havens to the big, important-looking man with him. He didn't answer.

**T**HE publisher quickly understood the reason for Steve's hesitation. He said, "It's all right, Steve. I'd like you to meet Arnold Karrisson, Senator Midworth's campaign manager, business friend—just about anything you can name. It's all right

to talk, Steve. Mr. Karrisson's all right."

The reporter shook hands with Karrisson, then said quickly, "That's different. Yes, Mr. Grey was on the plane with me. I—"

"But where is he?" Havens said, still looking around, puzzled.

The quick grin touched the reporter's features for an instant. "Gone. Said he'd meet you at the office a little later." Steve pulled the baggage checks from his pocket, went on. "I have to get our luggage first."

They headed inside the terminal, and while they were waiting for the bags to be unloaded from the plane's cargo compartment, Steve told them about the incident at LaGuardia.

He ended with, "Mr. Grey figures that the hood who tried to eliminate me got his orders from Chicago—but fast. Grey's probably going to check with Inspector Gregg in New York to see what kind of line he got on that hot rod. I'm sure he'll show up at your office shortly."

Havens looked at Arnold Karrisson. "I wanted you to meet him. Grey is one of the sharpest reporters in the business. Crime is his specialty." He glanced at Steve Huston.

Steve jerked his head. "The best!"

Karrisson said, "Bring him around to the hotel later, then. Mrs. Midworth will want to meet him also. She'll welcome any help in cracking this horrible thing."

When the luggage arrived, and Steve had claimed his bags, Havens said, "I have a cab waiting. We'll drop Mr. Karrisson first, then hurry to the office. Muriel's there waiting."

Steve was on the verge of saying that he wished lovely Muriel were waiting for him, but he checked himself.

They headed outside.

The Phantom's exit from the airport waiting room had been done with dispatch. Just before he swung into a cab he had a glimpse of Steve Huston, Havens and the third man inside, awaiting the baggage truck. A quick smile flickered his features. He had practically rubbed elbows with the publisher as he passed

through the big waiting room.

From the plane window, just before they rolled to a stop near the exit gates, the Phantom had noted the stranger with Frank Havens. He had quickly changed his plans, suggested to Steve that the reporter meet the men.

He gave the cab driver the name of the Press building on Wacker Drive, observed the driver's framed license hanging before him in the rear section of the taxicab. The Phantom had learned to take precautions, and right now he was still thinking about Steve Huston's would-be murderer in New York. Somehow, someone had swiftly learned about the reporter's trip to Chicago. Perhaps the same source of information knew about his own scheduled arrival. How they had learned about Steve still puzzled him.

He noted that the cab driver's photo, framed with his permit beneath the glass, checked with the features of the man at the wheel. The Phantom settled back. . . .

**I**N THE outer office high up in the Press Building, prim Miss Burr came quickly to her feet as Van Loan introduced himself as "Mr. Grey."

"Oh, yes!" she exclaimed. He noted her eyes, bright and nervous, behind the tortoise shell glasses. "You're the reporter from New York. I—good heavens! Didn't you see Mr. Havens at the airport? He went with Mr. Karrisson to meet you and—"

Van Loan smiled easily. "They'll be here soon. I—ah—is Miss Havens here?"

The thin, efficient woman stepped quickly to a door, saying, "Yes, she's been expecting you. Won't you go in?"

He closed the door carefully behind him as he entered the spacious office.

Muriel Havens had just turned away from one of the open windows across the office. She'd heard the last of the conversation from the outer office, yet she stared toward him as he came in and moved toward her. Her eyes held disbelief.

[Turn page]



"Van," she said softly, "it isn't really you?"

She took in the loud sports coat, his seemingly gaunt, dissipated-looking features.

He smiled. "Printer's ink now flows through my veins, ma'am. Would you grant an interview to this lowly reporter?"

With a little cry of delight, Muriel rushed toward him. He took her briefly in his arms, was keenly aware of her lovely, shapely form close to his own. Then, still a little self-conscious over this love which she had recently revealed to him, he stood back, clasping her hands.

"Madam," he said lightly, "careful of my makeup!"

Muriel felt his cheek lightly with her fingertip. She shook her head in puzzlement. "Van you should have been an actor. I'd never have known you!"

"I hope no one else recognizes me as the Phantom."

The girl's pretty features became serious. "Didn't you see father?"

"There was a stranger with him at the airport—someone your father's secretary just referred to as a Mr. Karrisson. So I gave Steve Huston the job of meeting them and came directly here. A little incident happened in New York which has me puzzled." He shrugged. "So—"

Muriel explained quickly, "You needn't have worried about Arnold Karrisson, Van He was Senator Midworth's"—her eyes held shock as she mentioned the name—"best friend. It was Karrisson who helped lead the Senator to the top. Mrs. Midworth, too, has aided even more. She devoted her life to helping the Senator climb the ladder . . . served on committees, worked in campaigns—"

Van said, "Tell me about the letter your father mentioned in the long distance call—the one Midworth was supposed to have left for him. Would Mrs. Midworth know—"

"Father's already called her," said Muriel. "She has no idea whatsoever about what might have been in it. Apparently she left their North Shore estate early

this morning, to help out at the party's hotel headquarters here in Chicago. The Senator came in later. They've checked the butler out there and the Senator's chauffeur. Neither has any idea what was in the letter."

"And the elevator boy—how is he?"

Muriel shook her head. "Still unconscious. No one's permitted in the room—"

"Good Lord," said Van Loan, "haven't they assigned a policeman to guard his room? Even though someone obviously got the letter from that kid, he's still in danger of—"

She was quickly shaking her head. Van paused as Muriel explained, "Father took care of that immediately."

"Good."

Then she told Van about the strange way in which Midworth had started his speech, about how he started to say something about not accepting the nomination.

"Everyone was dumbfounded. Then . . . then, a moment later, he was dead!"

The Phantom remembered Steve Huston's words about the TV cameraman. He repeated the information to Muriel.

SHE nodded even before he finished. "His name is Johnnie Garrett. He was here earlier, to see father." Muriel repeated the details which Steve Huston had already told him about the exchange of water bottles on the speaker's platform. "Father wants you to see Johnnie Garrett as soon as possible."

"Where is he now?"

"He had to return to the auditorium. Then he called later and said that the place is being locked against the public while the police finish their checking over there. So he's going to wait for you at his apartment. It isn't far. Here. . . ."

She went to the broad desk across the room, returned with a slip of paper which she showed Van.

Muriel pointed out, "It's an address not far away on the Near North Side. I can take you, Van. I've rented a car while father and I are here, so—"

"He said, 'I know enough about Chicago to find it, Muriel. You'd better wait



for the others. I'll be back in a hurry."

He wanted to call Inspector Gregg in New York, but he had decided to put the call through from outside this office. For one thing, he wondered if someone here at Havens' Chicago paper could have known about the publisher's call to Steve Huston. Also, he didn't want Muriel to hear the discussion about the man they had left for the police in New York. The feeling was building up in him that as soon as it was known the Phantom had entered this mystery, there was going to be menace against himself as well as Steve Huston. Probably more. He didn't want Muriel to worry. . . .

Van Loan, assuming his offhand, easy-going reporter's role again, started toward the door. But he paused to warn the girl just before leaving. "Be careful you don't call me Van whenever this door is open—or anywhere else around this building."

Muriel was at his side. Her hand held his arm briefly. There was a worried crease between her pretty eyes. "Do you think there's danger?"

"We'll soon know."

He went out.

JUST across one of the many short bridges spanning the narrow Chicago River, which wound through the outer fringes of the Loop, was one of noisy Chicago's many railroad stations. Van Loan crossed the bridge just outside the Press Building, quickly located a battery of telephone booths in charge of an operator. He gave the number of New York's police headquarters, stepped into a booth the woman indicated. By making the call from here he was certain that no one could trace it to "Mr. Grey"—or the Phantom.

Shortly he was talking with Inspector Gregg.

The New York headquarters man said, "Grey? I figured it was just about time for your call. I checked arrival of that plane from this end . . . Well, we got him!"

The Phantom's pulse quickened. "He

was still wired up the way we left him?"

"He was still in *dreamland*. But he's wide awake now, I can tell you. Sweating, too . . . but a tough one to crack, Grey. We've been questioning him for two hours. This baby's been around. Nevertheless, we've got him pegged—whether he talks or not."

"Swell!" said Van. "Who is he?"

"A bad one, Grey. One of the boys recalled a flyer we got recently on a Chicago hoodlum wanted for questioning in the shooting of a ward leader out there. Name's Bruno."

"Connections?"

"Al Capone—"

"Who happens to be dead," said Van Loan drily.

"Of course. But not the syndicate, my friend. Rumor has it that it's more powerful than ever out there. Except today, it's not just vice and booze, as in the old days. The juke box racket—five million alone, each year, out there—horse racing, horse meat and politics. Which will you take?"

"The last, Inspector." He repeated what details he knew about Senator Midworth's death, added, "I suppose the wires are buzzing about that?"

"They're burning up!" exploded the voice in New York. "The opinion everywhere is that, having won the nomination in his party, Midworth was a cinch to be elected president in November. Brother, things are in an uproar. I've talked to one of my friends there at Chicago headquarters. The verdict is that Midworth was poisoned—a swell guy like him! How or by whom is still a mystery. In fact—"

He stopped talking abruptly, asked, "Say, how are you involved in this thing, Grey?"

Van Loan gave him a brief rundown, explained about publisher Frank Havens. "He and Midworth were very good friends. It seems that Midworth delivered a very important letter to Havens' office shortly before he was murdered. The letter has since disappeared. What it said, we don't know—but it might be the answer to everything. Havens figures that

if I pose as an ordinary reporter working for his paper here, I might uncover something big."

Inspector Gregg was silent a moment. Then, "I'll tell you what. This friend of mine at headquarters out there works undercover out of a special unit set up by the Chicago Detective Bureau a few years ago. Name's Jim Rush." He gave Van Loan a telephone number. "I'll call and tell him you'll contact him. This man Rush knows more about political crime tie-ups than the commissioner there himself! See him."

"Thanks," said Van. "Perhaps he can give me something on this hood, Bruno, also."

"Probably. Watch yourself, Grey! Those babies in the Chicago rackets—whatever *this* one is—deal in death."

"I know. And I have an idea this one ties up with important people."

"Well—luck," finished Gregg. "I'll call Jim Rush right off. He's a detective-lieutenant, by the way, but you're liable to find him as a laborer, a bum, or a barfly when you see him. That's the way he operates."

Van Loan left the booth, made sure that no other persons had occupied the booths on either side of him, paid the woman for the call and went toward an arched exit that led to the taxi stands.

He gave the driver the location of a street corner on the Near North Side and swung into the rear seat.

He wanted to question Johnnie Garrett even before he saw Rush. It was Johnnie who had seen that bottle of drinking water switched. Perhaps, with prodding, he could remember more about the person who had put the second bottle there.

In a few moments, the Phantom hoped to know.



VI

AT THE corner of State and Division, Van Loan lingered until the cab pulled away. Fast, streamlined Chicago streetcars swung the busy corner, loaded with commuters going home from the Loop. Office girls came out of delicatessens, carrying supper wrapped in paper bags. Newsboys hawked extras about the sudden death of Senator Midworth. No mention yet about murder, though, Van Loan observed. The police were playing it cagey.

Bums brushed by well-dressed business people here on this crossroads of the Near North Side. A block toward the lake, and you could walk into the exclusive Drake Hotel; a long block west, and you found yourself in a honkytonk area of saloons, strip-tease night clubs and joints that catered to sexy-looking young white girls and their zooty Chinese escorts. And only two blocks north were quiet side streets lined with residential apartments and old structures made over into modern, high-priced efficiency flats.

The Phantom headed north, cut through a short street to Gothie, checked building numbers until he located Johnnie Garrett's place.

It was a long, three-storied apartment building built alongside a vacant lot. Rear of the building ended at one of the many alleys which bisected each square block throughout the area.

A bored-looking young man sat near a switchboard behind a small cubicle inside the lobby. Van Loan asked for Garrett. "He's expecting me. The name's Grey."

Scarcely turning his head to glance at the switchboard, the fellow pushed in a jack and buzzed the apartment. He mumbled something, looked briefly at the Phantom.

"All the way back on your right," he

3

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said wearily. "Number 19."

The Phantom followed a long tiled hallway, saw that Apartment 19 backed on the rear alley. There was a window at the back of the hall. He rang the bell.

Johnnie Garrett quickly opened the door. He was an alert-looking man in his late twenties.

"Mr. Grey?" He motioned his visitor inside.

**N**ODDING, Van Loan entered a neatly furnished bachelor's apartment. He

Garrett had been restlessly waiting to see him.

"You heard?" Garrett blurted.

"About what you saw just before Senator Midworth collapsed on the stage?"

Garrett jerked his head.

"Yes." Van thought a moment. "I understand you saw someone replace a water carafe for one that had just been put near the speakers' stand, is that right?"

"Well, not *someone*. A hand, it was, Mr. Grey. Understand, it was just a quick

## LAW AND THE WOMAN

**I**F SOME male criminals believe it's a woman's world, there are a number of very real reasons for it.

To begin with, there's nothing weak about the sex whatever, if a shoplifter recently arrested is any indication. She confessed she'd robbed a wardrobe trunk and a large furniture-sized radio phonograph—single-handedly—from a Des Moines establishment.

In addition, when they're angered by policemen they show it. Or at any rate a 100-pound gal named Velma did, not so very long ago. She was being cross-questioned when she lost her temper. It wasn't found until she broke the rib of one gendarme, jabbed a cigarette neatly in the eye of another, and resoundingly kicked a third. All landed in the hospital.

What's more, a recent six-year survey proves women are more successful than men when it comes to escaping from jail. It reveals that only 9.9 men out of every 1,000 make a successful break from a federal or state pen yearly. The scoring for women was 13.5.

For the past 50 years in France, the death penalty for women criminals has never been carried out. This is due to the fact that no executioner will attempt to operate the guillotine on a member of the fair sex. If he does, it's believed, a terrible death for him will result.

—Bess, Ritter



noted radio and TV trade magazines on a low coffee stand, some good fox-hunting prints on the walls.

"Drink?" Garrett indicated a cocktail shaker on the coffee table. "It was so warm and sultry I made some gin and tonic."

Van shook his head. He was aware that Johnnie Garrett was rather keyed up and tense. He sat down, waited for the young man to start talking. It was obvious that

movement I saw in the viewer when focusing the camera on the platform. I wasn't really conscious of it at the time. Then, when the word leaked out that Senator Midworth had been poisoned, I recalled the incident."

"Was it a man's hand or a woman's?"

Garrett frowned. "Say, I hadn't thought of that. But I'm positive it was a man's."

"Were there any women on the platform?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Could it have been one of the page boys they have for carrying messages and doing errands at the Convention?"

"I don't . . . think so," Garrett said slowly. "I'm sure it wasn't."

"I don't suppose any of that TV broadcast was recorded—I mean, on film?"

"No, it was going right out over the air. It's gone and done with now. I—" He gave a start, then stared at the Phantom "What a dope I am! Of course. One of the boys from National Newsreel—was there. He'll have the thing on film!"

"If he happened to record that particular action," Van Loan pointed out.

"But it's worth checking, Mr. Grey."

"Absolutely. Do you know where we can see the film? I'll want you along, too. If this newsreel cameraman did catch that little scene, perhaps you can identify the person when you can study the film."

"It's worth a try," Garrett agreed with enthusiasm. He stood up abruptly. "Let's go down to the National outfit now. Perhaps—"

The ringing of the telephone interrupted them. Johnnie Garrett stepped to a small corner desk to answer it, said, "Yes? Who? . . . Okay, I'll come out and get it, kid."

He hung up, looked at the Phantom and said, "Wait'll I pick up a telegram that was just delivered for me. The kid out front can't leave the desk right now."

Leaving the apartment door open, Garrett took off down the long hall. The Phantom, waiting, could hear his quick, impatient steps echoing along the corridor. . . .

It was somewhat sticky and humid in the apartment, as it was everywhere this warm summer's afternoon. He stepped to the window, where Garrett had flung it open earlier. A desultory movement of air ruffled the curtains, but at least it felt pleasant.

Just below the open window was a narrow alley that cut behind the building. Another, running north and south, bisected it at the far side of the apartment building. In the distance he could hear

the faint hum of traffic streaming along the Outer Drive, alongside Lake Michigan. Somewhere in the neighborhood a dog was barking, and there was the laughter of kids playing.

And then there were two gun shots, spaced close together, flat and hard, like two boards being slapped sharply together.

Startled, the Phantom stood tensely, trying to locate the source of the shots.

THEN he realized the gun sounds were echoing along the outside hallway, just as Garrett's footsteps had echoed. . . .

Garrett! Someone delivering a telegram!

Van Loan whirled toward the hall.

At the same time the voice of the young man up front at the lobby switchboard came tumbling down the long hall. Only now that bored fellow had snapped out of his lethargy and was screaming, apparently, in terror!

"Help! He's shot! Help—somebody!"

Along with the frantic scream, there was the other sound.

A car motor roared as if it were being pushed to the limit in low gear. Two strides down the hall Van Loan jerked to a stop, his sharp ear following the sound. Oddly the engine roar seemed to be coming closer. He wondered. . . .

The alley—the narrow thoroughfare alongside the building!

Someone was trying to use the alley as an escape shortcut. If he could head that someone off. . . .

He spun back, cut quickly through the apartment living room, flung a leg over the window sill and dropped to the ground all within seconds. He plunged toward the bisecting alley, only feet away. Even as he did so he heard the thundering car approaching the intersection of the two narrow passages.

Unconsciously, his hand went beneath his coat, toward his left armpit—until he remembered that his automatic was packed in his suitcase and that the luggage was still in Steve Huston's care. Along with the weapon they'd taken from

flat-eared Bruno at the airport in New York. He'd had the reporter slip the other weapon into his brief case.

But if he could only get the license number. . . .

He reached the mouth of the adjoining alley an instant before the getaway car appeared. He took one step out into the cross area, then whipped back. The heavy sedan was almost upon him. He remembered seeing, in sort of a camera flash second of time, two men in the front seat of the sedan—and that the window on the right, *his* side, was rolled down, because a hand suddenly appeared in the opening and it was holding a gun.

Van Loan leaped backward and hit the ground, rolling fast. He heard the spanging of lead off brick walls just above him, the three sharp blasts of the gun. Almost crowding out the gun sounds was the roar of the heavy car as it shot past the narrow intersection.

By the time he picked himself up and ran back to the cross alleyway, the car had reached the next street, swung left, and was gone. The Phantom heard, faintly, the engine sound fading in the distance. The car could have turned right or left on another street that paralleled the Outer Drive, gone a few blocks and disappeared down any one of the numerous side streets. He had not seen the license number.

He ran down the alley toward the front of the building, leaped a low hedge and cut toward the lobby of the building.

Two residents of the apartment building were staring down in morbid wonderment at the still figure on the floor. Behind the small office counter, the excited young switchboard operator was holding a small, round switchboard mouthpiece in his trembling hand and was jabbering something to the police on the line.

The two tenants drew back hesitantly as Van Loan, his clothes dusty, face grimed, appeared. He ignored them, jerked open a door on one side of the small office, said, "Give me that earphone."

The kid, wide-eyed, slid the metal loop from his head and passed it over. The

Phantom held the receiver to his ear, took the mouthpiece from the clerk's hand.

"...precinct officers on their way, son," he heard on the line. "You stay right there. Don't disturb the wounded man. An ambulance is also. . . ."

Van Loan interrupted. Quickly he described the sedan as best he could, gave the location where it had disappeared, made it clear that the gunmen were in that car.

"Get some squad cars blocking off those streets," he finished.

The desk sergeant on the line didn't start asking foolish questions. He recognized a ring of authority in the Phantom's voice.

**H**ANGING up, Van Loan hurried to where Garrett's crumpled figure was lying on the marble floor of the lobby. The two building tenants had been joined by others. Everyone was now talking at once. The young clerk kept saying, "Right here in the lobby. Right in front of me, he shot him!"

Van Loan was aware of the lad's remarks even as he bent down over the still figure. Garrett had fallen on his side, one leg twisted beneath him. On hands and knees, Van Loan bent closely to study the two marks on the front of the TV cameraman's coat. Bullet holes, hardly visible. They had entered the left side of the chest, and one slug had come out the back, in line with Garrett's heart.

For a long moment the Phantom's eyes were bleak and thoughtful. It was almost uncanny the way *someone* was manipulating strings in this mystery—just as if the person or organization behind the thing had a magic, all-seeing eye. He thought of the speed with which they had learned of Steve Huston's trip to Chicago.

And now Johnnie Garrett, murdered ruthlessly. How *could* anyone have known that Garrett visited Havens and to tell him about the incident on the convention platform? More amazing still, how could they have moved so *fast*?

Van Loan reminded himself that he must take every precaution to cover his



true identity. This menace, whatever its source, struck like lightning—and there was no telling when it would seek him out.

Perhaps he had already been spotted, he realized with dim alarm.

He stood up as he heard the dying moan of a police siren out front, quickly followed by the clanging bell of an ambulance.

Two prowling car cops from the local precinct hurried into the lobby, one already reaching for his notebook as he saw the still figure on the floor. People and youngsters of the neighborhood began to gather outside the building and the second cop ordered them to remain where they were. An interne and another uniformed policeman pushed their way in through the curious mob that was forming just outside the entrance, morbid appetites whetted by the scent of death.

The Phantom waited quietly as the switchboard boy blabbered details of what he had seen. Piecing the disconnected statements together, Van Loan was able to visualize what had probably happened.

The young man had still been alone at the desk when a messenger had entered, saying he had a telegram for Mr. Garrett. The man had dropped the wire on the counter of the small open office and gone out. At least he *thought* the man had gone out, explained the excited young man.

He stammered, "I called Mr. Garrett in his apartment. . . and he came out here to pick up the wire because I was alone and couldn't leave the board, and. . . and then that man, the messenger, was over there in the doorway shooting, and he shot Mr. Garrett!"

"Then he hadn't left?" said the tall, rangy cop with the notebook.

"I *thought* he had," gasped the clerk. "But he must have been waiting there in the doorway. He called to Mr. Garrett right after he stopped at the desk and picked up the message. And when Mr. Garrett turned toward him, he was shot. I mean—by the messenger over there in the doorway. Then the man ran out and jumped in a car and it went down the

alleyway here." He pointed in the general direction of the side of the building.

THE cop, who had arrived with the ambulance and interne asked, "You said a man. Wasn't the messenger a boy?"

The clerk shook his head. "But he wore a messenger's uniform."

"What did he look like?"

The switchboard clerk stared for a moment. "Why. . . why just like any man wearing a messenger's uniform. I think he . . . he was dark-haired."

The cops exchanged glances. One had been watching Van Loan. The interne went into the small office and called someone. Another siren sounded far down the street.

Van Loan said quietly, "What happened to the telegram, young man?"

The youth jumped, stared toward the office, said, "I just remembered!" He went over to the counter, reached inside, retrieved a yellow sheet of paper and envelope from a small desk. "I . . . I guess I picked these up after Mr. Garrett dropped them when he . . . he fell."

The rangy cop with the notebook took them. He looked at the envelope, then at the telegraph blank. He passed them to one of the other cops.

"Blank message," he said. "Just a gimmick to fool the kid, here, and get him"—he jerked a thumb at the inert figure on the floor—"out here."

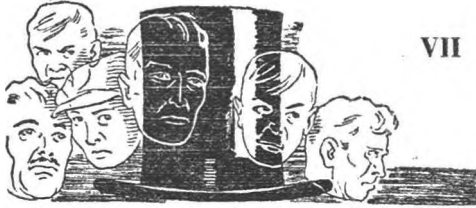
The young clerk was suddenly pointing at the Phantom. "He was with him. He came in with Mr. Garrett and went to his apartment. . . and was there when Mr. Garrett got shot!"

Everyone looked at Van Loan—including a solid-built, ruddy-faced man in a plain business suit who had come in accompanied by another officer in uniform. He had paused a moment, somewhat to the rear of the other officers, listening to the conversation. Seeing him now, they stepped aside.

"Hi, lieutenant," said one with respect.

Headquarters man, Van Loan knew, probably Homicide Division. He looked smart and tough.

The plain-clothes man looked steadily down at the corpse for a moment, then raised his eyes to study Van Loan critically. "Looks like someone mussed you up," he said quietly.



VII

"ALMOST," said the Phantom. He told briefly about trying to obtain the license number of the car, minimizing the close call he'd had when the gunman fired as the sedan raced through the alley. Then he said, "I told someone on the phone"—he nodded toward the switchboard—"the direction the car went. There's a possibility—"

"We've got every available prowler car on it," the ruddy-faced lieutenant said. "The call was put right on the two-way radio. How much time would you say they had before you called?"

"Two minutes, perhaps."

The lieutenant shook his head. "You can disappear a lot of places in Chicago in that time. See them?"

Van Loan shook his head. "I was practically flat on my face when they roared past that—"

"You do look a little worked over," said the detective.

Van's jaw set imperceptibly. He said,

"I'd like to speak to you a moment—alone."

They moved to one side of the lobby, but the Phantom noted that the officer who had accompanied the detective lieutenant here kept his eye on them.

"Well?" said the lieutenant.

"My name's Grey," said the Phantom quietly. "The boy, there, has told you as much as I know about it. I'm a reporter for the *Enterprise*. If you don't mind, I'd rather not be delayed here. I have something to—"

"The hell you have," said the detective grimly.

"—to see Jim Rush about," finished the Phantom. "I wonder if you'd call him, please. Just give him the name—Grey."

The detective looked sharply at the Phantom for a moment, glanced at his officer-assistant, then called the switchboard boy. He gave the number of police headquarters and snapped at the lad to put the call through. The young clerk almost fell over himself getting into the office.


A moment later the lieutenant was speaking to the undercover man whom Inspector Gregg had mentioned in his call from New York. The Phantom watched the lieutenant's face as he talked at the switchboard.

He noted the changes of expression that came over the Homicide man's ruddy features as he listened to the person at the other end of the line. First there was curiosity, then a look of quickened interest,

[Turn page]


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followed by a mixed expression of respect and wonderment. He finally said, "Okay . . . I see," and ended the call.

He turned hastily to Van Loan and said, "He wants to see you right away." He looked past him and barked a sharp order to his assistant. "Reilly, run Mr. Grey down to headquarters—Jim Rush's office. Quick, see?"

The lean, towheaded patrolman nodded hurriedly. "Yes, sir!"

The lieutenant said to the Phantom, "The name's Broderick, Mr. Grey. Anything I can ever do, just let me know, see? Any friend of Jim Rush's is a friend of ours. We get anything on this shooting of Garrett, here, and we'll give you the first lead on it, Mr. Grey."

Lieutenant Broderick and his man Friday motioned building tenants aside as they escorted Van Loan through the lobby. Outside, there was a black, hearse-like car drawn up at the curb now. The ambulance had departed. From the black, closed-panel car two attendants were removing a long wire basket.

The detective asked only one question, "You have no idea who might have murdered Garrett, sir?"

Van Loan shook his head. He didn't mention the TV cameraman's story about the switched water bottles at the Convention hall. First, he wanted to talk to this crack detective Rush. And next he wanted to see Frank Havens.

"Well, we'll get right on it," said Broderick. He held open the front door of the police sedan as Reilly hurried around the car to slide behind the wheel.

As the car shot away from the curb, Van Loan knew that Lieutenant Broderick was standing there a moment looking after him. He wondered what he had been told over the phone. He hoped that Broderick had not guessed he was the Phantom Detective.

**T**HE third-floor office was practically lost in a forgotten corner of the Detective Bureau. A stranger would have thought it was being saved as a storeroom for odds and ends. Old sagging wooden

file cases lined one wall. An ancient oak rocker with a hard black leather seat was the only other chair in addition to a straight-backed uncomfortable-looking chair in front of the roll-top desk. The place needed dusting. Chicago soot and grime covered the windows. An old-fashioned fan vibrated noisily on the wall.

The fairly young man who got up quickly and came to the open door moved lithely and smoothly. His entire manner was in extreme contrast to the atmosphere of the room.

"Mr. Grey?" he asked.

Van Loan nodded, stepping inside.

"Sit down," said Rush, closing the door.

He was not a big man, nor was he tall. But there was a suppleness about him that spoke of quick strength and fast coordination. His eyes were a pale blue, his face smooth-shaven. His hair was sandy and close-cropped.

It came to the Phantom, then, that he'd heard and read about this well-known detective. Jim Rush had cracked some of the toughest cases in Chicago. It was said that when this man was on an assignment, he would sleep wherever his quarry led him—on roof tops, in bars or hotel lobbies. He would spell an assistant for forty winks so that the trail would never get cold as long as he was on the case.

In addition, the Phantom had seen write-ups about him in various magazines—how he was a fair artist, and oftentimes sketched dozens of faces of a killer merely from descriptions handed to him by eyewitnesses; and that more often than not his final, composite drawing turned out to be a true likeness of the murderer's face.

He was a Judo expert, a musician. . . and he was clever and tough as they came.

He smiled easily as the two men momentarily sized up each other. "Lieutenant Broderick's going to pester me to death with questions later, Mr.—ah—Grey," he said. "I gave him to understand you were not to be delayed up there another moment. Now he's wondering who you are."

He paused, face becoming serious. "Inspector Gregg called earlier, as you

know." The detective paused again, looking directly at Van Loan. "Do you mind if I make one request?"

"Of course not."

"May I see that badge of yours?" Rush, for the first time, appeared just a trifle self-conscious. "After all, I've never met you or—"

Smiling, Van Loan passed over the small leather case. "I'd think you were lax if you didn't ask for some identification," he said.

Jim Rush studied the jewel-studded badge for a moment, handed it back. He straightened up and said abruptly, "That carries more weight than the police commissioner's orders. . . Okay, Mr. Grey, what can I do?"

Van Loan said, "Tell me what you know about Bruno." Briefly, he reviewed the attack on his reporter friend at the New York airport.

"Bruno's a killer," said the undercover man quickly. "We *know* that. Pinning any particular crime on him is something else again. He's wanted here for questioning in the murder of one of our ward leaders. It happened recently."

"Has he confessed anything to Inspector Gregg in New York?"

Rush shook his head. "And he never will. Bruno's a tough baby. Besides, he has plenty of protection from Gulick here in Chicago. You need to have air-tight evidence to get a conviction against a rat like Bruno—and as yet we haven't got it."

Van Loan nodded. The name Rush mentioned was connected with crime syndicates, subversive elements and other rackets across the country. "No one can touch Gulick?" he asked.

"Not yet. His network spreads right into Washington itself. . . into moneyed sources the country over. Don't blame the police commissioner or mayor. It's something even *they* can't compete with."

**B**OTH men were silent a moment. A fly buzzed lazily somewhere in the warm office. Outside the dirty windows, the bright sunlight was lessening over the city.

"Now," Rush continued, "you want to

know about Senator Midworth?"

The Phantom's eyes flickered. This man Rush was clever; he found out things in fast order.

"Yes," said Van Loan.

"I got some of it from Inspector Gregg on the phone," explained the undercover man. "You're out here to help Havens, because he was a close personal friend of the Senator. The police department gets along with Havens fine. He doesn't try to crowd us like some newspaper publishers. And I don't blame him for calling on you; perhaps you'll run onto something because of your anonymity here." He paused, then said, "The commissioner hasn't released it to the papers, because the moment it hits the streets hell's going to pop in politics, the national election—everywhere. We have the medical examiner's report now. Senator Midworth was definitely murdered today. Poisoned!"

Nodding, the Phantom explained about the murdered cameraman. He ended by asking, "What about the water carafe, then? Didn't it show that the switched bottle was loaded with a fast-acting poison?"

The detective frowned, his pale blue eyes questioning. "The lab men figured the poison must have come from the bottle placed there for the speakers. And they also realized the bottles must have been switched. The only joke is. . . there was no second bottle. It was gone!"

"Probably taken during the excitement of Senator Midworth's collapse on the stage," said the Phantom. "I understand the platform was a melee of confused people. The person who put the poisoned bottle there must also have grabbed it up again."

Jim Rush nodded. "And got rid of it!" He placed his hands on his knees and looked grimly at his visitor. "Where?" he asked. "Where does it all tie together? 'Honest John' Midworth was one of the finest men alive. I know some politicians who are as crooked as they come. But not Midworth. And if there had been someone opposing him in the campaign who had definite crooked connections, it might be

understandable that certain people were out to eliminate Midworth. Yet it wasn't like that. Midworth was the unanimous choice."

"I know," said Van Loan thoughtfully. "Another curious thing," he pointed out. "I understand Senator Midworth started to say he couldn't accept the nomination—just before he died. Why, I wonder?"

Rush shook his head slowly. He stood up, paced up and down the small cluttered room once, stared toward the windows.

"There's a clue somewhere that will give us the right lead. I wish I knew what it was!"

The Phantom thought, *the letter!* The letter which had never reached Frank Havens. He had an idea it contained a solution to Midworth's strange actions before his death, and to the murder itself. He decided not to tell Rush about it, however, until he had obtained a little more information from the newspaper publisher himself. He ought to be getting back there. . . .

Coming to his feet, he said, "There's one angle. Perhaps you'd like to check it while I see Havens." He told about Garrett recalling that a National Newsreel cameraman had also been taking shots at the Convention. "Young Garrett mentioned it just before that fake telegram was delivered and he was shot down in cold blood."

The detective's eyes brightened. "The film might possibly show something—give us a clue!"

"Yes."

On a sudden impulse, Rush said, "Wait a minute. . ." and stepped to the telephone on the old-fashioned roll-top desk. The Phantom listened to him speak to the radio tower dispatcher. Rush listened a moment, then hung up, shaking his head.

"No trace, yet, of that sedan Garrett's killers used in their getaway. Damn!"

Van Loan had his hand on the door-knob when the undercover man said, "I'll run you up to Havens' building. From there I'll go over to the National Newsreel—"

"Thanks," said the Phantom. "But perhaps it would be better if I left here alone. You can understand why, Rush."

"Yes," agreed the lithely built detective. He joined the Phantom, motioned to a side hallway nearby. "There's a back way out of here. You'd better take every precaution. Once they learn *you're* on this crime—" He broke off, but the implication was clear and disturbing. Van Loan had to keep moving fast, and incognito. Perhaps even now some sinister foe had guessed the true identity of "Mr. Grey" and he was being trailed.

**T**OGETHER Rush and Van Loan rode a freight elevator to the basement, came up a flight of stairs that opened onto a side street lined with warehouses. The neighborhood was deserted and quiet now. Dusk would soon be settling over the city. A slight, refreshing breeze could be felt moving in from nearby Lake Michigan.

Rush left Van Loan at the exit door, asking, "Where can I reach you?"

He named a hotel that faced on the Outer Drive near the Drake. "It's a rather small, quiet place," he explained. "I usually stay there when I'm in Chicago as Richard Curtis Van Loan. I asked Steve Huston to make the reservation for me under the name of 'Grey.' I'll be there later tonight. Or you can try Havens' office at the newspaper."

"Watch yourself," said Jim Rush with feeling.

Nodding, Van Loan went up the quiet street.

The evening shadows were deepening now, and the big warehouses around him were dark and gloomy. His footsteps sounded lonely and lost in the approaching night.

Shortly, though, he was on South State street, where he swung north watching for a cruising cab as he moved along. There were gaudy flashing lights now, cheap movies and questionable burlesque houses, second-hand clothing stores, lunchrooms and beer parlors. Already Chicago's lower-level night life was on the move. Any one of the characters he passed along this seamy section of State Street could have been carrying a gun, a knife or a sap. A nice neighborhood. And right

in the lap of Police Headquarters.

He was hungry and his clothes, even though of light summer weight, felt sticky against his tall, muscular body. He'd like nothing better than a shower and some food. But he was anxious to see Muriel and her father. Muriel, especially, would be disturbed that he had not returned to the newspaper building. He also wanted to pick up his bag from Steve Huston, and, especially get his gun. He'd feel a whole lot better if he had the reassuring holster beneath his armpit now. . . .

Several times Van Loan glanced around, watching for a cab. The only ones he saw were occupied. He doubted that many drivers cruised this cheap neighborhood looking for passengers.

Several blocks ahead he could hear the clatter of the El trains overhead on the Loop, where it crossed State at Van Buren. It was a busy corner; he'd surely find a cab stand there. From where he was he could see a garish, flashing confusion of theatre and cafe lights that marked the busy intersection.

He looked over his shoulder again, however, hopeful of spotting an empty cab. . . .

A warning telegraphed itself to his brain. There was something he'd seen, something familiar. . . .

Of course! The gray coupe moving along a half block behind him. It had been at the same identical distance the last time he had looked back for a cab!

Someone in the coupe was pacing his footsteps.



VAN LOAN continued along the wide sidewalk, glancing sidewise trying to pick up the outline of the coupe in nearby windows. But it was far enough behind him not to be reflected in the glass. He was anxious to get a good look at the car

without being obvious about it.

At the corner ahead he saw another of the combination bar-and-grill restaurants that were located frequently along South State. He swerved abruptly, entered the place, turned just inside the doorway and saw the gray coupe go past.

He had also noted, before entering, that a second doorway led to and from the side street. He strode quickly across to the side entrance and out to the sidewalk again.

The car had abruptly turned the corner and was stopping right in front of him!

He moved fast now, figuring it was better to take his follower by surprise than be trapped himself. If he had his gun it would be different. He was across the sidewalk and had whipped open the door of the car before it had barely rolled to a full stop.

Then he stared.

"Muriel!" He slid into the seat, hastily closed the door.

The girl's lovely eyes shone in the light cast by the restaurant window near them.

"Van!" she said. He caught the relief in her voice. "I wasn't too sure. You see, I waited for you near the Detective Bureau, saw this man—you—walking along the sidewalk, but I was doubtful. The way you're dressed, and in the half-darkness—"

He gripped her hand a moment, conscious of the close bond that flowed between them every time he was with this wonderful girl.

Then he laughed softly. "I guess I look like a tabloid newshound."

"Not that bad," Muriel said. But her quick eyes had taken in his appearance, noting some of the dust still on his sports coat. Her hand impulsively went to his arm, and her eyes were concerned. "I . . . we heard about Johnnie Garrett. Van, you must be very careful. You might have been killed there in that alley behind Garrett's apartment building."

"How did you know?"

"Steve Huston got the news, of course. He's been checking the police reports at father's paper every five minutes since his



arrival. I dropped him off up there at Garrett's place." Her eyes were troubled. "That poor young man. . . Van, how did they ever find out about Garrett. Who found out?"

The Phantom shook his head. Then he asked, "How did you learn about me—where I'd gone?"

Muriel explained, "Leave it to dynamic Steve Huston! Somehow he wheedled the information out of a detective lieutenant named Broderick up there at Garrett's building." Her voice lowered intimately. "I was worried about you, Van. So I drove down here—"

"And," he urged, "I think we better keep driving, Muriel. You found me down here. There's no telling who else might have me pegged. We can talk while you drive."

They started up, continuing down the side street toward the lake and Michigan Avenue. She told him, "Steve also reserved a small suite for you at that hotel you told him about. He left your bag up there." She glanced at the dashboard clock. "It's after eight-thirty now. Father went on ahead to the Midworth's estate out on the North Shore. Mr. Karrisson's with him. We're to meet them out there and see Mrs. Midworth. Father wants to find out anything he can about that strange letter."

"How's the elevator boy?"

"We phoned the hosietail again, Van." Muriel shook her blonde head. "It doesn't look good. They're going to operate on his spine. He's still unconscious."

**T**HEY reached Michigan Avenue, waited for the lights to change, and were now rolling northward in a steady stream of traffic. Some distance ahead the brilliantly floodlighted Wrigley Building stood majestically just beyond the North Michigan Avenue bridge. A pleasant breeze swept in from the lake. Gone, now, was the sultry heat of the afternoon.

Van Loan spoke, "Do you know where the Midworth place is? I could take a cab." He hesitated at telling her he'd rather go alone. He did not want to hurt her, yet

he was thinking of her safety. . .

"Nonsense!" Muriel exclaimed. "I know just where it is. Besides, I want to offer my condolences to that poor woman. Imagine how she feels, regardless of the way Mr. Karrisson says she is holding up."

The Phantom had to agree. It would be better, he told himself, if Muriel was along.

They reached the end of the Avenue, but instead of continuing onto the Outer Drive, Muriel swung the coupe deftly right along a street that bordered it, close to the lake and a beach, visible beyond the Outer Drive. They pulled up in a block lined by smaller, exclusive, residential type hotel buildings.

"I'll bet you haven't eaten!" Muriel exclaimed abruptly as they stopped at the curb.

"I can wait."

"You check in and clean up," the girl said. "They don't have a restaurant here. I'll drive around the block and get you a sandwich or something. You can be ready by the time I'm back."

He watched her drive off. He wished he didn't care for her so deeply. This was a horrible way to think, he told himself, yet in his business there was no telling when danger lurked nearby. It wasn't fair to Muriel to expose her to that danger. At the same time, he admired her. She was fearless.

Putting the thought momentarily out of his mind, he went inside to check into the hotel. . . .

When he opened his suitcase, he found the gun which he had taken from Bruno at the New York airport. It was wrapped carefully in a clean handkerchief, and on top of this was a note scribbled by Steve Huston: It read:

I imagine your friend Jim Rush at the Detective Bureau would like to check this rod. Wouldn't be surprised if it had quite a history—of murders! Will contact you later. Watch yourself.

Van Loan put the gun carefully in the bottom drawer of the dresser, quickly stripped down and headed for the shower.

Van Loan was just putting the final

touches to the dye coloring which amazingly changed his features, when the buzzer sounded just inside the apartment door. He listened, a smile touching his features. It was a signal Muriel had used on the occasions when she picked him up at his penthouse apartment in New York. He slipped into his coat, went through the large bedroom and out to the living room of the smartly furnished suite. A short foyer led to the hall door.

Tall, slim Muriel pushed a paper bag at him as she came in.

"Here—time for your nine o'clock feeding," she ordered.

Munching a sandwich, holding a drug store coffee container in his other hand, he said, "How far is it to the Midworth estate?"

"Twenty or twenty-five miles," said the girl. "It's near Highland Park. There are some beautiful places out there."

"Anyone know you in this hotel?"

Muriel shook her head, then gave him a sidelong look. "Am I liable to lose my

reputation, being here with you, sir?"

"Possibly—" Then he said seriously, "I still have the uneasy feeling I might have been spotted since arriving here in Chicago. If so, I don't want you caught in the middle of it. Muriel, you must be careful."

The girl's face now reflected his own seriousness. "I know, Van. Honestly, though, I'm getting to be a regular sleuth. You should see the precautions I take to be certain I'm not followed."

"Good girl," he told her. He tried to ease the tension that momentarily touched them. "Make sure you do that with all men—except me!"

He dropped the empty coffee container and paper bag in a waste basket, said, "Be right with you," and disappeared into the bedroom for a moment.

Quickly he slipped on the shoulder holster beneath the neat blue suitcoat he was wearing—and which was carefully tailored so as not to show any bulge of the

[Turn page]



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holster—and then carefully placed the well-oiled automatic in position. He glanced once in the dresser mirror, saw a face that looked quite gaunt and fine-lined, and much older than his own. His hair was combed in a manner that also helped to change his appearance.

Well, he thought maybe Muriel was right. Certainly no one should recognize him. . . .

A LITTLE over half an hour later the outlying residential communities of Winnetka and Glencoe were well behind them and they were following winding, less heavily traveled Sheridan Road. Now and then Lake Michigan appeared in the clear night on their right. Houses became fewer and they entered an exclusive area of well-kept estates. Even these became farther and farther apart, and now the big mansions were set far back from the road and hidden by high walls and hedges.

Presently the girl leaned forward, peering ahead through the aisle of trees. "Slow down, Van. I think we're near it."

He had taken over the wheel when they left the hotel.

Muriel kept watching for the occasional high stone columns that marked the entranceways to various residences. Soon she said, "There it is—just ahead. The one with the big stone flower vases atop the columns."

The Phantom swung the car to the right and along a gravel roadway that quickly was winding and curving through a narrow lane of trees. The night suddenly became black-shrouded, impenetrable all around them.

Muriel said, "The house sets well back, close to the lake. It's about a half-mile from here."

They could not see it through the thick curtain of trees. The Phantom felt as if a dark blanket had been drawn about them.

He stopped the car in the winding lane.

The girl glanced at him quickly.

"Something wrong, Van?"

He cut the ignition, turned partway in the seat to face her. The dim glow from the dashboard faintly outlined her fea-

tures, giving them a softness that made her more beautiful than ever.

"No-o," he said slowly. "There are just a couple of things we ought to check before reaching the house, however. Remember, Muriel, we don't know anything about the employees here. One of them might have been planted recently by whoever ordered Midworth's murder."

"There are only two or three—and as I understand it they've been with the Midworths for years."

"Just the same, be careful. From now on, don't forget, I'm 'Mr. Grey.'" You'd better stop calling me Van, even when we're alone. You might make a slip."

Muriel nodded.

They sat silently a moment. Faint night sounds reached them: a cricket rubbing its legs together to create that sound crickets make, the brief flutter of a bird somewhere above them, disturbed in its sleep by the arrival of the car. The soft rustle of leaves as a breeze reached them from the lake. The night was cool now.

The girl sighed. "It's so peaceful here."

He moved his shoulders. Van Loan sensed that uneasiness again. He couldn't explain it.

Abruptly he said, "Tomorrow I'm going to see that you get a gun to carry. I'd feel better if—"

Muriel was opening the glove compartment. "I told you," she said brightly, "I'm learning fast." She half removed the small automatic from the compartment, slid it back again, closed the little door. "Satisfied, silly?"

He chuckled softly. "Blame it on the jitters. From now on, young lady, you're on your own. I'll give no further orders. That's a promise."

"And that," Muriel said cheerfully, "makes me feel better. You *have* been tense tonight—for no reason whatsoever that I can see. Why should—"

Suddenly the car door beside the Phantom flew open and the point blank beam of a flashlight blinded them both. A cold, harsh voice rapped:

"Reach for anything, my friend, and you get a bellyful of lead. All right—get out!

You, lady, stay right there and don't move."

It was odd, the Phantom thought, the odd things you are aware of in a moment of danger like this. He remembered that the crickets were not the least bit disturbed; they went right on chattering to each other.

Carefully, he got out of the car—his motions slow and deliberate because he was concerned over Muriel's safety. He said without looking at her, "Do exactly as he says."

The flashlight beam was still blinding him, but he caught the glint of gun metal beyond the stabbing cone of light. His feet lightly touched the ground, scraped the gravel, touched soft lawn as the gunman snapped, "Over here, pal!"

The man kept backing away from the car, the light still trained on Van Loan's face. He wanted desperately to do something about that light; its stark, revealing beam might show up the dye on his features, help to give away his disguise.

Several paces from the parked car, the gunman ordered, "Stand right there. Get those hands up!"

Van Loan managed to turn a little as he raised his hand. The movement was enough to make the unseen gunman circle a bit to the right. That was better. Now, if he should get trigger-happy, the parked car—and Muriel Havens—would not be in the line of fire.

The flashlight snapped off. The man was no doubt worried about attracting someones' attention with the light, but he had been forced to use it momentarily to confuse his captive.

Slowly, outline of the gunman's form took shape. Van Loan made out a pulled-down cap that partially covered the fellow's face—even if there was more light. He was not a very big man. He looked almost thin and puny in the night. Van Loan could not yet make out any part of his features.

If he could get close enough to him, within arm's reach, Van knew a disarming trick that was swift enough to deflect the shot even if the trigger was pulled. Watch-

ful, keenly alert now, he brought his arms down slightly and made a small, helpless gesture with his hands.

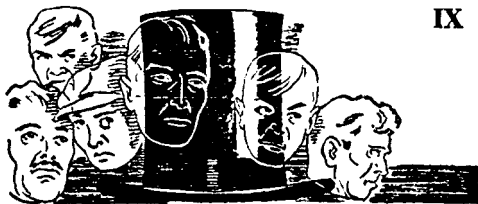
"What do you want, mister?" he asked in a helpless tone.

The man came a step closer to him, the gun pointed levelly—but within reach, then, of Van Loan's strong hands.

*Just what I wanted*, thought the Phantom.

Now!

But the voice behind him said, "Watch him, sweetheart, while I give him a frisk!"



IX

AT THE sudden knowledge that someone was behind him, Van Loan was taken off guard. He had not figured on the presence of a second man. Now he felt big hands expertly frisk him, locate the shoulder holster. The second man had to move around partially in front of Van Loan in order to get the automatic. As he did so he warned his small partner, "Careful, now!"

He came around on Van's left, big hands diving beneath the coat and quickly loosening the weapon from its holster.

Van's eyes, adjusted to the darkness now, observed a hulking form with beefy shoulders that were slightly hunched forward. A fedora was turned down all around the brim, almost hiding the fellow's eyes, yet the Phantom had the impression—though it was an impression only—that the second man might be pockmarked.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw his own gun go into the big man's side pocket. Then the man said, "Next, pal, your wallet. We're gonna find out just *who* you are!"

The small man still had his gun trained on the Phantom. He waited as the Phantom carefully reached to his hip pocket and passed over the wallet.

And Van Loan appeared to be looking at the big man as he gave him the wallet. But at the same time, obliquely, he observed the little man sharply. He saw the first man's eyes shift momentarily to the wallet as it was passed over to his burly partner.

Van Loan moved like a flash.

His powerful hands came down in a chopping, swift motion. As one of his hands clamped over the small man's gun wrist, the other slapped the side of the gun in a twisting, deflecting motion. The man yelped with pain but at the same time he pulled the trigger. Gun sound shattered the quiet night.

Meanwhile there was another round covering the first—a roar of pain from the beefy fellow who had done the frisking.

Van saw him double his left arm up against his chest. He had been nicked, apparently, by the deflecting slug! Then the man was trying to claw into his right-hand pocket for the automatic which he had taken from Van.

But his motion was far too slow to match Van Loan's amazing speed. The crime-fighter had already reversed the revolver which he had deftly twisted from the smaller man's grasp. The heavy butt came down across the big fellow's head, a glancing blow, but it knocked the man to the ground.

Van Loan barely glimpsed the man falling as he spun back to the smaller one.

Like a frightened terrier, the thin little punk had taken off as though a pack of hounds were on his trail. Already he had scooted into the surrounding gloom, his footsteps pounding the turf.

Other steps were running now, Muriel's, as she came toward Van Loan crying, "Are you all right?"

She had seen him drop to one knee. Fear and worry were in her words.

But he was quickly retrieving his own automatic from the fallen man's coat pocket. Over his shoulder he called to the girl, "Swing the car around and turn on the lights. Hurry, Muriel; See if you can pick up that other one."

Muriel surmised his intention. She

started the car, expertly maneuvered back and forth in the narrow roadway, located a break in the trees and shot it forward onto the sweep of broad smooth lawn revealed by the headlamp beams. It was easy to see that the estate covered many acres, bordered by thick groves of trees.

Van Loan was running in the direction the little thin man had disappeared. But the fellow could move like a deer. As Muriel swept up near the Phantom in the drive-yourself coupe, he vaguely made out the man's dashing form far ahead. He also noted that the tough little man was trying to gain the protection of tall trees revealed well across the stretch of lawn.

MURIEL swung the car close and the Phantom leaped up on the running board on the driver's seat. "Overtake him before he reaches the woods!" he directed.

They were too late.

The figure had disappeared from sight before they reached the far side of the expansive lawns. The car headlights barely penetrated a dozen feet of the thick woods.

"Drive along the edge," the Phantom called out as he leaped to the ground and plunged toward the spot where he'd seen the man vanish. He wished the car had a spotlight which Muriel could train on the woods. As it was, the Shadow ran along parallel to the car, hoping the reflection from its headlights would penetrate deep enough so that he could again locate the fleeting figure.

But in a few moments he realized that the chase was futile. The fellow had vanished. He could have taken off in a dozen different directions.

Returning to where Muriel had momentarily stopped beyond the woods, he said, "Hurry back to where we started. I only stunned that other one." He hung onto the open door window frame as the girl raced the car back across the lawn.

Seconds before they reached the spot Van Loan knew that he was already too late. The beefy thug who had frisked him was gone.

Muriel stopped the car, cut the motor, and they listened. They heard no sound.

He put his own automatic back in its holster, felt his coat pocket to make sure he had not lost the small man's revolver when he was racing across the lawn.

"Well," he said quietly, "perhaps the little fellow's gun will tell me more than my wallet will tell them."

Muriel caught her breath sharply. "But your *wallet*!" she gasped. "Don't you see? They weren't robbers at all. They want to find out who you are and—"

"Of course," he agreed. He gave a quick chuckle. "I only carry a couple of dollars in that wallet, anyway. But the cards and various identification in it were all specially printed and carefully planned. They'll have no idea *who* I am when they get done inspecting the contents."

"You mean, you carry that wallet as a precaution?"

Van nodded. He patted an area just below his belt, at the left side of his midriff. "I carry another wallet here."

The girl started to say, "You *were* right—there's every reason to be very, very cautious from now on." She spoke low and softly, hardly above a whisper. "Van, it's uncanny the way *someone* seems to know every move that we—you—make. I can't understand how they do it!"

"I know. If—"

He paused, listening. Muriel heard it, too.

Somewhere in the general direction of the main entrance to the estate, they heard a car motor start up. Gears ground and then the car was rapidly picking up speed. Even as they listened the engine roar started to fade in the distance.

Muriel said, "We couldn't overtake it even if we wanted to. This rent-a-car has a governor on it set for fifty miles an hour."

"They all have," Van said. "Let's get on to the house. We can notify the police from there."

While Muriel drove, he carefully placed the small gunman's revolver in the glove compartment beside her own light automatic. "Lock this up after you stop," he suggested.

In a few moments they swung the last

turn in the roadway, found themselves on a wide drive that bordered sunken flower gardens. The huge, many gabled stone house loomed up before them. They rolled to a stop before the broad steps of an open veranda that ran along the entire front of the house.

As they climbed out, the girl pausing a moment to lock the glove compartment, Van recognized straight, military-looking Frank Havens at the top of the steps. The big, distinguished looking-man he had spotted with Havens at the airport was also there, as well as a younger man in chauffeur's cap and rolled-up shirt sleeves.

All three men appeared disturbed about something as they hurried down the wide stone steps to greet Van and Muriel now getting out of the gray coupe.

"What happened back there?" asked Havens, Muriel's father. He looked from his daughter to Van Loan, and there was deep concern in his eyes. Then he indicated the younger man with them. "Harry, here, said he heard a shot!"

THE husky man in rolled-up sleeves and chauffeur's cap nodded. "I was back near the garage, just getting some air." A sweep of his arm indicated that the garage was somewhere at the rear of the main house. "I ran around here to tell Judson and Mr. Karrisson."

"We just came out as you folks drove up," said the man called Arnold Karrisson. Looking at the Phantom with steady, dark eyes, he said, "I don't believe we've met..." His glance swerved to smile briefly at Muriel.

Havens stepped forward, "That's right," he said quickly. He introduced Van as "Mr. Grey." The big, bushy-browed man gripped the Phantom's hand, said, "So you're this ace reporter of Frank's from New York? Sorry we missed you this afternoon. I... Did you see anything as you drove in just now?"

Briefly, the crime-fighter told them what had taken place.

Austere-looking Arnold Karrisson listened closely, then exclaimed, "Good God, we never have trouble with prowlers or



thugs out here. We even have a special police patrol for the estates in this community."

He swung, led the way back up the steps. "Let's report this immediately. Maybe they can be headed off." His big head turned quickly to look at Van Loan. "Did you see their car?"

"Hardly," Van said.

Entering the broad center hallway of the house ahead of them, Karrisson called out "Judson!" as he moved with determined steps.

Muriel touched her father's arm, asked quietly, "How's Mrs. Midworth? Is she—"

"Upstairs," Havens said in an undertone. "She asked to be called as soon as you arrived. She's in her room telephoning about funeral arrangements for the Senator."

"The poor woman," said Muriel with a shake of her head.

An elderly, slightly bent man with a kindly face and white hair appeared from an archway on the left of the hall.

Van Loan heard Karrisson say, "Judson, what is the phone number of that private police patrol out here?"

The butler said something quietly, then Karrisson motioned to Van Loan. "Perhaps you'd better talk to them too, Grey," he said in a precise manner. "You know exactly what happened."

Karrisson had opened one of two heavy-paneled doors, led the way into what was obviously the library. Deep carpeting muffled their steps as he led the way to a massive desk. Above a fireplace, Van Loan saw an oil painting of 'Honest John' Midworth himself.

Then he listened to Karrisson as the deep-chested, deep-voiced man got hold of the local operator and told her to rush through the call.

Karrisson was the type of man, Van Loan quickly surmised, who knew how to get things done. He reminded one of a successful, hard-hitting, action-getting Congressman.

Without any wasted words Karrisson identified himself, gave part of the details to a patrol officer at the other end of the

line, then stated that "Mr. Grey," a guest who had just arrived here at the estate, would fill in remaining details. He motioned for Van to take over, held out the receiver, then stepped aside, waiting.

Van Loan repeated what he had told them outside when he and Muriel got out of the car. He ended with, "I think your best bet is to alert prowling cars in the communities south of here. They headed toward Chicago." He described the two assailants as best he could, added, "I see no need for your coming here. It might upset Mrs. Midworth right now—" He glanced at Arnold Karrisson, saw him nod quickly in agreement. "One of them was clipped by a gun shot. You might ask for a check of doctors' offices—though I doubt if that will help you. That type of hoodlum uses doctors who don't report gunshot wounds to the police."

He listened a moment, learned he was talking with an Officer Culp, was told that they would call back if anyone was picked up.

He hung up.

KARRISSON said, "That was the sensible thing to suggest, Grey. Marie—Mrs. Midworth—isn't a woman to go to pieces and show her innermost emotions. Nevertheless, we want to spare her all we can."

He started toward the hall, paused, asked with a slight frown, "Do you think that attack was simply a holdup—or something else? What could they have wanted?"

Van Loan did not answer for a moment. Presently he said, "They might have been after a letter."

"Letter?" Arnold Karrisson frowned. Then his heavy-browed eyes widened and he exclaimed, "Of course—the letter Honest John wrote to Havens!" Karrisson's heavy fist came down and smacked the broad desk. "By God, we've simply got to find out what was in that letter! It's the clue to the Senator's strange actions just before his death—"

"—and to his murder, perhaps," reminded Van Loan.

"Exactly!"

Karrisson swung his big figure toward the butler, Judson, who had been standing discreetly in the background.

"Isn't there *anything* you can think of which the Senator might have said before he left here this morning? You said, Judson, that he was in here writing the letter, and that he seemed disturbed and preoccupied about something as he went out."

The white-haired, soft-spoken man shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I told you everything I know." The lines

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## ZORELLA'S SNAKE



**I**N BALTIMORE, a shapely dancer named Zorella did a dance with a seven-foot snake in a night club. Zorella didn't seem to have much more clothing on than the reptile and police haled her into court, where she righteously informed the judge that her dance interpreted a legend of mythology—something to do with a princess who danced with a prince who had been turned into a snake.

"Interesting—tell me more," said the judge.

But that's as far as Zorella could go—she admitted she was a little rusty on her mythology.

"Forty dollars and costs," said the judge, definitely bringing her back to current civilization.

—William Carter

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in his aged face seemed to deepen even as he spoke.

Van Loan put in, "You've questioned the chauffeur also?"

Karrisson jerked his head. "Harry says the Senator didn't have a word to say all the way to Chicago."

"How long has Harry worked here?" Van Loan addressed his question to the elderly butler.

"Five years, sir. And his father for many years before him. The father died

before Harry took over the job, sir."

Then, with a slow shake of his head and pointing toward the big desk, Judson added, "It was right here he was writing that letter Mr. Karrisson is referring to. Only this morning—"

He broke off and turned away. The Phantom had caught the glint of tears in the poor old fellow's eyes. There was no doubt whatsoever about the servant's devotion to the family.

Karrisson added a word. "Mrs. Midworth and I both searched this desk from top to bottom. There's no hint at all about what the Senator was writing. I doubt if we'll ever really know—"

He snapped his fingers. "That reminds me!" Karrisson picked up the telephone again, asked the operator for one of the Chicago hospitals. It was the one Muriel had mentioned to Van Loan earlier, the hospital where the elevator boy now lay hovering between life and death.

Karrisson spoke first to a desk clerk, then was connected with a staff doctor. Then he was listening to the doctor's report, saying, "I see . . . I see . . ." He finally hung up and turned to Van Loan.

"He's still unconscious. You've heard about that boy, of course?"

Van nodded.

He moved toward the center hallway, where he could see Havens and his daughter talking quietly, waiting for them to come out.

Karrisson followed, saying, "I'll get Mrs. Midworth. She wants to see you, Grey." He headed toward a flight of curving stairs as Van joined Muriel and her father.

The blond-haired girl asked anxiously, "Do you think the police will catch those two men—Mr. Grey?" She added the last as she saw the butler come out of the library and turn toward the rear of the wide hallway.

Van Loan shook his head. "I doubt it. They probably had their movements well planned."

"Muriel tells me the one you momentarily stunned with the gun butt managed to join his partner. Are you sure? Maybe

one of them's still around the grounds."

"The little runt wouldn't have driven off without his partner, Mr. Havens. Muriel and I both heard the car."

"Maybe they'll both return."

A quick, cool smile flicked across Van Loan's face. "I wish they would." He patted the side pocket of his coat. "I have the only weapon they had."

"Who do you figure they were?"

"Perhaps the same two who murdered Johnnie Garrett late this afternoon."

Muriel's eyes flew wide. "They might have killed you!"

"If they still had the gun," said Van Loan. "I'll give the revolver to Jim Rush at the Detective Bureau. He can have it checked against the slug taken from Garrett's heart." Quickly, and speaking quietly, he told a little of his meeting with the special undercover man working out of the Chicago police department.

Havens' square jaw set grimly. "If those two murderers are caught, I'll use every resource in my power to see that they get the chair!"

Van Loan nodded in agreement. "Yet those two are only hired gunmen," he pointed out. "Expendable, you might say. They'd be replaced by others."

"By the Gulick's crime syndicate?"

"By someone or some organization even more powerful than the Gulick syndicate." The Phantom frowned slightly. He glanced at Muriel. "One thing puzzles me about this attack on us as we came in here tonight—why weren't those two hoods after the letter itself? The letter, and what it might contain, is far more important than trying to learn my read identity."

"I never thought of that!" said the publisher. "They killed young Garrett because someone is afraid of what Garrett might have revealed—what he saw through his television camera viewer. Somehow, they learned that Garrett was trying to see either you or me. Yet that missing letter is far more important. Funny they didn't look for it on you, Grey!"

Van Loan said thoughtfully, "Maybe they knew I didn't have the letter. Remember, the letter disappeared when the

elevator boy in your newspaper building was shot. Perhaps they already know who has that letter now."

Muriel's eyes widened. "Then why don't they go after that person?"

"That," said Van Loan deliberately, "is what particularly puzzles me."



THEY stopped talking as they heard steps coming down the stairs.

The tall, slender woman held big Arnold Karrison's arm as they descended the curving staircase. Even at a distance, the Phantom had a quick impression of dark-haired, almost breathtaking beauty . . . of smooth, delicately etched features that were unusually youthful for a woman who must be fifty, according to his estimate.

Alert Frank Havens stepped to the foot of the stairs to meet them. He was saying, "I'm sorry we have to disturb you again, Marie. But I did want you to meet a man who might be able to—"

"And I want to meet him," said Marie Midworth in a firm, steady voice. "Frank, you know me better than that. I don't admire crocodile tears and hysteria in anyone. My husband, Martin, was a man of action and purpose. I'm the same way. Anything Martin would despise would be a weeping widow. My one objective, right now, is to get to the bottom of this dreadful thing."

She shifted her attention from Havens, looked at Van Loan, came forward with a hand outstretched. "I understand you're Frank Havens' top crime reporter. I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Grey!"

Van Loan was conscious of the firm grip of her slim fingers. She was as tall as Muriel herself and with a figure that would be the envy of women much younger. He could not detect the faintest lines in her classical, smooth features. Her eyes were a very dark brown that appeared

almost black in the hall light.

"I'll help in any way I can," he said. "I wonder"—he glanced at the others—"if we could have a few moments alone? It might be easier if all of us weren't confusing you with questions."

"You're very considerate, Mr. Grey," she said, stepping toward the arched doorway of the living room. She attempted a brief smile as Muriel put her arm around her for an instant and offered, "If there's anything I can do about the . . . arrangements. . ."

"Thank you, darling." Marie Midworth shook her head. "I have everything already organized. I believe in keeping busy at a . . . time like this. But I'll surely call upon you if I need something."

Havens said quickly, "We'll wait in the library."

Arnold Karrison's steady, dark eyes followed the tall, well-proportioned figure as Marie Midworth went on into the living room. He shook his head in admiration. "An amazing, capable person!" he said softly.

Van Loan followed her.

The beautifully furnished room was expansive, long, ending at a music room far back at the other end. Somewhere there came the soft, faint, steady hum of air-conditioning equipment. Otherwise the deep carpets and rich furnishings gave a sort of hushed silence to the place.

He waited until Marie Midworth had selected a straight, gold-painted chair, then drew up an occasional chair to face her. He was aware of her dark, sharp eyes studying his features carefully. She said without preliminary:

"You have changed your appearance somewhat, Mr. Grey. I believe I can detect skin dye and other tricks of the trade. Why have you done that?"

A discerning person, Van Loan told himself. And cautious. Even though he knew Frank Havens had recommended him highly as a top-flight reporter, Marie Midworth wanted to be reassured.

"Sometimes," he explained, "in my work of reporting . . . crimes . . . I rub elbows with the underworld. Naturally

I've made enemies. I can't be too careful."

"Who are you, really?"

He smiled, shrugging. "Just call me a man with a nose for news. I've simply been luckier than some at uncovering crimes. I guess that's why Mr. Havens called me in on your husband's . . . death."

**W**HETHER she was convinced or not, was hard to tell. And he had to admit that he had met few women with such sharp, analytical, discerning minds. Here was a woman at once beautiful and intelligent, one who believed in getting things accomplished. She'd never allow her emotions to interfere with straight thinking. No wonder 'Honest John' Midworth had climbed to the top. For an instant, he was tempted to reveal his actual identity. That, he knew, would gain her full confidence. But he had never let anyone in on the Phantom's secret other than Havens and his daughter Muriel, and so he put aside the thought now.

He said, "Tell me, Mrs. Midworth, everything that happened this morning up until the time you . . . last saw your husband. What I'd like to know is, how did he act, what did he say . . . anything like that?"

She shook her head. "Mr. Grey, you know just as much as I do. Perhaps more. I understand Frank Havens gave you all the details . . . I mean, the way my husband acted just before starting to speak, about writing some mysterious letter that has now disappeared, about . . ." She spread her expressive, well-cared-for hands, caught her breath sharply. "You see. I don't *know* what was wrong with him. I didn't even see Martin today!"

In response to his puzzled regard, she explained, "I left quite early for our party's headquarters in Chicago. There was so much to do, and as you probably know, I've been quite active in the campaign."

He nodded.

"Martin was still in his room when I left. I didn't disturb him because he needed the rest. The past few weeks had

been mighty strenuous on him. He was to stop by the headquarters hotel where I was, before going on to the Convention Hall. But he never—"

For the first time, it appeared she might break down. She reached in the pocket of her dark palm beach suit for a small lace handkerchief, then squared her shoulders and went on. "He had told me last night that he would pick me up there. But Harry, our chauffeur, tells me they were late and rushed right to the Press Building and then to the hall itself."

"He was anxious to deliver that letter," the Phantom said. "Haven't you any idea what was in it?"

"None whatsoever."

"Just before . . . he died," the Phantom went on, trying to keep the word "murder" out of the conversation, "your husband started to tell the Convention delegates that he could not accept the unanimous nomination. Why? I can't understand—"

Marie Midworth came to her feet. She was trembling now. "Neither can I, Mr. Grey! Together, we worked for years toward this goal. He would have been our next president. The opposing party hasn't a man strong enough to be president of the Ladies' Aid! They have half a dozen men who have no more influence than . . . than . . ." She gave a half sob, turned away, stood leaning on a grand piano that was beside her chair. Her head was bent.

White-haired Judson appeared in the doorway from the living room. He spoke softly, "A telephone call for you, sir." He motioned to a handset on a table in the adjoining room. "You can take it on this extension."

The butler turned away and moved noiselessly through the long, quiet room.

VAN LOAN was almost thankful for the interruption. It would allow Marie Midworth a moment to regain her composure. He stepped into the next room to pick up the receiver, wondering who, besides Steve Huston, knew of his whereabouts.

"Grey?" Van Loan instantly recognized

the voice of Jim Rush, undercover man he had met earlier.

"Speaking," he said.

"Thought you might be able to describe those two hoodlums who jumped you out there tonight. I'm curious."

"You're also fast," said Van Loan. He spoke in a low voice, so that the woman in the next room would not be disturbed for a moment. "You must have good contacts."

"I have."

As best he could, Van Loan described the small, thin, tough little man and his burly partner. "I think the big one was pock-marked, but it was difficult to tell in the dark."

"I heard about it in a flash from the private police out there," said Rush. "Those punks haven't been picked up, but at least you've given me something. Like Bruno, they're also wanted for murder—if they are the pair I have reason to think they are."

"I also have another gun for you," the Phantom said quietly. "That might help."

"You're a regular antique collector!" said Rush. "Be careful, though, you don't collect a few slugs. . . Yeah, that gun might help. Do you think the same two might have been at young Garrett's apartment building this afternoon?"

"I'm sure of it."

"The dirty—" the undercover man cursed profanely. Then he said, "About that National Newsreel film taken at the Convention—"

"Yes?" Van Loan asked quickly, his hopes rising.

"They've airmailed the darned original negative to their New York laboratory for printing and distribution."

Van groaned. "Can't you catch the plane it's going on?"

"Already thought of that," explained Rush. "Got a man over at the post office now. Near as we can figure, it's in a sack scheduled for a midnight flight from the airport. We'll do our best to intercept it before the plane leaves."

"I know you will, old man."

Stating that he would either see Rush

later that evening or first thing in the morning, Van Loan hung up. He went through the living room to the wide center hall for a moment, caught Frank Havens' eye, motioned for him to come out of the library.

When the publisher joined him, he suggested, "Try to locate Steve Huston for me, will you?" He told about the film shipment.

Havens nodded, asked, "How's Marie?"

"All right, I think. I'll be finished in a few moments. Tell Steve I'll pick him up at the *Enterprise* offices—if you should locate him."

He went back to the music room, found Marie Midworth standing quietly waiting for him. Dry-eyed, she had quickly regained her composure.

She said, "I couldn't help hearing part of that phone conversation, Mr. Grey. I take it those two marauders escaped."

He nodded.

"Did they rob you?" She explained that Arnold Karrisson had told her about the incident when he came upstairs to her sitting room.

Again Van shook his head. "I don't think robbery was the motive."

"Then what—"

"Let's," he suggested, "worry about you instead of me. I doubt if those two characters will return, but nevertheless you should have some protection out here. Who—"

FOR the first time, Marie Midworth gave a little laugh. He decided, however, it was more of a nervous laugh when she said quickly, "Protection? Heavens, no one is going to bother me. Besides, I have the chauffeur and Judson."

"Who else?"

"The cook, Mary, has a month off. You see, Martin and I had been spending practically all our time at the hotel in Chicago. We—I rented a suite there."

"How about a gardener, someone around the grounds?"

"I use a landscaping service. They come once a week."

"Then," he said, "there's only Harry,

the chauffeur and your butler?" He couldn't imagine the elderly Judson being much help in an emergency. "Does Harry live here in the house?"

"He has a small apartment on the top floor." She smiled briefly again. "Look, Mr. Grey, please believe me—I'm in no danger." Her intense dark eyes clouded and she came close to him. She lightly touched his arm. "It's you we should worry about. If my husband's . . . death is the result of some horrible political-underworld setup, then it's you we should think of. Anyone who tried to oppose the powerful crime syndicate here—" She broke off, shuddered. "Do be careful. And please consult me on every step you make. I know many influential people in the State. Perhaps I can help."

"I'll remember that," the Phantom said. He was aware of this woman's magnetic personality, the purposeful drive that was part of her makeup.

She finished, "Remember, tell me everything you uncover in this horrible situation. It's quite possible that something you tell me might give me some idea who was responsible for my husband's death."

She accompanied him as far as the hall, murmured quickly, "Please make my apologies to the others. Tell Muriel to call me in the morning." For the first time she indicated weariness by pressing her slim fingers briefly to her smooth forehead. "I think I'll go to bed."

Van Loan nodded, watched her disappear around the curve of the stairs. He had never met another woman with the ability to conceal grief as Marie Midworth. A truly remarkable person!

HE FOUND Muriel and her father alone in the library. The newspaper publisher explained that Arnold Karrisson had gone outside looking for the husky young chauffeur. "He's going to give Harry instructions about watching the grounds. Karrisson wanted Mrs. Midworth to stay in Chicago at the hotel tonight, but I imagine she's too exhausted to go in until morning."

"Any word about Steve Huston?" Van

Loan wanted to know.

Havens shook his head. "I left word for him to be at the newspaper office sometime around midnight—if he shows up. I told the switchboard operator you wanted to see him." He glanced at his watch. "It's getting late. We'd better start back."

"Karrisson has his car?"

Muriel answered. "He said Harry took it around to the garage a little while ago. He wanted the chauffeur to check on something about the motor." She glanced toward the library windows as the reflected glow of headlamp beams angled across the ceiling of the paneled room. "That must be them driving around front now."

They started out. Judson appeared in the hallway. Van told him, "Lock up good tonight—after Harry comes in."

"I've already attended to things, sir," the elderly man said.

Outside, they met the shirt-sleeved chauffeur and big wide-jawed Karrisson getting out of a limousine.

"Ready?" Karrisson called.

Muriel looked surprised when Van Loan nodded toward Karrisson's car, saying, "You ride in with them. Give me your keys, Muriel. I'll use your coupe. I have to meet Steve Huston. I'll see you all first thing in the morning."

The girl looked concerned. She spoke softly to Van. "Be very careful." She pressed his arm fondly in the darkness. "I'll worry every minute."

He answered quietly, "Don't. I lead a charmed life. Only beautiful blondes are dangerous to me."

"Silly."

But he caught a tenseness in her voice as she said it.

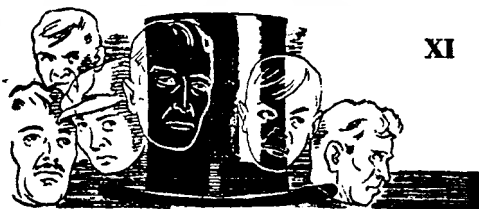
Louder, he said, "Oh, just a minute. . . I think you left your cigarettes on the seat of the coupe."

He started toward the other car, Muriel following. When she handed him the car keys, he leaned inside, opened the glove compartment and slipped her the small automatic which she had shown him earlier. "Put that in your purse," he ordered.

They returned to the limousine, and Van Loan watched as they drove off

toward the winding gravel lane to the main highway. Then he turned to the husky young chauffeur.

"Let's have a little talk," he suggested.



XI

THEY stood in the wide cement driveway before the long porch of the house, the cool night quiet all around them now. But Van Loan felt the chauffeur's eyes boring into him.

"Talk about what?" Harry asked.

"This morning . . . when you drove Senator Midworth to the Press Building and then to the Convention hall. What happened?"

"Nothing happened."

"Did you stop anywhere else?"

"No."

"Was anyone out here to see him before you left?"

"No."

"Did Senator Midworth act scared about anything?"

"No."

"Did he say anything to you about that letter?"

"Just that he had to deliver it before going to the Convention hall."

"Anything else?"

"I told you—" The young man's voice raised a trifle.

"Take it easy," said Van Loan. "That letter is the clue, I think, to this entire thing. I want to know why the Senator wrote it, *what* was in it, *where* it is now. Even Mrs. Midworth is puzzled about it."

"I know," said Harry, relaxing again. "Something was bothering 'Honest John.' He sat there in the back seat of the car and his mind seemed to be miles away. He didn't say a word all the way to the city. Even getting out at the Convention hall, he acted like he was in a trance. He didn't even say good-by, something he



never forgot to do. It was the last time I saw him—alive." The young man's voice trailed off to a whisper as he spoke the last word.

"You liked him, didn't you?"

"Everyone loved him," said the chauffeur proudly then. "He was one of the finest men living."

Here it was again, Van Loan thought. Even Frank Havens had nothing but the highest praise for 'Honest John' Midworth. Then how in the world did this murder of the Senator tie in with known hirelings of the nation's biggest crime syndicate?

He said, "Thanks, Harry. I'm sure you'll do everything to help if you learn anything." He was convinced, from the tone of the young man's voice, that Harry had told the truth. "Look, call your local private police immediately if anything suspicious happens out here again tonight."

"Don't worry," said the chauffeur. "I've already talked to them from a phone out in the garage. They're going to check the place carefully on their regular rounds. I took a walk around the grounds myself—with Michael."

"Michael?"

"Come along a minute, if you have time," suggested Harry. He motioned toward the rear of the big house.

Van Loan went with him, following the smooth driveway around the house and then along a fieldstone walk that cut across to the rear of the large garage. He made out a high wired enclosure that looked like the exercise runway of a kennel. There was a small, wooden building built at the farther end of the runway.

Then, abruptly, the Phantom gave a slight start. He had heard no sound—but suddenly he realized that the huge police dog was standing almost in front of him, just beyond the stout wire. He caught the gleam of liquid eyes, heard a sound that was a low, steady growl in the powerful animal's throat.

Harry said quickly, "All right, Michael. All right, boy."

The growling stopped.

"You see?" said the chauffeur. "If he

was turned loose, and didn't know you around here at night, he'd tear you apart."

Van Loan felt a little chill race along his spine. He could well imagine how swiftly and quietly the police dog could stalk a man.

He said, "But he didn't bark when we came around here?"

"He's trained not to," explained Harry. "You see, in case of emergency, he wouldn't scare off any problems before I could nab them."

The husky young man took a short sap from his pocket, slapped it against the palm of his sturdy hand. "Leaded," he said significantly. "So you see? Mrs. Midworth's in good hands. Don't worry about us here."

"I'm convinced," said Van.

They went back toward the front of the house. He named the hotel where he was staying, also reminded the young man that he could be reached through Haven's newspaper office.

"I'll call you if anything comes up," said Harry.

He stood in the darkness as the coupe drove off, and Van felt better now about leaving a murdered man's widow there in the house tonight.

**I**T WAS already after midnight when the Phantom wheeled the gray coupe into the outskirts of Evanston, still fifteen miles from Chicago's downtown Loop. There was little traffic, and he was making good time, nevertheless it would be another half-hour before he could reach the Press Building where he had left word for Steve Huston to meet him. He decided to call in now.

He swung west from Sheridan Road, drove up to Chicago Avenue and located one of the small "El" ticket offices which were open all night. There was a phone booth inside. He called the *Enterprise* switchboard operator and was told that the reporter was waiting to hear from him. Then he was talking to Steve himself.

"Listen," said the dynamic young man without preliminary, "have you ever been

to the Crimson Cat Club?"

"It sounds like a hot spot. No, I haven't been there. Why?"

"It's hot, all right—in more ways than one. It's a big gambling joint out near Cicero. Where are you now?"

Van Loan told him.

"Got any fancy sports shirts at the hotel so you can look like a gambler? You know the way those race-track hot shots dress—no ties, fancy slacks, a pocketful of cigars."

"What's up?" Then Van Loan added, "Yes, I think I can dress the part."

"Good!" said the reporter. "Look . . . I've been in touch with your friend Jim Rush. He's out at the airport trying to intercept that movie film shipment. He'll try to meet us at the Crimson Cat later. Meanwhile, we're to get right out there. He wanted me to tell you that he's learned those two gunsels—the ones who jumped you at the Midworth place tonight—hang out there. It was also our friend Bruno's bailiwick. Catch on?"

Van Loan's interest sharpened. "Which means it might be the spot where more important people meet?"

"Right! I'll meet you at your hotel. It'll only take us a little while from there out to Cicero. See you. . ." The connection was broken.

Van Loan had wanted to ask him just how they were supposed to get into the gambling club. He knew there was several such spots on Chicago's fringes, and Cicero was probably the hub of them all, but it usually took influence—as well as a bulging bank-roll—to get in.

Knowing Steve, though, he had an idea the reporter had worked something out.

Following the multi-laned Outer Drive along the lake shore, he was impatient because of the governor on the rented car which held him down to fifty miles an hour. But with traffic now thinned to a trickle, he pulled up several doors away from the quiet, residential hotel in a little over twenty minutes.

Steve appeared magically as Van Loan was hurrying toward the entrance. The reporter said, "Thought it a good idea to

make sure neither of us was followed here."

"There isn't another car or a person within a block Steve."

"I know." Then he added, "I'll wait until you come out—just in case." He melted away into the night shadows again.

It took only a few moments for the Phantom to make a swift, striking change of clothes. The pearl gray, open-necked sports shirt and specially padded shoulders of the checkered sports coat gave him a shorter, wider appearance. Low-heeled suede sports shoes also helped change his height. His skin now had the bronzed appearance of an habitu  of the Florida race tracks during the winter months, the northern tracks come Spring. Deft touches of dye at the temples made him seem older, a little gray.

He found Steve sitting in the coupe, alertly watching the quiet street that bordered the lake shore drive. On the way to Cicero Van Loan brought him up to date. Finally, because he was still wondering how they were going to get into such a gambling place as the Crimson Cat, he asked,

"How did you manage it?"

The redheaded reporter took a business-type card from his pocket, passed it to Van Loan. "A couple of press men over at the *Enterprise* go out there on rare occasions to gamble."

ON THE outskirts of Cicero, Steve Huston directed the way to a highway that led west out of the notorious town. He selected a route previously mapped out by his friends at the downtown newspaper. They crossed a through highway, shortly found themselves in an area of occasional eating places and scattered gas stations, all closed for the night. The sky overhead was moonlit and clear.

Shortly they picked up the glowing neon sign ahead. The outline of a huge, springing cat took shape. As they neared the long, low white building set far back in a parking lot alongside the road, they could see that the red-outlined cat's eyes were a baleful green. They swung in.

Cars were parked almost fender to fender throughout the sprawling parking area. A man holding a flashlight directed them toward the rear. A second man, waiting back there, showed them a spot where they could squeeze in.

"Gambling pays," said Steve laconically.

"In more ways than one, my friend."

The Phantom motioned the reporter to silence for a moment as they climbed out. He handed the attendant a coin and they cut across the large parking lot toward

## FATAL GAME



WHEN death comes up the winner in a game of Russian roulette, how (in the eyes of the law) should the victim's demise be classified—as an accident?

That unique question popped up in Atlanta, Ga., recently, when the mother of a son, who'd played the "game" with fatal results, sought to collect "double indemnity" on his insurance policy, claiming that his death WAS an accident.

Stated the Georgia Court of Appeals, "Death in a game of Russian roulette CAN-NOT be legally classified as an accident, because it has to be presumed that the participant INTENDED that he should be killed or injured should fate stop the cartridge in the firing position," and ruled in favor of the insurance company!

—Jack Benton

the entrance. He continued when they were out of earshot of the man. "To give you some idea, syndicate bosses who own these clubs even had the gall to approach the Chicago Crime Commission, offering huge contributions if the Commission would take the heat off the gamblers and their operations. They've done the same in politics."

"But the Crime Commission ran them out of the city itself," Steve put in quickly. "That's why the gamblers now operate out here in the country."

"In politics, though, they've often had their bribes—just another word for contributions—accepted. The money helps to

elect officials who, in turn, make certain that the crime syndicate has free reign."

"No wonder you can't lick it completely," said the reporter grimly. He glanced at the Phantom, said thoughtfully, "Senator Midworth was too big for that sort of thing. And if there had been anyone opposing him for the nomination who *was* backed by the crime syndicate, I would have heard about it. That might have been a motive for the Senator's murder. But there wasn't! So how do you explain his death?"

"That," said the Phantom, "is what we're trying to find out. I wonder—"

He broke off, nodded toward the entrance of the club which was in plain view now as they rounded the front of the building. "Hold it," he said abruptly.

Both paused in the shadows cast by high shrubbery. But from where they stood they could easily see the long Cadillac which had pulled up and the people who were getting out of it.

Steve whispered impatiently, "Just some more dopes with more money than brains. I'm anxious to—"

Van Loan gripped his arm, held him back. "Take another good look," he suggested quietly.

His own alert gaze had centered on one man who had climbed out of the car. There were two men, one of them helping two well-dressed women in dinner gowns and short fur jackets out of the limousine. The one man was facing partially toward them, the big flashing red neon sign illuminating his features.

He was unusually tall, as thin as a well-worn dime. There was little hair on his bared head, and his lean, angular, bony features gave him a satanic appearance.

Steve Huston saw his partner's intent regard.

He said, puzzled, "There is something familiar about that beanpole. Who is he?"

"Rudolph Bliss."

"I don't recall—" Then the reporter almost jumped. "Bliss, the guy they had up for investigation in Washington! They *knew* he was connected with the underground, but he wouldn't talk. So he was

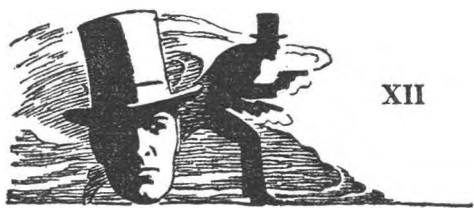
given a stretch for contempt of court—five years, as I recall!”

Van Loan nodded. “But he got out in three. There was a small item in the paper recently. He left the penitentiary only a week or so ago.”

They saw the party disappear inside the club, the limousine drive off and circle back toward the parking lot.

“I wonder,” mused Steve Huston, “what he’s doing here?”

Van Loan was moving forward again. “It might be interesting to find out,” he offered.



**T**HERE was not one, but two burly characters at the door when Steve and his friend reached the vestibule of the gambling club. Both looked like heavy-weight possibilities for a tag-team match at some local wrestling arena.

The solid inside door of the vestibule had just closed behind the two couples who had left the limousine. Both doormen had their heads together and seemed to be intensely interested in what they were saying.

In fact, one of the pair looked annoyed when the two new arrivals interrupted their whispered huddle.

“Yeah?” he grumbled.

Steve Huston flashed his borrowed “membership” card. Van showed the one the reporter had given him.

Steve said airily, “Call up Brinks for another delivery of cash. I feel lucky tonight.”

“Sure, sure,” muttered one of the bull-necked pair. He scarcely glanced at the admittance cards. “Go in and help yourselves, friends.” He gave them a leer.

But he opened the door.

The two were already deep in conversation again before the heavy door barely closed behind Van and his associate.

They found themselves in a plush lobby. There were crystal chandeliers, indirectly lighted heavy glass mirrors etched with crimson cats.

On their right Van Loan had a glimpse of a glittering cocktail lounge. It was jam-packed with patrons. Somewhere in the background a piano was playing a torchy number, and a girl with a low voice was singing.

The foursome from the big Cadillac had just entered the lounge. Van Loan caught his friend’s eye and they lingered near the hat check room for a moment. A head-waiter stood hopefully awaiting their approach. He was a dapper, impatient-looking man with round, pink features.

As they moved toward him, the man asked, “Dinner, gentlemen?”

Steve quickly shook his head. “Maybe after a few drinks. We’ll see.” He swung toward the cocktail lounge, anticipating Van Loan’s plans.

The room was long and narrow, with tables intimately packed together on one side and a massive bar running the entire length of the other. The front of the bar was covered with imitation leopard skin. Halfway down its length, on a small circular platform built atop the back-bar, a young man was playing a midget-size piano, while the girl was trying to sing above the clamor.

Van saw the two men and two women far down the room, working their way through the crowd. He spotted two stools halfway down the bar, nudged the reporter, and they managed to reach them before someone else pushed up to the busy bar.

Steve ordered beers. The noise of the place covered his words as he spoke to his companion.

“They’re heading right for the gambling rooms.” He nodded toward the rear of the bar.

There was a small neon sign above an archway that said “GAME ROOMS.”

The Phantom had already noted it. And he observed something else. Tall, hawk-like Rudolph Bliss was standing in the wide doorway leading to the game rooms. He had let the others in his party go ahead

while he paused to speak to someone. The second man looked like he might be the manager of the gambling part of the club. He wore a tuxedo and a white carnation in his lapel. He also wore glasses and reminded the Phantom of a well-dressed vice president in a bank.

Gangling Rudolph Bliss talked to the other man for a moment or two, then disappeared into the game rooms beyond to join his friends.

Van Loan picked up his glass, held it near his mouth as a cover while speaking to Steve Huston. "I have an idea Rudolph Bliss is looking for someone," he said quietly. "It might be interesting to find out who. We'll stroll back there. On the way, though, we might check on exits. Just in case."

The redheaded reporter didn't need a blueprint. "I was thinking of that," he said in a low voice. "Say we—er—run into any trouble, we'll meet back there at the car." As an afterthought, he said, "That scarecrow Bliss reminds me of a skinny, hungry vulture."

Nodding, the Phantom picked up his change and they moved casually toward the game rooms.

A WIDE foyer separated the bar from the gambling part of the club. It was lined with settees, deep armchairs and convenient cocktail tables on which to place drinks. Several groups of people sat along the foyer, talking. There were signs indicating rest rooms further along the passageway.

The reporter and his friend walked that way, entered the men's rest room, saw that the place was in charge of an elderly colored man.

Van stepped to a basin to wash his hands. The attendant opened a glass cabinet to get him a clean towel. While his back was turned, Van nodded toward windows at the rear of the room. He said very quietly, "There's one of your exits."

Steve gave him a quick grin, nodding.

A few moments later they entered the busy game rooms. The place was as ornate as the main entrance foyer, beautifully

furnished, and one room gave onto another. The decor was different in each.

There were massive crap tables, each surrounded by a tense, avid group. Typical race track followers in flashy sports shirts rubbed shoulders with business men, clerks, suave-looking playboys and fashionwise women in low-cut gowns. There were blackjack tables, rows of one-arm bandits lining the walls and roulette tables spotted throughout the place. They passed the open doorway to a small room in which a group of men were seated around a poker table. Husky waiters moved in and out with trays of drinks.

Van Loan appeared to be looking for a roulette table where there might be a couple of vacant stools as they walked slowly through the crowded rooms. No one paid the slightest attention to him and the reporter. Each group was too intent on the dice, cards, or the little bouncing white ball as it dropped into a numbered slot.

Steve asked quietly, "See anything of your hoodlum pals from the Midworth estate?"

Van Loan shook his head negatively.

They paused near a row of slot machines, located just inside the doorway of another room. The reporter fished in his pocket for a couple of quarters. Next to him a young woman—she couldn't have been more than twenty-one—fed half-dollars into the adjoining machine. Lemons kept appearing beneath the glass window on the front of the machine. Her face, though pretty, was strained and pallid. There was a bright intensity to her eyes each time she pulled down the handle and watched the triple wheels spin around. Again the machine failed to pay off. The girl stamped her foot, gritted her teeth, reached into her purse for several more half-dollars.

Steve dropped a quarter in his machine, pulled the crank, stared idly around the room. He heard the wheels stop spinning with that familiar click. A lemon and two plums. No pay-off.

As he reached to drop in the other quarter, he glanced again across the big room

before them and looked at Van Loan. The tall, hawklike man who had so recently been released from the penitentiary, Rudolph Bliss, was with his party at one of the roulette tables not far away. Van Loan, Steve noted, had seen them also.

Tall, baldish Rudolph Bliss was not playing. He stood behind the others in his party as they placed chips on the various numbers. His head turned, looking toward the doorway, even as Steve spotted them.

The reporter let his quarter drop and pulled down the handle again. He was curiously watching the young girl beside him when there was a clatter at his own machine and coins rattled into the trough at the bottom.

The girl gasped, "Three bells—the second time!"

Grinning, Steve Huston scooped the eighteen quarters out of the trough and dropped them in his coat pocket.

"System," he said knowingly, winking.

The girl shook her head sadly as he moved off after Van Loan.

Rudolph Bliss did not even glance at them as they joined the group around the roulette table. Instead, he kept watching the doorway. Van Loan sat down at one of the high stools as it was deserted by a middle-aged, refined looking man in evening clothes. The man gave a long sigh as he moved away. Tiny beads of perspiration covered his forehead.

**V**AN LOAN purchased a stack of one-dollar chips, placed five of them on the Double 0. Red 19 came up and the chips were swept away by the croupier at the end of the table. He placed five chips each on 13, 19, 25 and 31. The white ball dropped into Number 5.

He saw the manager with the white carnation in his lapel come up and speak quietly to Rudolph Bliss. The ex-convict's eyes brightened. He followed the manager out of the room, pausing only long enough to say something to his friends.

Van Loan stacked the remainder of his chips on the Double 0 again. He was positive he had seen everyone in the club now. He was just as certain that the burly pock-

marked man and his tough little partner were not in sight. He had not seen them.

Steve Huston, standing directly behind him, remarked casually, "It's time your luck changed."

The white ball stopped spinning and dropped into a slot.

"Single 0," said the croupier.

He glanced at Van Loan as he scooped in the chips and shook his head politely as though he were heartbroken because the ball had not dropped into the Double 0 slot.

Van Loan pulled a bill from his pocket and handed it to the man. Without batting an eye, the croupier looked at it and said, "You'll have to ask the manager, sir. He'll get it changed for you as soon as he returns."

Crumpling the thousand-dollar bill up in his fist, Van Loan sat waiting. Behind him, Steve said, "I'll be around." He left the table. Steve surmised Van Loan's plans.

Five minutes passed before the business-like man in the tuxedo reappeared. He caught the croupier's slight head movement, came over to roulette table. The manager glanced at it, said matter-of-factly, "I'll have to get it changed in the office. I'll be right back, sir."

"That's all right," said Van Loan.

He got up, shoved his hands in his pockets and strolled toward a water fountain near the doorway. No one looked at him. He went out through the doorway and followed the manager along the heavily carpeted foyer where people sat gossiping or complaining about their run of bad luck.

Steve wasn't in sight.

The manager stepped briskly along the hall, opened a door on the left, almost across from the men's wash room, went inside. The heavy carpeting hushed any sound of Van Loan's steps behind him.

Having no idea what was beyond the door, Van Loan waited a moment as he reached it, made certain that no one was behind him, then opened it. He heard footsteps echoing at some distance on bare wood floors.

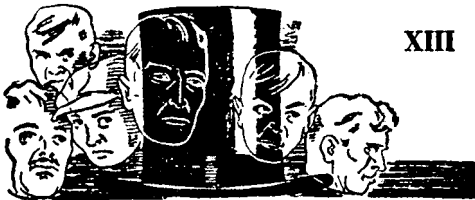
Quietly, he closed the door behind him, found that he was in a long room lined with rows of wooden arm chairs. A dim night light burned in an overhead drop light. On one wall, along the entire length of the room, were tack-up sheets printed in large type and listing horses' names and numbers. The sheets designated various race tracks across the country.

He was in the horse-betting room, closed now until tomorrow afternoon.

Van Loan saw all this in a glance, while his sharp ear located the spot where he had heard the manager's footsteps fade away as he, himself, slipped in here. He made out a doorway in the far corner of the long room. A wedge of light angled out from the room beyond and told him that there must be the office where the manager had gone to change—but first get okayed—the bill. A murmur of voices reached his ears across the empty horse-betting room.

Quietly, he walked toward the vertical shaft of light. Just outside the partially open door, he paused. He could not see inside, but he heard a voice say, "Let's hope he cashes a few more this big. If he keeps losing, buy him a drink or two." There followed a short, harsh laugh.

Van Loan pushed open the door and stepped inside. Three of the men seated in the office he had rather expected to see. Sight of the fourth, behind the olive-green, modern metal desk, almost brought him up short.



XIII

OF THE four men in the office the Phantom recognized three. One was the business-like manager he had followed here from the game rooms; the second, the tall, hawkish-looking ex-convict and suspected underground spy—Rudolph Bliss.

The third was the thin, tough little

man who had shoved a revolver in his face as he and Muriel had stopped for a moment in the gravel drive of the Midworth estate tonight. As a result of Jim Rush's information, relayed by way of Steve Huston, Van Loan had hoped to find the little gunman and his burly pock-marked accomplice here at the club. He wondered where the pock-marked man was at the moment.

But he didn't wonder about the fourth man in the plain, orderly, efficient-looking office.

The fourth man sat behind a kneehole desk directly facing the doorway and Van Loan as he came quickly into the room. He was not a big man, but about him there was a solid, squat, powerful appearance that belied the almost innocent-looking, rotund features. He was almost fifty, Van Loan judged, but that naive, wide-eyed stare gave him a younger look.

Looking up, the fourth man said, "I believe you've made a mistake, sir. Were you looking for the men's room?"

Van Loan was studying the man. He didn't answer immediately. Instead, he was aware of the man's short, stubby fingers. Those hands were holding a thick sheaf of bills, and had been in the act of counting out change for the thousand-dollar bill placed to one side. A ten-carat diamond gleamed in a heavy gold ring worn on the small finger of the left hand. From a long, thin cigar resting on the back edge of the desk, tendrils of rich-smelling cigar smoke drifted lazily upwards.

"No, I didn't make a mistake," said Van Loan quietly. He nodded toward the layer of bills which were being counted out on the desk. "I merely came for my change."

The man with the carnation in his lapel, standing at one side of the desk, exclaimed coolly, "What's the idea? I told you I'd bring you the change for the bill?"

"I just like to keep a thousand dollars in sight," said Van Loan blandly.

"Just the same—" the manager started, but the squat, round-faced man behind the desk cut him off.

"All right, Nelson." Without hurry, he



finished counting out a thousand dollars, picked up the bill which he had laid to one side, added it to a fat roll which he pulled from his pants pocket. Van Loan was aware of his short, heavy legs visible through the knee-hole section of the desk. Those legs barely reached the floor as the man sat in his swivel chair.

"There you are, sir." The change was pushed across the desk. Van Loan saw well-manicured fingers set off by the glittering diamond. The round, innocent-looking face broke into a smile. "I wish you luck tonight, sir."

"That," Van Loan said, "is one for the book." He pocketed the money. The easy manner about him concealed the tenseness that flowed through his lean body. This man here before him, that wide-eyed manner of staring at a person. . . .

"My dear fellow," said the man across the desk, "I really do wish you luck. We operate on a very small percentage here. Many of our customers are lucky. We do not believe in gouging the public—"

Van Loan laughed then, a short, quick laugh that stopped the squat, round-faced man in mid-sentence. He reached for the cigar, started to put it in his mouth, then lowered it again. The thick fingers tightened slowly around it. He looked steadily at the intruder.

On the verge of commenting again on the squat man's pretended generosity, Van Loan checked himself. But it was all he could do to maintain his casual manner.

For this individual seated across the desk was the overlord of a crime empire that spread far beyond Chicago's limits. Recent Senate Crime Committee investigations had proved that it was linked with vice, rackets, gambling and politics in Miami, New York, St. Louis, Kansas City and other major cities across the continent.

"Boy-face" Gulick was the crime king's name. In all his career he had spent but three years at Stateville Penitentiary in Illinois. He controlled rackets whose take ran into the millions. That innocent-looking face had fooled many people in its time. In years gone by it had misled juries

and helpless victims alike.

THE man himself was a millionaire many times over, Van Loan well knew. Seeing him sitting there in a plain dark suit, an ordinary office, it was hard to believe. But the diamond ring, the expensive cigar, the well-cared-for hands, and the well-cared-for chunky body told the story. Yes, here was a dangerous man who held power and ruthlessness in his pudgy hands.

Van Loan's apparently casual gaze slid to the little, tough man sitting across the room with his chair tilted back against the wall. The fellow appeared to be busy cleaning his fingernails with a small penknife. He didn't look up.

More tension built up in Van Loan's tall form as his eyes swept across the man. Could he be young Johnnie Garrett's killer? It was quite possible. The orders could have come right from Gulick.

His gaze went on to the next man—Rudolph Bliss.

Steve was right. The long man's gaunt, pasty face made you think of a vulture. The eyes were deep-sunken in their bony sockets. They returned Van Loan's glance with an unblinking, cold stare.

The efficient-looking manager of the game rooms watched him impatiently.

Gulick said, "Looking for something?"

The Phantom's glance around the room had been a camera-quick flash that permanently recorded each face in his memory. It had taken but an instant, as if he had just glanced away from Gulick and then back again. But those wide, innocent-looking eyes had not missed it. There was a watchfulness now, a hint of suspicion, in their depths.

"No-o," Van Loan remarked casually, "I guess that's all." He heard the penknife snap closed in the wiry little man's hand, the front chair legs come down and touch the floor. "I'll see you around," he finished. "Maybe I will be lucky to—"

He spun, then, as he caught the swift, quiet movement behind him. The office door slammed shut even as he came around.

It was the tough little guy, his features hard as dried cement, his thin voice harsh as he stood with his back against the door. He cried out, "I thought I had him figured. This is *him*, boss!"

Tension was a live, vibrant thing in the room. No one spoke for a moment. No one moved—or at least Van thought so. But when he turned back to look blandly at Boy-Face Gulick, there was a snub-nosed .38 in the pudgy man's right hand.

Gulick, keeping his eyes on Van Loan's tall figure, demanded of his aid, "This is *who*, Runt?" And to Van Loan, "Just stand as you are, friend, until we get to the bottom of things here."

Van Loan knew better than to try anything. Probably every man in the office carried a gun—except little Runt. It was his weapon that now reposed in a bottom dresser drawer in Van Loan's hotel room, alongside the one taken from Bruno at the New York airport. But even Gulick's .38 trained on his stomach was enough to hold him unmoving.

The tough little fellow called "Runt" slid away from the door, circled to face Van Loan along with Gulick. Sharp little eyes blazing, Runt said shrilly:

"He's that guy named Grey. I can *prove* it, boss. Ask *him* for his wallet out of his hip pocket!" He quickly added, "Careful! He packs a rod under his coat!"

His eyes never leaving Van Loan's face, Gulick ordered, "Take a look, Nelson."

The club manager came around from the side of the desk, where he'd been standing motionless and watchful. Rudolph Bliss was standing now, also, but he did not speak.

"Raise your hands—high!" said the manager. He stood carefully on one side.

Van Loan put his hands up, his eyes never leaving Gulick's face. Quickly, he was relieved of his gun.

"See if he has a wallet," the crime king then snapped.

The manager felt of the Phantom's hip pocket, slid his hand inside the coat, missed the special bill fold that was cleverly concealed behind the Phantom's belt.

"The Runt's right," he said, stepping

quickly back, away from Van Loan.

"I told you!" cried the little man. "I was sittin' there listenin' while he was talkin' to you, boss. I knew there was somethin' familiar about this guy's voice. He's the same one was out there at Highland—"

"Shuddup," said Boy-Face Gulick.

**I**T WAS the only word he said, and it wasn't very loud, but accompanying it there was an amazing change in the man's features.

Lines came into the flesh that, relaxed, had appeared almost youthful. The mouth pulled down at the corners; the eyes seemed to recede into his head and become gimlet-like in appearance. The face became ugly, vicious, and the man's entire personality seemed to change with it.

"So," he hissed, "maybe we'll get better acquainted with Mr.—ah—Grey. But not here." His head moved slightly as he kept his eyes steadily on Van Loan. "All right, Nelson."

The club manager went across the room, still holding Van Loan's gun in his right hand. He reached down, gripped what appeared to be part of the baseboard molding, pulled, and the entire wall panel slid outward and upward like an overhead garage door operates. Van's swift sidelong glance caught what looked like a black abyss beyond.

"Go on ahead and turn on the lights, Runt," ordered Gulick.

The quick-moving little man scurried across the room. He was as fast and agile as a fox. No wonder he had reached and slammed the office door before Van Loan could spin around.

A switch clicked and a stairway leading downward was revealed.

"Go ahead, Nelson," snapped Gulick.

The manager disappeared through the secret doorway, but Van Loan knew that Nelson would be standing at the bottom of the stairs to cover his descent.

Stocky Gulick was on his feet now. He was even shorter than Van Loan had imagined. But he was as solid-looking as a stout keg of beer.

"Get going—Mr. Grey!" he growled. Still holding his gun, he picked up his cigar.

Van Loan, Gulick behind him, moved carefully toward the hidden stairs. He passed directly in front of motionless Rudolph Bliss, who still had not spoken. He felt the man's weird, sunken, hawklike eyes upon him. Those eyes gave one a crawly feeling.

Gulick said to the gaunt man as they passed him, "Follow us down. Pull that panel closed after you."

The procession went down the flight of wooden stairs, reached a long hall that ran beneath the club. Van Loan saw a heavy door, padlocked, down the hall to the right. From behind the door came sounds of kitchen help working: the rattle of china, the splashing sound made by a dish-washing machine, the murmur of voices. Apparently the kitchen was kept locked off from this part of the basement.

They turned in the opposite direction. Nelson stood to one side with Van Loan's automatic ready in his hand. The Runt had disappeared some place ahead of them. Then he popped out of a door at a point which must be near the rear of the gambling club. A leer was on his thin, tight face as Van Loan was ordered into the room where he waited.

"Wait'll Rocky shows!" he said almost gleefully.

Rocky, Van guessed, was his burly pock-marked partner.

Things were not becoming very cozy.

Just before he was marched into the basement room, Van Loan was aware of the creaking of heavy beams overhead, the sound of many people moving back and forth. He wondered if Steve Huston was up there looking for him in the various game rooms.

As soon as they were inside the room where the little man called Runt waited, however, all overhead sound vanished as the heavy door closed behind them. A stout Yale lock held it firmly shut.

Van Loan saw a room strikingly different than the ordinary-looking office above. This basement meeting place was as ele-

gant as any of the rooms upstairs.

**K**NOTTY pine paneling covered all four walls. At one end of the room was a small bar made of the same colorful woodwork. Around the room were placed heavy red leather arm chairs, sizable chrome ash stands, reading lamps with mural-typed shades in the new style created by well-known artists.

Main feature of the room, though, was a huge rectangular mahogany table that might be found in the board of directors' room of any major industry.

Here, obviously, was where the "top brass" of Gulick's empire held their secret meetings. From here, at a few casual words spoken by a man with relentless power, orders went out to eliminate some victim around the corner or thousands of miles away.

Again Boy-Face Gulick's sharp eyes had not missed the Phantom's swift appraisal of the meeting room.

"Consider yourself honored," he said. "Strangers do not come into this room."

*Or leave,* thought Van Loan grimly.

Outwardly, however, he remained relaxed. He took his time moving to a position against the far wall that chunky Gulick indicated with a motion of the snub-nosed gun. He kept thinking about Steve Huston, and where the reporter might have disappeared. It wasn't like the quick-acting redhead to wander off some place. Van Loan was attempting delaying tactics by acting casual and unworried.

The club manager, still holding the Phantom's automatic, little Runt and vicious-looking Gulick formed a semi-circle around him.

Rudolph Bliss again stood to one side, watchful, his almost bald head reminding the Phantom of a bird of prey.

"Now, my friend," Gulick started, "we'll take first things first. Where's the Runt's revolver?"

So that proved it! It must be a murder gun, the Phantom felt certain now. And Gulick was afraid that weapon might get into the hands of the law, be put to a ballistics test.

Van Loan merely smiled easily.

Runt yelped, "He hasn't got it on him, boss. That means he's probably stashed it wherever he's stayin' in town!"

"Where are you staying?" demanded Gulick, his glittering eyes never leaving Van Loan's face.

"I shall tell you," said Rudolph Bliss.

It was the first time the very tall, gaunt man had spoken. There was an accent to his words, a guttural sound that could not be disguised even by his slow, careful choice of words.

He stated the name of the hotel where the Phantom was staying, adding, "He is registered under the name—Mr. Grey."

"Bah!" said Gulick. The word burst from his mouth like an epithet. "Grey!" he snarled. "We're going to find out just *who* you are, my friend. You're no snooping reporter and that isn't your name. I happen to know!"

Without turning his head, he growled at Runt, "Get down to that hotel. You can probably reach his room by way of the fire escape. Tear the place apart. *Find that gun!*"

"Don't worry, boss," assured the tough little man.

Van Loan could well imagine the agile little man gaining entrance to his suite by using the fire escape. And if that didn't work, he realized the shrewd little man had other methods.

The Runt had started toward the door, stopped abruptly when Gulick said, "Wait a minute."

Then the crime overlord directed, "Find Rocky on the way out. He's probably in the kitchen helping himself to a steak again. Tell him he's got a job to do here." His evil eyes shone as they held on Van Loan's. "Grey, is it? We'll see."

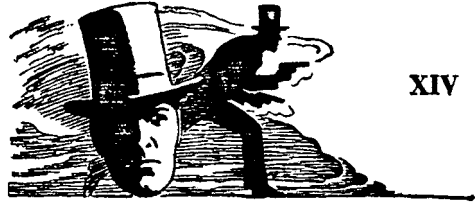
The Runt looked sad as he paused in the doorway to complain, "This I wanted to see!"

Then the door slammed behind him with finality.

Three against one. Two of them armed. The calm expression on Van Loan's face concealed the tremor that flowed through his arms and legs. He was poised, taut,

ready for the slightest break. . . a break that must come before the burly, pock-marked man's arrival. Rocky was going to enjoy working Van Loan over. He had a little score to settle.

And Van Loan saw no way to trick the three men watching him.



XIV

STEVE HUSTON had found a hallway that ended at the rear of the wide, glittering, mirrored entrance foyer of the club. And he also located the telephone booths there.

He called the *Enterprise* newspaper, was connected with an editor there who had once worked in New York. The friend was busy helping put the morning edition to bed, but he said with pleasure at sound of the reporter's voice, "I heard you were here today. Like to see you, boy. Say, where are you—in jail, at this hour of—"

Steve said, "Listen, Ben, remember Rudolph Bliss, the close-mouthed character they sent up for contempt of court—the one suspected of being an underground worker for one of our country's enemies?"

"Sure, sure," said the voice at the other end of the line.

"Well, he's out of the pokey now. I want to get some information on him. Be a good lad and have someone down there dig up all the photos and stories they can about him in the Morgue."

"Sure," said Ben agreeably. "Where the hell are you? What gives?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow. No time now." He was anxious to join Van Loan again. "Have the stuff left on Frank Havens' desk. I'll pick it up in the morning."

He hung up, pulled back the folding door of the booth, stepped out into the hallway—and crashed into the lean, sandy-haired man stepping quickly toward the adjoining booth.

The stranger was forced to grab the reporter to keep him from tripping. His grip was like steel; his movements smooth and precise.

"Sorry," the man said. "I didn't mean to—"

Then pale, sharp blue eyes studied Steve's face and the man said quietly, "You're Steve Huston, aren't you? I've seen your picture." He glanced briefly toward the main part of the foyer, then back at the reporter again. "Is Mr. Grey with you?"

"Who?" asked Steve, looking deliberately vague.

The stranger said, "Oh, I forget. The name's Rush—Jim Rush."

The reporter's eyes brightened. "That's better!" he said with relief. "You had me guessing there for a moment. Yes, Grey hoped to find you here. I just left him in—"

"Where?" Jim Rush interrupted, frowning.

"Why, back in the game rooms. He asked the manager to change a thousand-dollar bill for him. Then he sort of trailed after the guy just to be certain he got his change."

The powerful, viselike grip was clamped on the reporter's arm again. "How long ago was that?" Rush seemed deeply disturbed.

"Just a few minutes ago." Then, curious, Steve Huston wanted to know, "How did you get in here?" He was remembering what Van Loan had told him about Jim Rush, and that he was one of the top sleuths of a special detective squad in Chicago.

"I'm not known in Cicero," the undercover man said quickly. "But I know a guy out here who got me a pass to this place from a bookie." He glanced at the phone booth, said, "I was going to check in with headquarters, but never mind that now." His quick gaze flickered toward the entrance beyond the foyer. "Something's up here. It's possible Grey's been spotted!"

Steve Huston almost jumped. "How come?"

CAREFUL that no one noticed them from where patrons passed back and forth between dining room and cocktail lounge, farther along the hall, Rush explained, "I got a tip-off that the two gunsels who jumped Grey out at the Midworth estate hang out here. So I came here right from the airport. And I just spotted one of those punks hurrying out of here. He was in one hell of a dither about finding his partner, a bruiser named Rocky. Seems this Rocky is around some place. The one I saw is a tough little article called Runt."

"And you say he came out of here?"

"Just as I was parking."

"That's funny," said Steve softly, frowning. "Our friend"—he did not use the name Phantom—"was looking for those two birds in the game rooms. There wasn't a sign of them—"

He stopped, tense, added swiftly, "We'd better take a look and see—"

"Wait!"

The wiry undercover man's quick, restless eyes had centered on the entranceway again. He pushed Steve into the booth, said, "Make believe you're phoning! I'm just a guy leaning in the open doorway, waiting while you try to get me a blind date. Make it good. He's heading this way!"

"Who?" Steve whispered from the small seat behind the booth. He had reached up, was holding the receiver to his ear.

"The one they call Rocky!" said the detective.

Then he rested both hands on the framework of the telephone booth, leaned partway inside, said, "Ah, tell her she's gotta bring a friend along for me."

Huston picked up the cue, started putting on a pleading act with a mythical girl on a dead line. He heard heavy feet pound past the small booth, managed to get one quick look at the man beneath Jim Rush's upstretched arms.

Rocky, he decided, was the correct name for him.

Solid, burly, thick-shouldered. There was a red welt across his temple that did not enhance his mean-looking face.

"Let's go!" said the detective, dropping

his hands. Huston got out of the phone booth.

Rocky had reached the far end of the hall, went through a doorway that Steve Huston, himself, had used when coming out here from the game rooms. The reporter saw him turn left in the direction the club manager had gone.

He said quietly, "Keep him in sight. He's heading the same way that manager went!"

"And our friend Grey," Rush added significantly.

They slowed their steps as they reached the wider hall that came from the game rooms, walked casually past couples sitting there. They saw the burly figure open a door some distance down the hall and disappear.

When they reached the door, they noted it was unmarked.

Rush paused outside the door. "Take a look back in the game rooms just to be sure Grey or the club manager isn't there. I'll stall here a moment."

Nodding, the reporter returned along the hall.

He was back in a couple of moments, his eyes concerned, his dynamic body tense. "We're going in there!" he said, indicating the door. "Neither Grey nor that manager have returned!"

Rush already had his hand on the knob. Both men stepped quickly inside, closed the door carefully behind them. They found themselves in the long, deserted horse-betting room Van Loan had entered earlier. They stood quietly, listening.

Then the detective nodded toward a doorway in the corner of the long room. "Someone's poking around in there," he said quietly.

Carefully, they made their way to the door. No light showed. It was closed tight.

**R**USH leaned near the panel, again listening. His right hand was partially raised toward his coat. Steve knew he probably carried a holster beneath his plain dark suit. But with that sandy, short-cropped hair, he looked more like a college student than a tough undercover man.

Steve, too, could hear movements inside the room. But no voices. He nodded when Jim Rush held up one finger significantly. The big fellow, Rocky, was in there alone.

Cautiously, Rush took hold of the door-knob and very slowly turned it. Then he shook his head. The door was locked.

Both men heard a sound like a drawer opening. Shortly it closed again. Then there was complete silence. Jim Rush motioned the reporter away from the door. Each moved back, one on either side of the panel.

Nothing happened. No one came out.

Redheaded Steve Huston's jaw stuck out. "Dammit, something's fishy. It sounds like he isn't in there at all. What do you figure, Rush?"

"This!" said the detective grimly. He stepped in front of the door again, a scant yard back from the latch. He threw a tight grin at the reporter, saying, "I'm out of my jurisdiction in this town. But the hell with it."

And with that, he raised his leg and sent a smashing kick at the door close to the lock. Wood splintered, the door swayed open. Both men leaped inside.

They saw only a plain-looking office, with no windows, no occupants. And there appeared to be no other entrance or exit from the room.

"There's got to be some way that bruiser went!" snapped Rush.

Hurriedly, then, he moved around the walls, tapping, pressing his ear against the panels. Steve did likewise, seeing his actions.

It was the reporter who discovered the fake panel. He heard the hollow sound it made when he rapped with his knuckles. Quickly, he started pressing on it in various areas. Nothing happened.

Jim Rush, joining him, scrutinized the panel inch by inch. He saw the slightly darkened area down low near the baseboard, as though the woodwork was stained by hand prints. He bent down, felt along the cap molding of the baseboard. His fingers touched something and the entire panel swung out.

"So!" he exclaimed.

In the next moment both men were padding down the stairs to the basement.

At the bottom of the steps they stopped, looking up and down the long cement corridor. They heard the kitchen sounds, muffled, beyond the locked door to their right. And faintly, to their left, another sound.

It was a man's deep guffaw, an unpleasant sound.

They located the heavy door from beyond which the laugh had come. Rush sized up the solid panel, shook his head. "You'd never break *that* down!" he said softly.

They heard the bellowing laugh again, and then the words, "*Will I* enjoy makin' this guy talk! A'right, *Mister Grey*, you asked for it!"

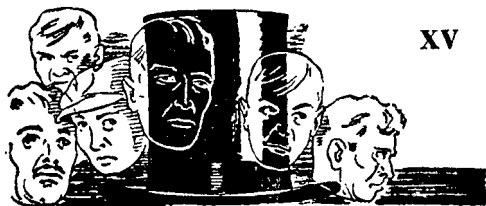
Steve stiffened.

The detective said, "That's the big fellow—Rocky. Our friend Grey's in trouble."

Then, as if he were merely reaching for a key, he removed the Police Positive from his shoulder holster, said to Steve Huston, "Stand back in case these slugs ricochet," and fired two quick shots downward at the lock.

The racket was deafening in the basement corridor.

But Steve Huston saw the lock shatter. A piece of metal barely missed his cheek. Together, both men gave the door a terrific kick. It crashed open.



XV

STEVE remembered an amazing sight as he flung into the room beside the undercover man. He saw his friend Grey falling backward to the floor, the burly man called Rocky leaping toward his victim. But that was only a part of it.

As he fell, Grey's hands shot out, grasped Rocky by the shoulders and

pulled him along. At the same time Grey's legs doubled and his feet found the big fellow's stomach. All in the same fast movement, the legs straightened out again in a powerful thrust and Rocky was catapulted through the air as his intended victim's back and shoulders hit the floor.

Only the short, thickset man with the long cigar in one hand and the gun in the other jerked around as the door crashed open. The other two onlookers in the room were so intent on the other thing that they did not hear the door slam open for an instant.

Vicious-looking Gulick yelled, "Nelson, you fool, *get the lights!* One of these guys is a Chicago dick!"

Big Rocky had landed on his back with a sound like a side of beef falling off a truck. But he rolled, cursing, started to his feet. The Phantom dove headlong at his midriff. Tall, gaunt Rudolph Bliss, standing near the hurtling figures, was knocked to his knees.

Then the lights went out. The club manager, Steve Huston remembered, had run behind the struggling men to reach what was a switch in a small wall box. The reporter dared not fire; there was too much danger of hitting the fast-moving Phantom. He had been everywhere at once!

But now utter confusion filled the big room. Chairs went over. Glasses and bottles crashed along the bar. Chubby Gulick yelled again. "Don't shoot, Nelson. One of us might get it!"

Then Gulick snapped orders in a foreign tongue that might have been Italian. In the shaft of light angling in from the hall, Steve saw the baldish, hawklike Rudolph Bliss run out of the room. He made out short Gulick's figure right behind him. His impulse was to follow. But Jim Rush's words stopped him.

The detective was struggling with someone in the gloom at the other end of the room. Panting, he called out, "Get those blasted lights on, Steve!"

There was more crashing of glasses again also. Steve tried to find the light switch. He was worried about the Phantom. He swore, knocking into a heavy



chair, trying to recall the exact spot where he had seen the club manager reach for the switch.

He found it, pushed the lever back into position.

As the lights came on, he observed the club manager running toward the hall door. Jim Rush was still on his feet, whirling toward the bar, where the Phantom had just climbed to his feet. Over his shoulder, Rush called, "Let him go, Huston. Rocky's the one we want." He ran up and grabbed the Phantom's arm. "You all right, Mr. Grey?"

Van Loan flicked a trace of blood off his cheek. It was merely a nick from one of the glasses that had flown from the battered bar. He looked down at the big, solid figure of Rocky on the floor, lying near broken bottles and glasses. He let out his breath with a relief.

"I'm glad he wasn't twins," he said.

Steve said impatiently, "What about the others? Shouldn't we—"

Wiry Jim shook his head. "Gulick's stooges are probably already rushing him to another hideout. Besides"—he looked at Grey—"our best bet is to get out of here but fast. I have no authority in this town. Remember, we haven't anything on that slippery Boy-Face yet." He glanced down at Rocky, who was beginning to stir a bit. "This one, though, might be our open sesame. Either Rocky or the Runt killed Johnnie Garrett. We'll take him"—he nudged the big fellow with his toe—"and we'd better get out of here."

"You're right," said the Phantom. "Trying to buck the syndicate in their own back yard is foolhardy." He saw Rocky trying to crawl to his knees, said, "I'll handle him."

**Q**UICKLY, as the burly fellow came to his feet, Van Loan clamped Rocky's left hand in a peculiar grip and swung the bruiser's arm up behind his back. Helpless, Rocky obeyed orders to start walking.

Heading toward the hall, Van said grimly, "That manager has my gun. I wish—"

"Did have," corrected Jim Rush, smil-

ing briefly. He handed him the automatic, explaining matter-of-factly, "I was right behind him when he shut off those lights. I got the gun out of his hand so nobody would get hurt."

Steve whistled. "Mister, no wonder you have a reputation."

"It won't be worth a plugged quarter if we don't hurry," Rush pointed out. "Any idea how we get out of here?"

They had reached the corridor. For answer, Van Loan applied a little pressure to the judo hold that could easily break the bones of a man's hand. Rocky yelped. "Which way?" his captor demanded.

The hefty captive motioned with his big jaw. Sweat was already streaming from his heavy face. "Back there. You'll find . . . elevator."

Jim Rush, a gun held ready in his fist, ran on ahead. Steve Huston covered the rear. Van Loan's captive tried once to stumble, but changed his mind about any more tricks when his hand was twisted again.

The elevator was a small affair used for bringing down supplies from the ground level at the rear of the club. They found the swinging steel doors which enclosed it, clambered onto the platform. Rush pushed the button and it carried them upward a dozen feet to ground level. Overhead metal coverings were pushed back by a curved steel strap atop the elevator carriage.

They found themselves out in the quiet, star-studded night.

Jim Rush told them, "I'm parked way at the back. There's a roadway out of the rear of this place that cuts through a dump. Put him in my car. I have some handcuffs there."

Watchful, they were hurrying along as the detective spoke. Some distance from them, around at the front of the club, a car roared away into the night. Then there was quiet again, only the soft sound of their quick steps following a strip of grass toward the rear of the big parking lot, the heavy breathing of Van Loan's captive.

In a moment they had reached the undercover man's plain, dark sedan. It car-

ried no police identification whatsoever. License plates were not of a series usually designated for Chicago police cars.

The detective reached inside the car, brought forth a set of steel bracelets. They handcuffed the big fellow's hands behind his back. Rush pushed him into the front seat, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and tied a make-shift gag on the man's mouth. All fight seemed to have gone out of the hoodlum. Sweat still poured from his face like water.

"Where's your car?" the detective asked Van Loan.

"Right over there," He pointed. Most of the machines had left since he and Steve Huston had parked. He spoke quietly in the half-gloom.

"I'll be ready to roll," said Rush. "Swing over here. Follow me. . . ."

Nodding, Van said, "One thing. . . as soon as we're out of this town, find a phone. I want to call the hotel. They sent the runt there to search my rooms. Gulick wants that revolver I took away from the Runt earlier. Without it, he knows we can't pin down these killers."

Rush swore. "How right you are!"

He slid behind the wheel, watchful as he waited for Van and Steve to reach the coupe. He glanced at his captive, said coolly, "If you have any ideas about jumping out after we get rolling, that's okay with me. Break your neck and it will save the state some money. Or try interfering with the wheel and you get filled with lead. Take your choice."

The handcuffed man, sitting hunched forward awkwardly with his hands behind his back, showed no inclination to do much of anything. He merely grunted behind the gag.

Van and Steve reached the coupe, started in the direction where Jim Rush was waiting in the darkness. They saw no one.

The reporter remarked, "Funny someone isn't throwing a few slugs at us."

"I'm wondering about that," said Van thoughtfully as he drove without lights across the rear of the big parking area. "But I think I know the reason."

"Rudolph Bliss?"

"Right. I think they want to get him under wraps. Somehow, Bliss fits into this murder picture—maybe in a bigger way than we know."

"But how?"

"Let me think about it. There's something that should connect, but for the life of me I can't put my finger on it."

They pulled up beside Jim Rush's car. The detective called out, "Switch on your lights. Pull ahead and follow the roadway through the dump. About half a mile from here you'll come to a main east-west highway. Swing east and keep going until I signal you. I'll cover you from the rear."

They started out. . . .

**S**HORTLY after they passed the city line into Chicago's outer limits, Van Loan saw the headlamp beams flick up and down on the car trailing him. Just ahead, the lights of a tavern indicated the only place open along this drab section of tenements, auto repair shops and dismal-looking store fronts. He pulled into the curb near the bar.

The undercover detective whipped his sedan up beside them. There wasn't another car moving at this hour. Rush called out, "One of you watch this clunk. I'll phone headquarters, notify them to get right up to your hotel and try to grab that Runt."

"Steve," the Phantom said, "you watch Rocky. I want to make a call, too."

"With pleasure!" said the reporter, leaping out and hurrying around to the detective's sedan.

Going into the barroom, Jim Rush explained, "I don't have any two-way radio equipment in that jalopy. Otherwise, I would have been spotted long ago."

They found the saloon practically deserted. A fat man in a long white apron sat at a table quietly playing cards with two customers. They were drinking beer.

The fat man in the apron looked up.

"It's all right," Rush said quickly. "Just going to use the phone."

There was a telephone booth at the front of the place. The men went on play-

ing cards, ignoring them.

Waiting impatiently now, Van Loan barely heard the murmur of the detective's voice inside the closed booth as he put a quick call through to headquarters. Van wanted to make certain that maybe Runt had not already been at his hotel and obtained admittance to his rooms under some phoney excuse. If so, there might be a way to intercept him. Certainly he would head back toward Cicero. . . .

He slid into the booth as Rush stepped out, dialed the hotel. It was some time before the night clerk answered. He sounded drowsy when he came on the line.

He identified himself as Grey, asked if anyone had been there in the past half hour asking for him.

"Why, yes, there was," said the clerk. "It was your sister, so I let the boy take her up and—"

"My sister?"

"Yes, Mr. Grey. She was quite upset and worried about you. She had phoned here several times. So she thought she ought to wait until you came in—"

Van broke in, his pulse pounding now. Could it be Muriel, looking for him? And that hard, tough little Runt maybe there right now! He could just visualize the clever gunman gaining entrance by way of the fire escape. He remembered that one of the fire escape platforms was outside his living room window, and that he had left those windows opened!

Swiftly, he described Muriel. "Was that the woman?" he demanded.

"Why, yes, it was. She—"

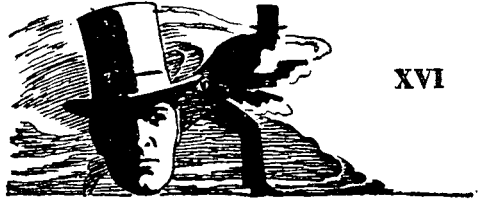
"Call the room!" he snapped. "Tell her to get out of there—fast." Then he briefly explained that police were already on the way to the hotel. "Hurry!" he said, and hung up so that the clerk could call his room.

He grabbed Jim Rush's arm as he swung out of the booth and urged him quickly toward the street, telling what he had just learned. He added, "That coupe has a governor. It only crawls."

"Leave it here," suggested Rush. "Huston can come out later and pick it up. Get in my car."

In a moment they were under way again. The undercover man's sedan hurtled toward Arched Street; a direct route into the heart of the city. Steve Huston had swung into the back seat with Van Loan. Both kept their eyes on silent Rocky as they raced through the quiet night.

Only once did Van express his feelings. He said, "I'll never forgive myself if something happens to her."



MURIEL glanced at her wrist watch. Three o'clock. Her usually pretty eyes were somewhat red-rimmed from strain and worry. She paced up and down the big living room of Van's suite, stopped abruptly to listen when she heard a car outside in the breathlessly quiet night. The fine, white rayon curtains at the open windows moved slightly with the motion of night air.

The car did not stop. Silence settled down again. For the past half hour she had not even heard the occasional hum of the elevator out in the corridor. The middle-of-the-night quietude oppressed her.

Where was Van? Where could he possibly be?

After leaving him, earlier, she had gone to her father's rented apartment at a nearby hotel. But an hour after retiring she had come awake with a start, terribly worried about Dick Van Loan for some reason. She vaguely remembered there had been a horrible dream of some kind, and that Van was in extreme danger.

She had called the hotel. No, Mr. Grey was not in, the clerk told her. She had called several times during the next hour.

Concerned, then, she had quickly slipped into a two-piece light summer suit and walked over here from her father's place.

The night clerk downstairs had seen in her a beautiful, refined woman who was

visibly upset about something concerning Grey. He had a bellboy let her into the suite, where she could await his return.

That was almost an hour ago. Then the house phone had rung with a message that Mr. Grey wanted her to leave. That only puzzled her. How did Van know she was here? Now she was even more determined to wait for him. . . .

Her eyes smarted from forcing herself to stay awake in the quiet, empty room. The place seemed a morgue without Van's magnetic presence. She went into the bathroom, adjoining the expansive bedroom, to bathe her hot eyes.

Coming out, she paused before the large square mirror of the dresser to look at herself. She was a sight, she thought. She went to get her compact out of her purse and as she came back into the bedroom again thought she heard a faint click. The apartment door she thought. . . Van was coming! She put down the compact and turned to meet him.

And she froze motionless, her slim hands reaching out along the dresser top for support, her straight tall figure pressed rigidly against the woodwork.

She stared fixedly at the man standing in the doorway to the living room. He was small, thin—but looked as mean and crafty as a fox. It was the knife in his hands that caused her blood to run cold.

The knife blade was of the type that springs open from a long-handled pocket-knife. *That* was the click she had heard!

He said, "If you're thinking about screaming—don't! This knife is fast, an' quiet."

Muriel saw that he held the knife in a manner for throwing, by the long blade. But as he approached her in a quick, cat-like padding manner, he deftly reversed the knife in his hand, held the wicked point lightly against her breast. He motioned with his head.

"Sit down in that chair!"

**H**E KEPT the knife point against her as he backed her away from the dresser and toward a chair beside the bed. She sat down stiffly, managing an expression

of wide-eyed horror which she hoped concealed the quick thinking that was taking place in her mind. She was afraid, yes, but she was not helplessly terrified. Perhaps there was some way to trick this intruder. . . .

"Where's he got it stashed?" Runt demanded.

"What are you talking about?"

"The gun, babe, the gun! Don't give me that!" His lip curled viciously.

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

With a snort of disgust, he glanced quickly around the room, sharp eyes lighting on the suitcase on the rack near the bed.

Still holding the knife in his right hand, darting glances at her every other instant, he started flinging clothing aside as he searched the bag.

Next he turned toward the big dresser, opening and closing the empty drawers in which Van, apparently had not had time to place some of his things.

Runt's thin, hard face became more menacing as he slammed the empty drawers. He kept glancing at Muriel's stiff, motionless figure, and she didn't like the expression she saw on his face. He was desperate now, seeking the gun. She remembered Van twisting the gun out of his hand. Certainly that revolver must link this little man with the killing of Johnnie Garrett. Why else would he be seeking it?

She moved her foot very slowly, an inch or so at a time. He had not caught the sly movement. Now he had pulled open the bottom drawer.

He cursed as he saw only the extra woollen blanket stored there, a service used by most hotels. He started to shut the drawer, looked down at the blanket again, then reached and pulled it partway out of the drawer. Something thudded against the wood at the bottom.

Eyes lighting, he bent down and scooped up the handkerchief-wrapped revolver. Another weapon lay beside it, but he ignored it. Putting the knife down for a moment, he unwrapped his own weapon and gave a grunt of satisfaction.

During that moment of concentration on

Runt's part, Muriel had finally slipped her high-heeled shoe off, bent quickly to pick it up. Using the spiked heel as a weapon, she dashed toward the little man.

He whirled fast at the whisper of movement, his left hand flashing out to pick up the knife.

But Muriel's sudden move was faster. The pointed heel of her shoe came down and caught the little man on the back of his left hand. He growled with pain, ducked his head to protect himself from the rain of hammered blows, threw his left arm around her waist.

Muriel dropped the shoe and grasped the man's gun hand with both her own. She had a strong grip. She tried desperately to twist the gun away from his grasp.

But he was as wiry and quick as a whip-lash. Keeping his left arm around her lithe, tall figure, he extended his right arm. He attempted to keep the weapon out of her reach. Struggling, they swayed across the room.

The back of her legs hit the edge of the bed. She fell. Instantly the quick-moving little man's left hand slipped from her waist and clamped on her throat. She tried to pull his fingers loose with one hand as her other still fought for the gun.

But she was choking. He had fingers as strong as steel wire. Muriel used both hands now as she tried frantically to break his hold and get off the bed. For the first time she was really frightened. She couldn't breathe. Her head pounded and the room spun, turning black.

Half conscious, it seemed that a noise like a shrill siren was keening through her brain. She stopped struggling and blacked out. . . .

**J**UST as the slender, shapely girl started to go limp beneath his strangling grasp, Runt heard the police sirens. It was close by!

In the next moment he heard rubber tires skid on the pavement below. He leaped across the room, peered through the bedroom curtains, saw uniformed men jumping out of a squad car and heading into the hotel.

He ran back toward the dresser, remembering the other gun he had seen in the bottom drawer. Swiftly he closed the knife and dropped it in his coat pocket. All the time his eyes were darting back and forth, like a cornered animal's. The girl was still motionless on the bed. He spotted the location of the light switch.

Holding a gun in either hand now, he shut off the bedroom lights with the heel of his hand, dove into the living room, where he snapped off the remaining lights. Then he scurried to the open living room windows. He peered down through the fire escape platform, just outside the window, whence he had made his quiet entrance. The platform led to steps at the corner of the building front. The steps ended in a side alleyway below.

The cops had disappeared inside the hotel. He scrambled outside, reached the steep ladder, gained the floor below. Only four more to go.

The second squad car rolled up, a sedan right behind it. Someone spotted him, and from one of the cars a voice called out:

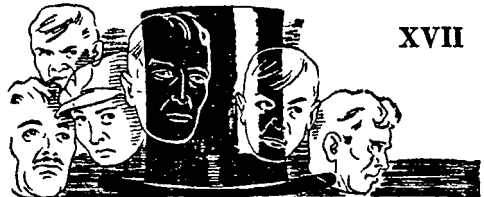
"There he is!"

The Runt reversed his steps and started back up the ladder. Then the beam of a powerful spotlight on the prowling car found and entrapped him.

He stopped, turned, raised one of the guns and leaned over the railing to aim at that blinding light. He started firing recklessly.

He never heard the answering gunfire. Something slammed against his side, knocking him off balance. He felt no pain, but he knew that he was falling.

He went over the low iron railing and started a slow-motion arc in the air as he plunged toward the ground.



XVII

**I**T WAS three days later, late in the afternoon of a sultry Chicago August after-

noon. In an office near the "morgue" of the busy *Enterprise* newspaper, Van Loan sat at a long table with his two friends, Steve Huston and sandy-haired Jim Rush. All were in their shirt sleeves, their ties loosened. Newspaper "clips" and photos were piled on the table.

Steve mopped his sweaty brow with a handkerchief and let out his breath. In front of him were a large foolscap writing pad and a pencil.

"Well, that's about it," he said. "Can you think of anything else to add to the list?"

Rush shook his head.

Van Loan sat looking at an 8 x 10 inch glossy print which he held in his hand. "Rudolph Bliss," he said musingly, studying the hawklike man's features. "The key to whatever is behind the murder of Senator Midworth. And now Bliss seems to have vanished into thin air." He shook his head.

"Well," said Steve Huston wearily, picking up the big yellow pad and reading from some of the notes which he had made there. "The Runt's gun, found near him along with Bruno's when he tumbled from the fire escape the other night, proves he murdered young Johnnie Garrett. That solves that."

Rush nodded. "Ballistics showed it fired the same slug they dug out of Garrett's heart. It also ties in big Rocky. The kid at the switchboard there at Garrett's apartment building definitely identified Rocky as being with the Runt. Rocky's being held without bail until his trial."

"Right," said Huston, checking his notes.

Then he went on, "Next, we have Bruno."

"He's being extradited from New York," put in Jim Rush. He looked at the Phantom. "The gun you took from Bruno, and found when the Runt fell from the fire escape, ties Bruno in with the killing we had here recently—the shooting of a ward leader on the South Side. Bruno will come up for trial, too."

Van Loan picked up some clippings. "True," he agreed. "But we have these other murders, some of small time politi-

cians, others of well-known people. There seems to be a pattern, even though they happened in various cities—New York, Chicago, Minneapolis, other places."

Rush nodded. He took the pad from the reporter, ran his eye down one of the sheets. "The thing I can't understand is that every murder was that of someone active in the party that opposed Midworth's own party. If it was a united movement on the part of some subversive organization to weaken the opposing party and strengthen Midworth's own, then why was Midworth killed?" He looked again at Van Loan as if for an answer. "Rudolph Bliss?"

Van Loan shook his head. "It goes beyond Bliss. He's in it, of course, somewhere. But remember, Bliss was still in prison when this program of murder first started. We've seen that from a study of these newspaper clips."

"Yes." Rush had another idea. "What about Boy-Face Gulick? We finally got a state's attorney's order to bring him in. But already that slippery crime leader has three of his high-priced lawyers screaming that it's a frameup."

"They would," Van said grimly. "Gulick, though, even as powerful as he is, probably is taking orders from someone higher up. And he'll never talk."

**I**T WAS Steve who put in, "What about the movie film?" as he checked his notes. "Will it be back here from New York by tonight?"

The newsreel film had not been intercepted at the Chicago airport, as Rush had explained later on the night that little Runt was shot and killed coming down the fire escape. Too late, the film had been traced to an earlier flight. The detective had checked the New York laboratories of the company, agreed to let the newsreel outfit go ahead with developing the film for their own use and sending him an extra print.

"It should be at my office a little after nine o'clock," said the undercover man. "I've made arrangements with the local office of the company to have a man avail-

able tonight so we can use their projection booth. It's down on South Wabash."

"What else do we have?" said Van Loan, looking at his friend Steve Huston.

"Well, there's that chauffeur, Harry, out at the Midworth estate. Also the butler . . ." He stopped, frowned. "I went out there to talk to that young Harry. He's a close-mouthed guy. Said Mrs. Midworth was closing up the place right after the funeral yesterday. She's staying at a hotel here in the city. He was going home to Indianapolis for a few days. At least, that's what he said."

"He did," said the Phantom. He motioned to Jim Rush. "We checked. And the butler, Judson, is out on a little farm he owns near Arlington Heights, west of here."

"What else have we?" asked Rush.

"The elevator operator, who might have told us who got Midworth's letter died without regaining consciousness at the hospital last night."

The warm room was silent for several seconds. Van Loan stood up, moved toward a window and stared down at the winding, canal-like Chicago River far below. He still held the photo of Rudolph Bliss in his hand.

"Ruthless," he said softly and grimly. "Someone who is absolutely ruthless. That poor kid."

He turned, facing the other two, his lean face moist from the heat, his eyes blazing. "Gulick has probably ordered many killings in the past. They were connected with vice, gambling and the rackets. They merely killed off their own kind. But this is different. Gulick has been hired—for millions, in my opinion—to branch out. When honest, fine people like Senator Midworth are viciously murdered—"

He broke off, clenched his hands, came back to the table again. "Perhaps that print of the newsreel will tell us something tonight." He tapped the glossy print in his hand. "Perhaps this will, but let's not overlook any bets. Look, Steve, could the newspaper here blow up this photograph—make it large enough to put on the wall?"

"Sure!" said Steve quickly. He ran a hand through his flaming red hair, wiped sweat from his face again. "But we *know* it's Rudolph Bliss. What—"

"Yes," agreed the Phantom. "It's a courtroom scene. Taken at this trial. You can see some of the people seated in the audience. I want to see *everyone* seated there in the courtroom. Call it just a crazy idea if you like. But how soon could we have the blowup?"

Steve said, "I'll call Frank Havens. He'll see that we have it by tonight."

"That reminds me," said Van. "I have a dinner date with Muriel. I'll have to go." He looked at Rush. "Let's arrange to meet at the newsreel place first. We'll come over here after that. What time shall we meet you?"

"Say a little after nine o'clock tonight." The undercover man gave them the address on South Wabash. He looked at the tall Phantom. "By the way, how is Muriel?"

"Fine. I reached my room the other night seconds after Runt went out the living room window. She was just coming to, but she had a nasty scare. She's been spending the afternoon with Marie Midworth. Yesterday she was with her at 'Honest John's' funeral."

"What's the latest on a man to replace him in the party?"

"I understand," said Van Loan, "they're trying to draft Arnold Karrisson as a dark horse. But he doesn't want the job."

Steve drew a finger across his throat. "Maybe he'd like to stay healthy."

"I don't blame him," said Rush. "Even with Gulick in jail, I don't feel satisfied. The idea of Rudolph Bliss being on the loose bothers me." He nodded toward the photograph in Steve's hand. "Who is he, really? Does anyone know?"

"I don't think it matters so much who he is," said Van. "It's more important to know *what* he represents. . . ."

DINNER with lovely Muriel was pleasant, relaxing and intimate. Because Dick Van Loan was still playing the part of Grey, a reporter, he selected an out-of-



the-way eating place that was small and uncrowded. He would be glad when they were back in New York again and he could dress smartly and really step out with Muriel Havens.

But he also selected the little restaurant for another reason. He was still concerned about her safety, after the incident in his own hotel suite.

They sat in a secluded corner. The place seated no more than two-dozen people and was run by an elderly Italian couple. It was eight o'clock by the time they finished their demitasse.

Muriel said, "I told Marie Midworth I'd come back and spend a little time with her this evening. We've had little time to talk. She says the evenings, when she is alone, are unbearable right at the moment." She shook her blonde head. "But honestly, Van, I don't know how she does it. Phone calls, people from the political party in and out every minute, conferences with various officials. She is an amazing woman—amazing in the way she gets things accomplished and in the way she handles people. In between times she asks me countless questions. Now she'll want to know everything that you men did today. She's determined to find out who murdered her husband."

Van said, "Is the Midworth estate closed up permanently?"

"Apparently so. Marie's thinking of selling it. No one's out there."

"Does Arnold Karrisson live at the Blake Hotel also?"

"He's just staying there during the political convention. I believe he has a place out in the country somewhere. He's a bachelor, you know. He was in and out several times today."

Presently, they got up and left. Dusk was settling over the city, but the street outside was warm and close after the pleasantly air-conditioned restaurant. They walked three blocks across Ohio Street to Michigan, then a block north to the Blake, near Muriel's own hotel and not many blocks from Van's.

Just before he left her, Muriel asked, "How soon will you know about that

newsreel film? I'll be anxious to hear."

He explained that it would be sometime after nine o'clock, and that afterwards they were going to her father's newspaper to view the blowup of Rudolph Bliss' courtroom photo.

"Will you call me right away?"

"Where will you be?"

"Call me at Marie Midworth's apartment here. I'll stay with her this evening a while."

"Okay." He squeezed her hand briefly, gave her a fond smile and hurried out to the curb to hail a cab. Climbing in, he said, "Take me to the telephone company main offices."

He knew the business office would be closed at this hour. That's why he did not phone. Perhaps, by going in person, he could obtain the information he wanted. . . .

THE three of them sat tensely in the small viewing room of the newsreel company on South Wabash. An operator ran the film off from a projection booth behind them. They relived, for the moment, the excitement, the noise, the cheering of thousands of voices that had taken place in the auditorium just a few days ago. They heard, over the sound track, the bedlam that cut loose when Senator Midworth came to the rostrum.

Steve Huston said, "What a show!"

"Nothing like it," said Jim Rush.

Van Loan was silent, watching.

He saw Midworth approach the battery of microphones. A chairman was rapping for quiet, but the roaring cheers continued for another minute or two. Then, finally, Midworth started to speak. Van Loan noticed the seriousness of his face. Not once had Midworth smiled. He appeared to be under some great strain.

"Ladies and gentlemen . . . I have something very startling to tell you . . . I . . ."

He stopped. A murmur ran through the crowd. Van Loan saw him reach for the water carafe, then the camera shifted to a shot of the crowd for a moment. When it swung back Midworth was saying slowly, ". . . within the past few hours I

have made a terrible discovery . . . a discovery that means I must give up any kind of public office forever."

Then, the bombshell: "I cannot accept this nomination for president of these great United States." Van Loan heard the single, amazed gasp that went up from the crowds. Then, "I have learned that for the past ten years now . . . that . . . that . . ."

The words choked off. An instant later the Senator collapsed. The platform became a jam of moving, pressing, excited people.

Quickly, Van Loan turned and called out to the man in the projection booth, "All right, run all that through again. Never mind the part from here on. Can you stop the film if we ask you to?"

The operator's face appeared at a small opening in the wall. "Sure. Just a minute."

"Did you see it?" Van Loan asked his two friends. "The carafe was switched shortly before Midworth came on the platform. The camera was really trained on the steps where he approached the stage, but if you watch closely you can see part of the table where the water bottle was."

"I *thought* I caught it," said Jim Rush tensely.

Steve said nothing. The reporter's face was thoughtful in the half-gloom of the little viewing room. He seemed puzzled about something.

They waited. Presently the film started on the re-run.

As the newsreel approached the part where Midworth was due to come on scene again, Van Loan came to his feet, watching intently, but calling out to the operator, "Slow it down. Be ready to stop it."

They strained their eyes, waiting. There it came, the camera shifted for a close-up of the steps and the Senator approaching the platform. The lens shifted to take in the officials on the platform itself. It cut past the table holding papers, a briefcase, the water carafe. The camera caught only a brief, partial view of the stand beside the speaker's rostrum.

"There!" called out Van Loan.

The film stopped.

All three stared at the motionless scene up there on the screen. A left hand and just part of a coat sleeve held a silver water carafe. It was in the act of putting the bottle down beside a second on the table.

Steve called to the operator, "Run a few more frames, then stop it again!"

They saw the bottles replaced. The film stopped. A right hand now, and still only part of a coat sleeve, was revealed in the act of removing the other water carafe.

The operator said from the little window. "That's all. The next part shifts to the steps again."

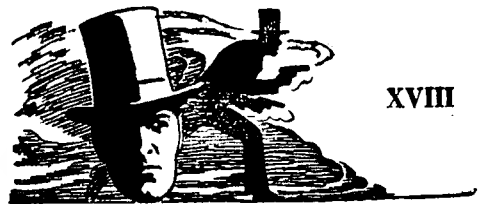
"Wait!" Steve ordered. He grabbed Van Loan's arm, pointing at the "still" upon the screen. "Neither of you would recognize them, of course. Jim, you weren't at the airport the other afternoon when we arrived." He swung to the Phantom. "And you left me at the gates and went directly into town. You didn't see them, so naturally you wouldn't recognize—"

"Recognize *what*?" asked Jim Rush.

"Those gold cuff links, each set with a large diamond! Senator Midworth's supposedly best friend and campaign manager was wearing them when I met him and Frank Havens at the airport."

"Who?" said Jim Rush impatiently.

"Arnold Karrisson!"



VAN'S first reaction was to ask if there was a phone here at the small studio. Hardly had Steve Huston finished stating Karrisson's name when he was hurrying toward the small office off a hallway at the rear of the viewing room. He remembered that Jim Rush was calling up to the operator, "Cut out that section of film. We'll have enlargements made of the frames."

And Steve adding, "And you'd better call headquarters, Jim, and have a warrant issued for Arnold Karrisson's arrest. Every move we've made so far seems to have been known to Karrisson. Maybe he even knows that we have this newsreel. He'll act fast now—if he's the one behind all this."

Van Loan thought of these same things the instant Steve Huston identified the wearer of the diamond-studded cuff links. His mind, however, leaped ahead to a more imperative phone call that must be made before they even notified headquarters.

Muriel!

Muriel Havens was at Marie Midworth's apartment at the Blake Hotel. And Karrisson had a suite right there in the same hotel. Muriel, herself, had told him just tonight that Karrisson had been in and out several times during the day, visiting with both herself and the Senator's widow. Naturally Muriel had not suspected the man. Karrisson had probably been around when Muriel brought Marie Midworth up to date on what "Mr. Grey" was doing to solve the murder of her husband.

Muriel also knew that they had planned to view the newsreel film tonight. If Karrisson had dropped into the Midworth apartment he knew it too!

He found the small office, impatiently waited to be connected with the Midworth apartment after he called the hotel. Then the hotel switchboard operator said, "I'm sorry, but they do not answer."

"Try Arnold Karrisson's suite," ordered Van Loan tensely.

"Mr. Karrisson went out about half an hour ago, sir. Do you wish to leave any—"

Cutting in, Van Loan demanded, "Find out if anyone was with him!"

"Just a moment, please."

He hung on, and the headquarters detective and Steve crowded into the small room behind. Rush said, "Make it quick, will you? I want to call—"

"Wait," said Van, waving them aside. Then he was listening intently for the switchboard girl to come on the line again.

The detective and Steve Huston saw the strained, sharp look that came over his features as he listened closely to what was being told him.

"You don't know where they went?"

There was another pause, then he said briefly, "Thanks." He broke the connection, but did not hang up the receiver. He held it out to Rush and said hurriedly, "Karrisson went out with both Muriel and Mrs. Midworth approximately a half-hour ago. Tell headquarters to send out a general alarm for Karrisson's arrest. But for God's sake warn them to be careful!"

NODDING, Jim Rush had taken the phone and slid into the desk chair which the Phantom vacated. The moment he was connected with headquarters he gave quick, precise orders.

Before Rush finished, the Phantom told him. "Have them assign men to the hotel right away, in case he returns—which I very much doubt. Also cover all of Boy-Face Gulick's known clubs or hangouts. Can you get me a car in a hurry?"

In between firing orders to someone at headquarters, the sandy-haired undercover man looked up, said, "Use mine. I brought it here. It'll have a detective bureau car pick me up." Then he went on talking.

"Where are you going?" Steve asked him.

"The Midworth Estate," answered Van.

"But it's closed up!"

"Is it?"

The reporter gave him a quizzical look. "You've figured something out," he said quickly. "What's the angle?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's just a wild hunch . . . a remark Muriel made on the way back to that hotel tonight. I started wondering about it on the way down here."

"Then we'll go with you!" announced Steve.

But Van Loan shook his head. The headquarters man, too, had finished now and was standing up, catching the last part of their conversation. Van Loan spoke

to them, giving last-minute instructions.

"Both of you are needed here in town. Steve, get in touch with Frank Havens. He might have some suggestions. He knows where Karrisson's estate is. Have someone check there, too. Besides, there's that blowup of Rudolph Bliss in the courtroom. See what it shows. I want to know as soon as possible."

He started toward the hall. They met the projection booth operator coming down a short flight of steps with the section of film, which he handed to Jim Rush.

Rush was saying to Van Loan, "I'll show you where the car is." He handed over his keys. "I'll call the private police out there near Highland Park and have them either meet you or go right to the estate itself. And I can have—"

"Don't call *anyone* out there yet," said Van Loan sharply. "Don't you see? Karrisson's liable to get panicky if the police close in on him. I'm thinking of Muriel. I'm not sure that he's gone there. But if I can get in the place alone, quietly, there's less danger of stampeding him."

Rush's pale blue eyes were somewhat skeptical. "All right, it's your problem. And there are plenty of things to check here in the city. Maybe Karrisson hasn't gone out there at all. He could be *any* place."

"How right you are," said Van Loan.

They reached the street. Rush pointed to his car parked a few doors away.

It was Steve Huston who asked, "But how will we reach you out there? If the place is closed up, that means the telephone is shut off—"

"It isn't," finished the Phantom. "I checked on that tonight."

He left the reporter staring after him, and as he pulled away from the curb a moment later he heard the police siren in the distance—no doubt the car that Jim Rush had ordered for himself.

Van Loan parked some distance beyond the main entrance to the estate some forty-five minutes later. He ran the detective's sedan beneath some trees close to the highway, locked it, kept to the shad-

ows as he made his way back on foot. The night was mild and the air motionless, but not hot enough to bring the fine beads of perspiration that covered his face. He was worried and upset about Muriel. If his one hunch about Karrisson coming here to the supposedly locked-up mansion were correct, then another he had been turning over in his mind might be correct also.

**H**OW long could Karrisson have preceded him? Less than half an hour, surely, because he, himself, had broken a few speed laws driving out. And Karrisson would have been mighty careful not to pick up any speed cops along the route.

Van Loan reached a wall surrounding the front part of the estate, pulled himself up easily and lithely, dropped silently to the grass on the other side. Avoiding the gravel roadway winding in to the house, he took a short cut through the small woods and then across the wide lawns. He was thankful there was no moon as yet.

The big stone house, gloomy and without a single light, became visible in the night. He circled it at a distance, reached the rear driveway leading to the garages. Not a glimmer of light showed anywhere.

Nevertheless, he moved with extreme caution. He remembered there were heavy drapes at the downstairs windows. Drawn, they would easily shut out the light from within.

First, he went to the garage. The overhead doors were all closed. But he found a small entrance unlocked around at the side. The instant he opened it carefully and slid inside, he knew that a car had recently been parked there. He felt the increased warmth of the place, heard the intermittent cracking sound a cooling engine makes. He saw the outline of the big limousine in the half gloom.

He went outside again and ducked toward the house, keeping close beneath the trees. He knew the police dog, the one the chauffeur had shown him, had been taken to a boarding kennel when the place was supposedly closed up. He had learned this when checking on the chauffeur.

fear himself. But he proceeded cautiously.

At the back porch of the house, he paused, listening for a brief moment. There wasn't a sound. The night was eerily quiet. He padded softly up the steps and tried the back door. Locked, as were the windows—when he pried at them quietly.

Next he slowly circled the house until he made out a basement window behind the shrubbery. Dropping to his hands and knees, he crawled carefully toward the window, mindful of rustling the shrubbery.

The small window was closed and locked.

Keeping close to the wall, he located the next window. His hands touched wire screening. But immediately he was bent close to the screen, listening.

There was the unmistakable sound of a refrigeration unit running quietly in the basement. The window beyond the screen was open. And, without a doubt, someone was in the house!

Using a small, compact kit of efficient burglar tools which he carried in an inside, built-in pocket, he swiftly cut part of the screen wire. Presently he was leaning inside the opening, his agile body doubled like a jackknife. He could see nothing.

So he had to chance striking a match from a pad he had in his pocket. From the rear, he felt sure he was covered by the heavy shrubbery growing alongside the stone walls.

He held the match stretched out before him, got a swift photographic impression of the basement layout. He saw the flight of steps and the route he would have to follow to reach them. He also noted that the floor directly beneath him was clear. He blew out the match, dropped it, turned around and quickly wriggled his legs and hips over the sill. Then he dropped to the floor below.

Van Loan's right hand went instantly to his shoulder holster to be sure the automatic had not been loosened. He listened again, but heard nothing. The house was so solid and well built that he doubted

if he could have heard anything upstairs regardless.

Depending upon his accurate memory now, he made his way silently toward the stairs. He knew almost exactly when his toe was ready to touch the first step. He started up, stepping close to the outside of each rise.

AT THE top he paused, felt carefully for the doorknob, turned it slowly, found that the door was open. The heavy automatic was in his right fist now. He opened the door, saw dim light at his right, stepped out.

He was in the kitchen of the house. The room itself was dark, and he noted that every shade was drawn to the sill, but there was a doorway that led to what seemed to be a large butler's pantry. A door beyond this was open and he could see the wide front hallway beyond. A light was turned on there. He moved silently that way.

A murmur of someone talking reached him then. It came from the direction of the library on the left, as he prowled toward the front part of the house.

As he came closer to the open door leading to the library, the voice became clearer. A man's voice. No one else seemed to be talking.

But it was not big Arnold Karrisson's. This voice chose words carefully, was precise and held an accent.

The voice was that of Rudolph Bliss!

This house, then, had been his hideout since he had disappeared at Gulick's gambling club. Either that—or he had met Karrisson some place tonight.

Well, in another split instant Van Loan would know. He was six paces from the doorway, the gun held ready, every nerve alert.

He heard the slightly guttural voice of Rudolph Bliss saying, "Quick thinking, sir. She could be very, very dangerous to us if she escaped."

And there was a sound like a grasping, choked cry, cut off.

Van Loan covered the remaining expanse to the open door in a flash. At the

same time it was a silent approach that brought him inside the room without a sound.

He stood unmoving. No one had seen him. He knew that he dare not make a mistake when those in the library did spot him, for Muriel's life might be the forfeit of any mistake on his part.

The slim, lovely blonde-haired girl was held firmly in a half strangling grasp by tall, heavy Arnold Karrisson. He must have seized her as she made a frantic dash toward the french doors on one side of the room. The heavy drapes covering those doors were still moving slightly. He had grasped her by the throat, from behind, the crook of his elbow now pressing against the smooth lines of her neck.

Van Loan's blood suddenly boiled. Only caution held him motionless an instant longer.

For the gaunt, hawklike man—Rudolph Bliss—stood near the middle of the room facing Karrisson and his captive. There was a gun in the ex-convict's hand. And there was a deadly glow in his strange, watchful eyes.

"All right," he was saying, addressing big, gray-haired Karrisson. "Let her go. I'll take care of her now."

The fourth party in the tense scene was dark-haired, strikingly attractive Marie Midworth—the murdered Senator's widow. She stood behind the wide mahogany desk, motionless, her eyes frozen on the three near her. She was directly in front of the Phantom, so she could not see him.

It was austere-looking Karrisson himself, following Bliss' orders as he released the girl, who first saw the Phantom. A gasp escaped his lips.

"Grey!"

So fast was Van Loan's actions and thinking that he momentarily ignored big Karrisson. He whirled toward gaunt Rudolph Bliss, because it was he who held the gun.

And it was Bliss who fired.

The shot came too late.

Two closely spaced shots, coming so fast they sounded as one, ripped from Van Loan's automatic. They were a split sec-

ond ahead of the ex-convict's. His shot went wild, boring into the ceiling overhead as his arm flung upward. He stumbled two or three steps forward, then crashed to the rug.

But Van Loan did not wait to see this. He knew with certainty that Bliss was dead before he struck the floor.

He spun to cover Arnold Karrisson, calling a warning to Muriel at the same time. "Get away from him!"

**M**URIEL ran out of the line of any fire. Karrisson's right hand came toward his breast pocket as he cried out, "Wait! Let me tell you what—"

A gun blast rocketed in the room. Big Karrisson was turned half around. He staggered toward the drapes which covered the french doors, as though trying to escape. The second shot caught him in the back. With a horrible scream he flung out his heavy arms to seize the drapes. Instead he started falling. He crashed right through the glass of the french doors, carrying the drapes down with him as he went.

Van Loan turned toward the desk near the fireplace. Slim-built, tall Marie Midworth slowly lowered the revolver in her hand. Apparently it had come from the purse lying open in front of her on the desk.

She stared sort of fixedly at the Phantom and Muriel, who had now rushed up beside him.

"He . . . he was going to kill her," Marie Midworth said slowly.

The woman appeared dazed. Her usually dark, flashing eyes looked dull.

Voice low, the Phantom said, "Get that gun she has."

He still stood with his own automatic leveled, but he lowered it when Muriel picked up the revolver which Marie Midworth had placed on the desk top.

Suddenly there was a commotion outside in the driveway near the french windows and side veranda. A second later fast-moving Steve Huston popped into the big library.

"Damn!" he said, taking in the scene

within the room in one hurried glance.

Van Loan handed him his automatic. "Watch her!" he rapped. His nod indicated the apparently dazed, smartly dressed woman behind the desk.

Then he hurried toward the broken doors.

Hatless, sandy-haired Jim Rush was out there, along with men in plain clothes who were either from headquarters or the local private police patrol out here in the North Shore community. Two men were bent down over big Arnold Karrisson, supporting his head a little off the floor.

To the undercover man, Van Loan said briefly, "You didn't lose any time getting here."

"You didn't expect me to, did you?" said Jim Rush. "Hell, if you hadn't broken all speed laws we would have been here sooner. I had an idea—"

Van Loan cut him off with a quick grasp of his arm.

"Listen!" he said.

Arnold Karrisson was talking.

Everyone listened, and only once did anyone interrupt the low, gasping words coming from Arnold Karrisson's throat. He was dying, but he managed to hold on long enough to choke out the words.

Rush whispered to one of the men with him, "Get all this down in writing!"

Someone had turned on the porch lights.

In a few moments it was over, and the big man lay dead.

Van Loan and the short, wiry headquarters man went inside.

MARIE MIDWORTH sat in the chair at the big desk now, her well-manicured hands stretched out gripping its edges. Steve Huston stood nearby, the Phantom's automatic still in his hand, a curious expression on his face as he watched her. Muriel stood near him, also staring, wonderment in her ordinarily pretty eyes.

"What's . . . wrong with her?" she asked, staring at Van Loan.

He looked at Muriel, shook his head, then at the woman in the desk chair. He

said quietly, "Karrisson's dead, Marie. He told us most of it."

Then he opened his clenched hand. The folded, blood-stained letter was crushed there.

He spread it out, read silently, passed the letter to Jim Rush.

He went on talking to the woman again. "Karrisson had the letter in his breast pocket—the letter *your* husband, 'Honest John', tried to deliver at the newspaper office the other day. Karrisson has always been your dupe, hasn't he? And he did the jobs you ordered because he has always been deeply in love with you." His lips thinned in a grim expression for a moment. "Karrisson wasn't reaching for a gun a moment ago. He was reaching for this letter, to prove to me that *you* were the one behind it all. So you shot him before he said anything—only he lived long enough to talk."

Marie Midworth continued to sit there, arms taut and outstretched along the desk. Her eyes were wide and staring.

To the others, the Phantom said, "*She* was the power behind Senator Midworth—a ruthless power that 'Honest John' discovered only the day before his death." He tapped the letter in his hand. "It's all here in the Senator's last letter. Karrisson's dying words also verify it. *She* worked with the crime syndicate and crooked millions, manipulating political machines, buying off the right people so that Midworth could reach the top. *He* thought people around him were honest—especially his friend Karrisson."

Muriel gasped, "I can't believe it!"

Van Loan told her, "No wonder she told me the first time I came here, 'I'm in no danger'. Of course she wasn't. And she used you. Muriel, as another dupe. She knows everything that was going on by having you stay with her, reporting whatever we were doing."

He turned, looked down at Rudolph Bliss' still figure. "But it takes money to make money—and to gain more power. Working through Bliss, an enemy agent, she collected more millions from an enemy source in order to buy her husband's way

to the top. Those enemies would have gone to any length to have Midworth in charge of this nation's destinies. Because they would have been pulling the strings through her!"

Jim Rush shook his head, a look of revulsion on his face. "She even had Karrison, her lover, murder her own husband when she discovered, somehow, that 'Honest John' had learned about her evil scheme."

No one spoke for a moment.

In the chair behind the desk, Marie Midworth started whimpering. Broken words came from her twisted mouth. She started saying over and over, "Damn him! Damn him!"

Van Loan nodded to his friend Rush. "Get her out of here. Muriel's heard enough. It's almost . . . sickening."

He went across to put his arm around Muriel and lead her toward the hall and across to the living room. Steve Huston joined him for a moment, saying, "We stopped long enough on the way out to call

Frank Havens' paper. That blowup of the courtroom picture, the one of Rudolph Bliss, showed Marie Midworth sitting near the back of the courtroom. We couldn't figure out why. But now—well, we've got a pretty good idea now."

"Now you know," said the Phantom. "She wanted to be certain Bliss didn't spill anything when he was up for trial. That's why he was sent up for contempt of court. He wouldn't talk. And more of her ill-gained money bought off witnesses, I imagine." He made a motion to the red-headed reporter, finished. "We'll clean up the details later."

Steve nodded silently, went back toward the library.

Alone, the Phantom said softly to the girl with him, "Let's get out of here, hon. I want to go back to the hotel, take a shower—sort of get rid of this . . . this thing. I want to be just Dick Van Loan for a while."

"Yes, Van," she whispered. "I don't blame you."

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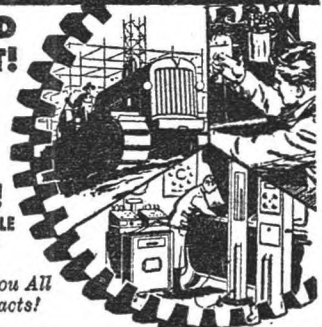
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# LADY ON A DOUBLE-CROSS

By HARRY WIDMER

*He knew it was a trap . . . but which girl was bait?*

**M**Y SEVENTH-FLOOR window of the Beach-View Hotel looked right out onto the sun-deck of the hotel next door. The sun-deck was crawling with near-nude babes. A feast of the flesh, for free—but my black thoughts cramped my appreciation of it.

I took a sip of my scotch on rocks. The

late afternoon sun reflected on my tilting glass. One of the sun bathers spotted me, and waved. She was a dream of creamy, sun-tanned skin and a wisp of a coral swim suit. Her white-gold hair was close-cropped.

Turning from the window, I made a mental note to look her up when I was in

a better frame of mind. I was steamed up about the crooked jerks who managed the Shore City branch of my detective agency. I had founded, built up and ran the Blackmoor Detective Agency. From a lone-handed, shoestring private eye, I had built up to a head office in New York; a branch here in Shore City and another in Philly. I'd never been crooked—at least not crooked enough to get caught.

And now I was being taken for a schlup.

A telephone call from here in Shore City to my New York office today put me hep to my crooked hired help. I flew down here to keep a date with the girl who had phoned me. She was already fifteen minutes late.

Her voice over the phone had made me think of long legs, hard liquor and soft lips. When she told me that my branch manager was blackmailing her, all I could think of was bashing in his stupid head. She said that she had been pushed to the desperation point. If I couldn't help her, she was going to the police—and to hell with everything.

My volcanic eruption of violent cuss words must have assured her that I had no part in the blackmail. She promised to come to me here.

And now she was twenty minutes late.

She had said that she would be announced as "Miss Jones."

By the time I had finished my third scotch-rocks she was three quarters of an hour late.

I took my bulldogged .44 belly-gun and shoulder clip from the desk and strapped it under my left armpit. Then I made a fourth drink and decided to sweat out another fifteen minutes.

It had been a waste of time. I put on a light summer jacket and left the room, not even taking one more peek at the sun deck next door.

My branch office was on the second floor of a two-story building on the big square facing the railroad terminal. The ground floor was handily occupied with a modernistic bar and grill. I had selected the offices and put Franklin Jessup, one of my New York operatives, in as manager. I

told him to hire his own help and run the show himself. All I wanted to see was a profit on the monthly balance sheet. I guess you can't work that way with some men.

I went up the one flight of steps. The legend on the door—BLACKMOOR DETECTIVE AGENCY—made me feel good for a second. Then a black anger churned in me. I stormed into the reception room, which was empty. I had picked out this leather-upholstered furniture and the secretary's desk. It was a good front. I'd gone whole hog to give Jessup a good start.

Next I went into Jessup's office. He was coming around his desk, evidently having heard the outer door slam. His face was away from the window so I couldn't see what his eyes and mouth were doing. But his whole figure had stiffened. Then his hand came out, and his voice was hearty:

"Hiya, Jack. What a surprise!"

"I'll take that hand gladly, Frank, when you give me the straight of this blackmail business."

NOW I could see his face. It started to come apart before he caught himself. The stupid, baffled expression he put on didn't go right with Franklin Jessup's rather intelligent face. He was tall, well set up with the hint of a pot. He cocked his head, asking:

"What blackmail case, Jack?"

I said evenly: "Look, Frank. Don't futz around. You just tipped your mitt with your lousy acting. I've seen enough people squirm to know when a jerk is squirming. I'm laying it on the line. Trot out the blackmail list and what evidence you have. You can give it to me, and get the hell out of here. Or I'll start taking you apart until you do give it to me. Take your choice—and take it damned fast."

Franklin Jessup sagged. "Honest, Jack, I don't know—" He stopped, looked over my shoulder.

I took a look, too, knowing I could get my .44 out and light a cigarette before Jessup could draw.

There was a guy standing just inside the door. He was holding an automatic. He

was shorter than Jessup but more compactly built. B-girls would have considered him flashy and good looking. I said to him:

"Keep your gun steady till I finish with Jessup." Then I looked back to Jessup, asking: "Were you about to say that you didn't know what made you do it? That's the usual line in a case like this."

The guy behind me spoke up. "He wasn't going to say anything." When I ignored him, he spoke to Jessup. "Frank, is this our big boss from New York?"

I stared open mouthed at Jessup. "God Almighty! Don't tell me that you hired that two-bit twirp in my organization! He'd do us more harm than a blackmail rap."

The jerk behind me said: "You go right on, Mr. Blackmoor, and you'll talk yourself into an open grave. Frank couldn't give you the list you want, if you clawed his eyeballs out. I've got them."

I still ignored him. "Listen to his talk, Frank. God-awful tough, isn't he? The boys on Broadway would laugh me off the Big Stem, if they knew a schmoie like this was working for Blackmoor."

Whispering footsteps sounded behind me. I turned. The guy had reversed his automatic and the butt aimed for my head. I flicked out my .44 and grinned at him.

His handsome face got fish-mouthed. He stood there frozen, too startled to move. I raked my .44 sight across his chin. He went down, his automatic bouncing on the rug. I put the automatic in my hip pocket, and turned back to Jessup.

"You're more stupid than I thought. If you hired that punk why the hell didn't you tell him how to club with a gun? Did you see how he held it?" Then I grabbed Jessup by his lapels and shoved my .44 into his throat. "Now you tell me what hapened to the girl who phoned me in New York?"

As I said, Franklin Jessup was a lousy actor. The bewildered surprise on his scared face was an honest reaction. I let him see the pure hell in my eyes, then I viciously jabbed my belly-gun into his

pot. A gust of air whooshed from his mouth. He jackknifed in half, wrapped his arms around his belly and dropped to the floor.

The other guy would be coming around now. Working him over would be a distinct pleasure. I turned to prod him with my foot.

He'd come around all right. He'd scrambled the hell out of the office. I growled at the moaning Jessup:

"You see what bad company does for a man? I'm getting as lousy as you two. And I must be going soft. I should've hit that jerk hard enough to break his damned jaw."

If Jessup made any reply it was mangled with his moaning. I walked out of the office and into the reception room.

STANDING just inside the corridor door was a redhead in a too-tight green dress. She was digging furiously into a big handbag. Lipstick, compact and cigarettes flew to the floor. I walked over to her and took the bag from her hands. She gasped and crouched back against the wall, her green eyes glaring hatred at me. I fished a tiny .25 revolver from the bag. Then I dumped the rest of the junk from the bag onto the floor, put the gun back, zippered it and tucked it under her arm. I said:

"We can walk ten paces, turn and fire."

Her lips drew back from sharp, cat-like teeth. "So you're the big stink."

I stared at her. My voice was a hoarse croak when I managed: "Don't tell me that *you* work here."

She slanted her hating eyes toward the steno desk. "That's the salt mine."

I took her by the arm and walked her into Jessup's office. He had dragged himself up into his chair. "Jessup," I yelled at him, "this dopey broad can't even get a gun out of a trunk." I cupped my open hand over her sneery face and shoved her. She landed sprawling in the chair beside Jessup. Her tight skirt had managed to ride high enough to show the lace of her frosty blue panties.

She let her skirt stay that way while

she called me twenty names without a single repetition.

When she took a breath, I cut in with: "Listen hard, you two—and you can tell that schlup with the pretty puss. I want that blackmail evidence in this office by tomorrow morning. If it isn't, I'm going to track down every one of you and break every damned bone in your bodies." I walked out.

The redhead dredged another name to fling after me. She knew them all, and they came fast and easy.

When I got back to the Beach-View Hotel desk, the clerk handed me an envelope of hotel stationery. I must have sweated forty bullets while I ripped open the flap. The note read:

I AM THE GIRL AT THE END OF  
THE BAR. BRUNETTE. WHITE  
SUIT. LAVENDER BLOUSE.  
MISS JONES

The hotel bar was mostly empty now. The cocktail-hour crowd had either filtered into the dining room or gone upstairs to pass out. Several die-hards were gulping down just "one more" before the distasteful chore of killing the glow with food.

At the far end of the bar sat "Miss Jones." She was a brunette all right, with jet-black hair caressing the shoulders of her white suit. She had mentioned her lavender blouse, but she hadn't said how beautifully filled it was going to be. And she had definitely neglected to mention her pale-lavender nylons and spike-heeled white shoes.

There were several empty stools beside her. Her frosty, minding-my-own-business mien had something to do with this unusual situation. Also, the nearest man to her, drooling over his nth "white lightning" martini, was talking to himself.

I walked over to her, seeing that her eyes were following my reflection in the back-bar mirror. I paused beside her, conscious that her delicate perfume was touching me with tantalizing fingers. I murmured:

"Miss Jones?"

She turned her head and I got the full

impact of her startling eyes. Her eyes, a light violet, were in startling contrast to her jet-black hair and sun-tanned skin. I started thinking of her violet eyes, black hair, lavender nylons—and decided I had better first get to the business at hand.

Her voice, which over the long-distance phone had reminded me of long legs, hard liquor and soft lips, now packed an even higher voltage. "And you?" She was a sultry, slow-talking gal.

"Blackmoor," I said. "When you didn't show for our appointment, I was afraid something had happened to you."

"And you did something about it, Mr. Blackmoor?"

"I wasn't sure that you had been hurt, so I just asked some questions."

Her violet eyes ran over my six feet and some inches. A hard glint came into those eyes. "They've made my life a living hell. Tell me what you did—please, Jack."

MY FIRST name coming from those red, wet-looking lips made me feel good. "Nothing much. I just wiped my gun-sight on pretty-puss' chin, and punched the barrel into Jessup's belly. By morning they'll either hand over their records, or land in the hospital, maybe the morgue. How about a refill on your dry manhattan?"

She rested slender, lavender-tipped fingers on my arm. "Just like that. Sure, fella, let's have a dozen dry manhattans."

When the drinks came and we each had a healthy swallow, she said: "My name is Sandra Hale."

I took another quick drink. Her family name was one of the most distinguished in both Philly and Shore City. I wagged my head. "I can see how those jerks had you over a barrel."

"They literally suggested that, but I decided to use my allowance and what I could borrow from Dad. But they kept on demanding more and more. I'm at the point now where I can't borrow or beg a dime from anyone. You can see what you've done for me, Jack."

I put my hand over hers. "In the morning I'll see what shape the accounts are in,

In any event, you'll get back every dime."

Sandra squeezed my hand. "I never expected that. I won't let you do it. Just to feel free again is all I want." She looked down into her cocktail glass. "You haven't asked me what they were blackmailing me for."

"None of my business," I said. "Whatever they have on you will be burned unopened. Forget it."

"I was once very foolish," said Sandra slowly. "If my stupidity became generally known, it would very likely mess up other people."

"Skip it, Sandra. You were foolish once—okay. I've been foolish many times. The difference is that blackmailers know that you won't shoot holes in their guts."

Sandra leaned close to me. "I'm going to kiss you, Jack. Pinch me—if I forget to stop."

"Hold it, sugar. Damn the luck! There's a redhead in a green dress over at the door. Do you know her?"

"No," said Sandra. "Didn't you want her to see me kissing you?"

"I definitely want her to see us kissing. But as long as you don't know each other, you won't get a bullet in your back. She's Jessup's steno. And she's got a gun in that bag. . . . Now, sugar, make like a B-girl." I drew her toward me.

Sandra slipped one arm around my neck and pressed her scented lips to mine. All of her months of nervous tension seemed to release itself in her quivering kiss. Then her mouth formed a smile. Her incredibly soft tongue traced the line of my lips. I had just decided to carry her up the seven flights to my room when the redhead's voice intruded into the bliss:

"Nice going, Mr. Blackmoor."

Sandra and I reluctantly drew apart. Her violet eyes, now a deeper shade of purple, told me she didn't want to stop.

I turned to the redhead. "What do you want?"

"To be friends," she said, moving closer.

Sandra coolly looked over the redhead, then slanted a glance at me. "I didn't know there was going to be competition, fella."

I said: "Miss Jones, meet Miss—er—Smith."

The girls didn't even bother to look at each other.

Sandra went about the pleasant task of repairing her smudged lips, and ignored both the redhead and me.

The redhead looked almost pretty now that she wasn't shooting sparks of hatred from her green eyes. She picked up a cocktail napkin from the bar and wiped Sandra's lipstick from my face. Then the redhead said:

"Mr. Jessup will meet you in your room in fifteen minutes, Mr. Blackmoor. He is fully prepared to carry out your wishes."

I could feel Sandra's thigh stiffen against mine. Outwardly she betrayed no emotion.

"Damned nice of Jessup," I told the redhead. "But he can cool his heels while I have another drink. What are you drinking, Red? Join the party."

**WE ALL** had a drink in front of us. I took a sip from mine and slid from the stool. "Dont you girls claw each other while I'm powdering my nose." I left them before any reply could be made. I asked the bartender where "It" was. He pointed his thumb, and I went in that direction until I was out of the cocktail lounge. Then I made a bee-line for the stairs and ran up to the seventh floor. When I got there, I realized I wasn't quite as young as I used to be. I let myself into my room.

The so-called "sitting room" was empty. The bathroom was empty. But Franklin Jessup occupied the bedroom floor. His skull had been cracked by a deft, clean blow. There was no mess or blood. Pretty-puss evidently could do a good job, if he sneaked up behind a man. And he could do a fairly good lock job in getting in and out of a person's hotel room. His stock went up a few points in my estimation.

I quickly took the screen out of my living-room window, then snicked out all the lights. In the darkness I lugged Jessup's mortal remains over to the window and dumped him out. I heard a dull thud

when his body hit the sandy back yard between the two hotels. I replaced the screen. I had just stepped into the corridor, closed the door and locked it—when the elevator door opened.

Pretty-puss and another man stepped out and came toward me. Pretty-puss had a strip of adhesive tape on his classical chin.

He called to me, having a hard time keeping the gloating out of his voice:

"Oh, going into your room, Mr. Blackmoor? We're just in time. This is Mr. Rawson, the hotel detective. . . Mr. Rawson, this is the great Mr. Blackmoor of the Blackmoor Detective Agency."

Rawson shook hands as if he meant it. I returned the friendly pressure.

I don't know what kept me from blasting Pretty-puss' jaw, unless it was because I wanted to see the surprise on his face when he discovered there was no corpse in my room. I said:

"I was just going back to the bar. We can talk down there."

Pretty-puss was almost grinning at me. "Here's your room. Why not go in there?"

"I've got two girls down at the bar. We can make a party of it."

"We can do that later," said Pretty-puss. "I've frankly told Mr. Rawson of the threats you made to Jessup this afternoon because you didn't like the way he was running this branch. Jessup told me he was coming here to see you. I was afraid for his safety."

Rawson put in: "If there might be some trouble, let's keep it out of the bar. Suppose we step into your room, Mr. Blackmoor."

I was laughing inside at Pretty-puss when I opened the door, and turned on the lights. Pretty-puss almost knocked both Rawson and me down to get inside. I could see the sneery grin on his face. It was worthwhile not punching him just to watch his face fall like soft, wet putty. He ran into the bedroom, even looked under the bed. Then the bathroom. When he came out, his face was working.

I ignored him and went over to the scotch bottle. "Mr. Rawson, while we are

waiting for Jessup we may as well have a snort."

That was all right with Rawson.

PRETTY-PUSS got up the nerve to confront me. When he started to open his mouth, I hit him. Not a bad punch for the short distance it traveled. My fist almost tore his head from his shoulders. He wouldn't be leaving this room for the next half hour, unless someone carried him out.

Rawson sprang to his feet, his hand on his hip-pocket gun.

I said: "Relax, Rawson. The schlup had it coming to him. Let's have another round and I'll tell you a story."

Rawson was wary, but he took the refill of scotch. I lugged Pretty-puss, who wouldn't be pretty again for one hell of a long time, into the bedroom and placed him in just the same position Jessup had been. Then I pulled the spread of the bed and threw it over him. Going back to Rawson, I said:

"Not ten minutes ago, Jessup was in that position with his skull bashed in. I tossed him out the window."

Then I told Rawson the whole damned story from the phone call to New York to my smacking Pretty-puss, with the exception of Sandra's name. When I finished, he said quietly: "You're still in the soup, Blackmoor. I know that you tossed the stiff out the window."

"Nuts to the stiff," I said. "No one can prove it was ever in this room, or that I tossed it out. Now, look, I have a little scheme in mind. Play along with me, and you'll discover I always return a favor."

"Meaning what, Blackmoor?"

"Meaning I'm going to need a branch manager here in Shore City. You look like a good Joe to me, and this is your town. When this scheme of mine works out, the job is yours. And your first assignment is to find out where that jerk in the next room is hiding the blackmail stuff. When you turn it over to me unopened, we'll burn it together. Then you're top eye in this man's town. Is it worth a try?"

Rawson stood up. "You have a fair rep

with the boys, Blackmoor. It's sure worth a try."

"Then stand in the shower behind the curtain—and listen."

I went to the phone, got the bartender and told him to put on the redhead I'd bought a drink for.

She wasn't long in getting on the wire.

"Red," I said huskily, "I've got to see you. Come up."

"Isn't Randy there?" she asked. So that was Pretty-puss' name.

"No," I said. "And I want to see you before anyone comes. You can help me."

"Imagine that, Mr. Blackmoor. Poor little me helping great big you."

"Please," I muttered, and hung up. Before the instrument hit the cradle bar I heard her bark of a laugh.

She'd come up. She couldn't resist the chance to see me squirm.

And she did come up, swinging her hips jauntily as she came into the room. She flashed a glance at the bedroom, saw the body on the floor, and smiled sweetly at me.

I said: "Thanks for coming up, Red."

"What can I do for you, you baboon? I can't grab your face and shove you into a chair. Maybe I can give you a last treat, though." She sank into a chair and crossed her legs, letting her dress ride high enough for me again to see her frosty blue panties. She said: "Take a good look. You won't be seeing any of this where you're going."

I turned my back on her, and picked up my straight scotch. I had to turn away from her, or I might have belted her. If I had been in the spot she thought I was in, she was doing the lowest, meanest thing she could possibly do. Not that I would have been giving that very much thought, but in her twisted brain she figured it was uppermost in every man's mind. When I finished my scotch, I turned and said:

"Drink?"

"Sure, I'll have a last drink with you. I'll drink to your being well broiled in the hot seat."

When I handed her the drink, I said: "You seem to know a lot about what happened in the other room."

She smiled sweetly at me, raised the glass and sipped. She had lowered her legs somewhat now and was just showing her stocking tops.

I WAS beginning to wonder how I could stall her. And I was afraid I had hit Randy too hard. He might be out for two hours.

The redhead sipped her drink slowly. Her eyes never left mine. I tried to act like I was squirming. The act must have been fairly good, for she seemed to be having a hell of a good time.

Rawson was a pretty good egg to stand so long and so quiet. Most guys would have come barging out and said nuts. But then most guys are not taken from hotel-dick jobs and put into an agency manager-ship.

It was then that the low groan came from the bedroom. The redhead leaped from her chair as if someone had thrust a hot poker through the seat. She crouched in feline tension, stared wide-eyed into the bedroom. Another groan came—and then the "corpse" decided to move.

"He's alive!" I yelled at her. I snatched up the phone. Holding the bar down, I yelled excitedly: "Send me a doctor! Emergency!"

The redhead was clinging to the back of the chair, watching the "corpse" twitch from time to time. Then she covered her eyes and sank back into the chair.

I said softly: "And now Jessup can name his would-be killer."

That brought her head up, got her thinking a moment. She said hoarsely: "He'll think it was me. He was facing me."

"It's sure going to be tough on you, Red—if you are innocent. Jessup will remember the last face he saw before he blacked out. He'll tell that to the police."

She clutched the arms of the chair. "I didn't do it. I didn't even know it was going to happen."

"Tough, Red. When Randy gets wind of this, he's going to lose himself in darkest Africa. You'll take the rap. . . . Damn, where's that doctor!" I ran into the bedroom, gently kicked Randy in the temple

and came out again. "He's alive all right," I said quite truthfully.

Then the redhead blurted: "Randy killed him—or tried to kill him. I saw him. I'll tell the cops! I'll tell the world!"

I raised my voice: "Okay, Rawson."

Rawson came out of the bathroom. I pulled the counterpane off Randy, but by then the redhead had gone into a real, honest-to-God faint. She went head first to the floor.

Rawson wagged his head at me. "It was a beaut, Boss. I'll learn a powerful lot about this detective business working for a guy like you."

"Fine, Rawson. You're on the payroll starting now. Get the cops up here. I'll see you later. I have something important to do."

Rawson frowned. "The cops won't like your leaving—" Then he grinned. "You're the boss."

**D**OWN in the bar Sandra was still perched on her stool. She was slightly tight. Her voice was smokier and her words a bit slower when she said, "Now that you've finished with the redhead—"

I lowered my voice: "The redhead finished herself. She's about to be arrested. Pretty-puss Randy will fry in the sizzle seat, and Jessup is dead. Let's get out of here quick. I don't want you to become involved."

We left the hotel in no time. Sandra's car was in a nearby parking lot. As she got the car rolling down Surf Avenue, she took a breath. "All that in a half hour!"

I grinned. "And I got me a new branch manager to boot. Talking him into taking the job was the toughest part of the whole deal."

Sandra pulled up into a dead-end street that faced the moonlighted ocean. She cut the motor and lights, and leaned back in the seat. Then I heard a sob. I looked closely and saw the tears streaming down her cheeks. I got out my handkerchief.

"Now, sugar, take it easy. The whole thing is over. You should be happy."

"I am happy," she said in a small voice. "The happiest I can ever remember having been."

I put my arm around her. She snuggled tightly against me. She rested her head on my shoulder, her nose against my cheek. We sat that way for a long time. Presently she said:

"This calls for soft music." She pressed in a station featuring dreamy band music.

I closed my eyes to let her perfumed hair and the music engulf me. Then my eyes shot open. An announcer was saying:

*"... and will Mr. John Blackmoor of the Blackmoor Detective Agency please call Police Headquarters. The authorities would like a statement from him ..."*

The dream music came on again.

I said: "Like old times, by God! The cops looking for me—and my holding a witness."

Sandra's arm slid around my neck. "Hold this witness tighter."

I gave her a bear hug. When she opened her mouth to gasp, I kissed her.



*Muriel Havens was slated for a horrible death because she was the only one who could identify . . .*

## THE STARING KILLER

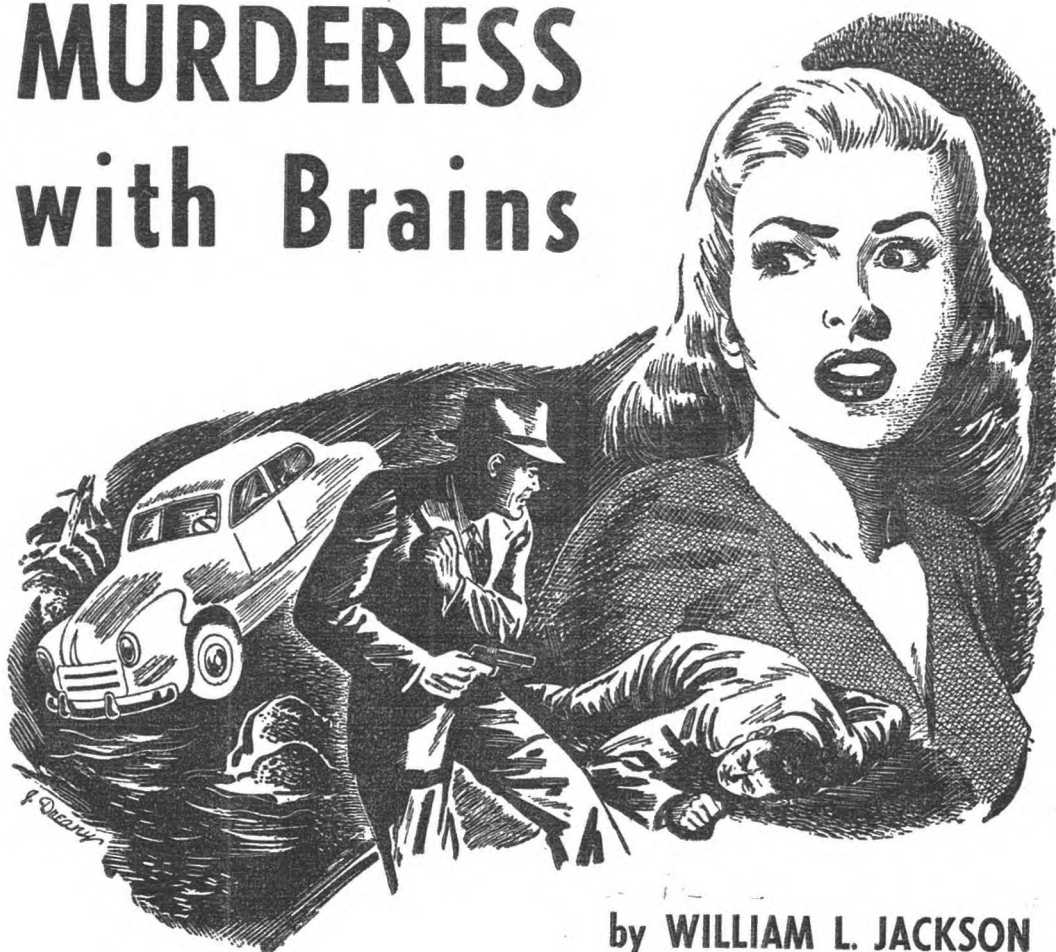
*in next issue's smashing Phantom Detective novel*

By ROBERT WALLACE

LOOK FORWARD TO THIS HARD-HITTING THRILLER OF CRIME  
ON NEW YORK'S TEEMING WATERFRONT!



# MURDERESS with Brains



by WILLIAM L. JACKSON

**H**ER FEATURES were finely chiseled, delicate and even, and her blond hair fell in soft waves to her shoulders. Her neatly tailored sharkskin suit only enhanced a figure that was near perfection. She was a beautiful woman, but her green eyes were cold, with no pleasure in them, and there were lines about her full lips which spoke of little softness.

These lips were set tightly as she handled the wheel of the blue sedan. She did not look away from the road as she said, "And you had to kill a cop. All the money we had, the perfect set-up, and you had to ruin it."

Beside her, Al Flavin leaned forward,

nervously running a slender hand up and down the flaring lapel of his gabardine suit. His lusterless black eyes clouded, and his pale lips pulled tight against his teeth. To anyone else he would have given a hot reply. He would have had his ugly, hair-trigger .32 out and poking into their ribs. But to her he only said, "I'm sorry, Madge. I lost my head. You can still get us out of this, can't you?"

He didn't tell her that she was a murderess as much as he was a murderer. He didn't remind her that she had planned the robbery, that if she hadn't sent him to the fur store there wouldn't have been any dead cop.

*The Muscle Boy Thought Madge Was a Mental Marvel*

Then the job was Al's, a job he knew well. He took only the furs which she had appraised, only pieces which were on display.

"Yes, dopey," she said. "I can still get us out of this. I'll have to."

Just hearing this from her made him lean back and relax a little. She had the brains. She would get them clear somehow. He was the dumb one. He had loused it up. He thought of the fifteen thousand dollars in her purse. All gotten with her brains. He was only the muscle boy, the hood.

Nobody ever suspected a beautiful woman like her, a woman who could dress to kill and look like a million dollars, of working on a layout for a thief. It had worked fine for months. She could walk into a fur salon with her haughty air and get a look at every fur within reach—and she could come out with the location of every alarm wire in the place memorized.

Surprisingly enough, these furs were often harder for their owners to describe than furs from their vaults. And the fences liked to get the goods in small bunches.

**H**E KNEW that he had started their run of bad luck when he had gone away from the house with his billfold in his pocket, as she had told him never to do. Then, inside the darkened fur shop, right where she had told him to be extra careful, he had stumbled right into the damn alarm. It was more bum luck that the police car was so near when the alarm went off. They had pulled up in front before he could reach the street.

The cop who piled out of the cruiser had been a rookie, or he would never have asked for Al's identification without frisking him first. Al could still see the look of surprise on the cop's face as he had brought the wallet out in one hand and the gun in the other.

He hadn't meant to kill him, but when he started shooting he couldn't stop. And he was scared after he dropped the wallet. The other cop had yelled and shot at him, but he hadn't been too keen about following him far with his buddy already dying on the pavement. Al had gotten away, knowing that the wallet would cause trouble, with Madge's picture in it and everything.

Madge had been mad clear through, but she had known what to do. They had been on their way within fifteen minutes after he'd told her about the wallet; and they had hardly passed the suburbs before the car radio had brought them the first bulletins.

"Where are we going, Madge?" Al said. "Out of state?"

"Ha, ha," she said humorlessly. "Just try it now. You killed a cop, remember? We're going north into the timber, up to Widow Bluker's place."

"But that's where you grew up," Al objected. "They'll look there sure."

"Sure they will," she said. "But they won't look hard. They won't expect to find us there. We've got to outsmart them, Al."

"Yeah," he said nervously. "And I guess you can do that." He thanked his stars that she was a woman with brains.

They drove in silence for four more hours, keeping far away from the main highways. Al kept the radio dials spinning, picking up news broadcasts. They were all the same now. The police weren't giving any more information on the search; but Al knew that they would be looking all over the state by now.

Long after midnight, Madge turned the car onto a gravel road beside a river. She stopped where the road turned back from a high bank above the water. "Better get the stuff and get out," she said.

"What are you doing? You ain't ditchin' the car?"

She glared at him. "Maybe you think we ought to park it in front of Bluker's? Use your head for a change."

"Sure. You're right." Al took their bags from the car and stood by the side of the road as she held the car in gear and eased it off into the water. "That's Pike's Hole there," she said. "Thirty feet of water and ten more of mud."

Now they walked away from the river, and Madge led the way on a road which was little more than a path. They came out of the woods at the rear of a small frame house in a clearing. "Bluker's," Madge said. "The widow's in bed." She went to the back door and knocked.

An upstairs window opened, and the head

of a woman in night dress appeared. "Land sakes," she said. "Is that you, Madge?"

"Sure enough, Blanche. Can you let me in?"

"Well, I guess I can. I can't think of anyone I'd rather let in. You just hold on a minute." Her head disappeared from the window, and in a moment she unlocked the door for them. She hugged Madge fondly and cried.

Inside, after the greetings, Madge told Blanche Bluker a story which made even Al blink a little. She told the widow that she was in trouble with the city police and that they would have to stay here for a while. According to Madge, the trouble with the police was all a terrible mistake, and she had a high-powered lawyer hired to straighten things out. The lawyer had hired Al, she said, to come along and protect her.

Blanche Bluker appeared to believe every word of it. She patted Madge's shoulder consolingly and said, "You're welcome here. You know that. You can stay as long as you like, and I'll shoo away anyone who comes looking for you."

SO MADGE went to bed in Blanche's bedroom, and Al was given the guest room, while the widow slept on the couch by the door. After he was sure that the old lady was asleep. Al let himself into Madge's room. She was in bed, wearing pink pajamas and reading.

"Is she going to swallow that story?" Al said. "What are we going to do if the cops should come here tonight?"

Madge smiled slyly. "Sure she'll believe it. She brought me up from pigtales. I could always cry a little and make her believe anything I told her. She doesn't take a newspaper, and she doesn't have a radio.

"Don't worry about cops tonight. Every cop in the state couldn't get Sheriff Dalm out here from town tonight. He's too sweet on Blanche to wake her in the middle of the night. We can stay here as long as we like. There's a big root cellar under the house, and we can hide there if anyone comes. Quit worrying and go to bed."

Al padded down the hall again, and the more he thought about it the prouder he was

of Madge. There couldn't be any place better than this, with the old lady to cook for them and everything. They could stay here until things cooled off and then drift.

In the morning they took their baggage down into the root cellar, and Madge threw a bunch of dirty things at Blanche to wash. "We'll be snug enough here," she said and, when Blanche's back was turned, added, "You'll get sick and tired of reading farm magazines, but it'll beat jail."

She was right. By noon Al was so sick of reading about feed mixtures and potato planting that he was almost glad when Blanche came from the kitchen and said, "Sheriff Dalm's car just came around the river bend. You two better go and hide."

They went down into the root cellar, and in five minutes they heard the sheriff's car stop beside the house. He knocked on the back door, and Blanche let him in.

"Afternoon, Blanche," he said. He stammered and mumbled something about not wanting to bring bad news, and then asked if Blanche had been hearing from the adopted girl she used to have around.

"No," Blanche said smoothly. "I haven't heard from her for months. She was doing fine in the city the last time I got a letter, but she don't write much any more. Why do you ask, Sheriff?"

"Oh, it isn't much," the sheriff said. "She's in a little trouble with the police, but it isn't a matter of life and death—for her. If you should get a letter from her or if she should drop in, you let me know right away. Okay?"

"I certainly will, Sheriff," Blanche replied. "And you let me know if you hear any more about her, won't you?"

"I'll let you know right away," the sheriff said. "'By, Blanche." In a moment they heard his car pull away, and Madge smiled and lifted the trap door to let them out of the cellar.

Blanche Bluker grinned impishly. "I could always handle that Sheriff Dalm. He's been sweet on me for years."

Within another hour Al grew tired of playing solitaire. The afternoon sun had warmed the house, and he walked to a window to let in a breeze. He opened the win-

dow, and his spine seemed to suddenly be made of ice water. He set his lips and slowly raised his hands.

Outside, crouching beneath the window, was a state trooper, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. He said, "Hold it," and his gun centered on Al's chest.

Al counted five more troopers in the woods on this side of the house alone. "Madge," he yelled, "walk out of the house and don't do anything funny. A cop's got his gun in my belly, and the place is covered."

Madge gasped and Blanche began to cry. Al stood still, and soon steps sounded behind him and a rough hand jerked his gun from his pocket. He followed the policeman to the rear of the house, and he saw more troopers on the lawn with Madge, Blanche, and Sheriff Dalm.

"Blanche," Sheriff Dalm said, "I'm sorry for you, but I'm not sorry for you, young lady, or for your cop-killing boy friend.

From the things some shop owners said after they saw your picture in the paper, I'd say that you two were a fine combination of thieves."

He looked at Al. "You thought she was pretty smart, casing all those places for you, didn't you?"

"She is smart," Al said. "She was making us rich. I loused it up, not her."

"You did, eh?" Sheriff Dalm stepped up onto the back porch and pointed into the kitchen. "Look at those," he said. "I saw them when I came here earlier. I'm sorry to say that Blanche isn't young enough still to be using those things."

He was pointing at Blanche Bluker's clothes rack and the things which Madge had given Blanche to launder. Bright bits of lingerie they were, rich and silken and frilly, things such as only a young woman with vanity and a good figure could possibly wear.

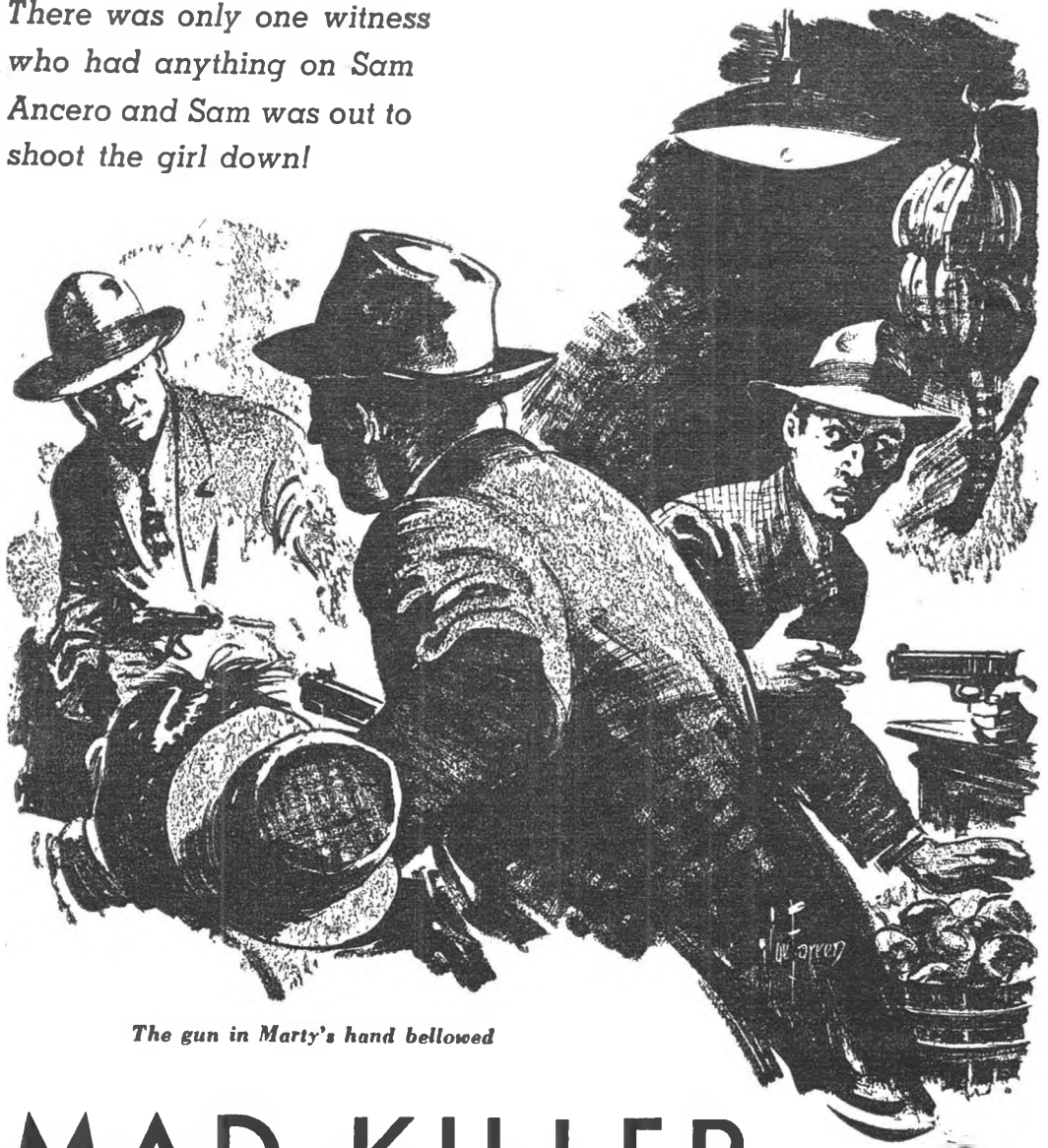
### CHERCHEZ LA FEMME

**L**ISTED below (in jumbled fashion) are 10 females—past and present—and the "crimes" which brought them infamy. Can you match up at least 6 of them correctly for a passing score? 7 to 9 is excellent; 10, perfect.

- |                                      |  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1. LUCREZIA BORGIA                   | (a) after murdering her two roommates in a fit of jealousy, she dismembered their bodies and shipped them in a trunk from Phoenix to Los Angeles |
| 2. MARY READ                         | (b) this female fanatic was jailed for trying to assassinate Lloyd George, Britain's Prime Minister, in 1917                                     |
| 3. MARGARIDA GERTRUD ZELLE (MacLEOD) | (c) she and her spouse were sentenced to death for "selling" Uncle Sam's atomic bomb secrets   |
| 4. MARTHA BECK                       | (d) she, known as "Axis Sally," broadcast propaganda for Herr Goebbels during World War II   |
| 5. ETHEL ROSENBERG                   | (e) this little Dutch lass was executed for sending no less than 102 persons to their untimely graves  |
| 6. MILDRED E. GILLARS                | (f) she and her brother, Caesar, were quite notorious poisoners in XVth century Italy  |
| 7. MRS. IVA IKUKO TOGURI D'AQUINO    | (g) known as the "Lonely Hearts Murderers," she and her paramour were electrocuted in Sing Sing prison   |
| 8. ALICE WELDON                      | (h) she was a pirate bold  |
| 9. VAN DER LINDEN                    | (i) under the name of "Tokyo Rose," this American born traitress broadcast propaganda for Japan during World War II                              |
| 10. WINNIE RUTH JUDD                 | (j) she was better known as "Mata Hari," and was executed by the French during World War I for being a German spy                                |

(Answers on page 113)

*There was only one witness  
who had anything on Sam  
Ancero and Sam was out to  
shoot the girl down!*



*The gun in Marty's hand bellowed*

# MAD KILLER

By PHILIP MORGAN

**I**T WAS a gray, miserable day. Rain slanted down in a steady downpour, churning up a muddy stream in every gutter. I felt lousy, like the day. On the drive down to Headquarters, I had time to think, so I thought about Sam Ancero.

Sam and I were raised in the same neighborhood. I had known him all his life, not well, but no one knew Sam Ancero well. I knew his mother and father and I knew his brother Marty. Marty and I ran with the same gang, a tough

bunch of kids who had gotten into a fair share of trouble. But the trouble we got into was the kind all kids love. It was never anything really bad.

Sam was different. In the neighborhood, it was too important to be tough, to be big. It meant you commanded a certain respect not given the little ones. And Sam Ancero was little. It was strange, because Marty was a big lug, but Sam was a runt and it rankled in his soul.

From the first, Sam was quiet and surly and friendless. He was mad at the world, but none of us thought anything about it. Then Sam shot the thug raiding his dad's fruit market. After that, it was pretty plain that Sam was heading for real trouble. After that, he walked big and talked big and wasn't ever without a gun. His folks tried to discipline him and failed, so Marty tried. Sam liked Marty, but he wouldn't listen even to him. He began to run with a tough crowd and when he was eighteen, he left the neighborhood for good. He came back for occasional visits and he was always well-dressed and driving a good car. But there were bad rumors around about him.

Marty and I grew up and he took over the fruit market when his dad had the stroke. I joined the force and worked my way up to lieutenant after ten hard years. I learned a lot more about Sam Ancero. He had a bad reputation, even in the underworld. The hoods were scared of him, scared of his hair-trigger temper and his meanness. He would shoot anytime and they all knew it.

The boys walked soft around Sam Ancero.

He was thought by the department to have had a hand in at least ten gangland killings, but there was never anything proved against him. The name of Sam Ancero was a name to be reckoned with in the underworld, but down in the neighborhood, it was a matter of deep shame that killed Sam's parents. It was a tough burden for Marty too, but he never said anything.

I reached Headquarters and climbed the three flights of stairs to Captain

Shan's office. He scowled when I came in, but in thought, not in anger. He was moving a pencil around the top of his desk with his blunt fingers, a sure sign he was worried. I knew part of the news, so I wasn't surprised.

"I suppose you heard," he said.

"I heard a little of it," I said and took a chair.

"The mayor wants Sam Ancero knocked off. He says the Farley killing Wednesday was the last straw. Between us, Farley had a lot of powerful friends, even if he was a crook. They're puttin' the heat on the mayor and he's passin' it on to us."

"We haven't any proof it was Sam. He and Farley were feuding, but we don't know he did it."

"There's a witness. She saw Sam at the time near the scene of the shooting. With what we have, it's enough to get a conviction. She was found last night, after you went home. She says she didn't know it was important, so she didn't come in earlier. There wasn't anything in the papers about us thinkin' Sam did it, so that sounds all right."

"Who's the witness?"

"HELEN CONNORS," he replied softly. He watched my face then, to see what was going to happen. I don't know whether he saw anything, or not, because I've been covering up my emotions for a long time, but it was a real belly-punching shock. I leaned across the desk, breathing hard.

"You're taking care of her, aren't you, Dan? You aren't letting her walk around outside?" I was scared. My mouth was dry and I felt my skin prickle. I had known Helen Connors since we were both six years old. We had grown up together and she was the first date I ever had. We had gone together off-and-on ever since. The way it was, we were miserable together and miserable apart, so we finally gave up and dropped it. But she was still the finest person I'd ever known and Malone knew how I felt about her.

"Sure, kid," he said softly. "We wouldn't

be foolish enough to leave her out where he could get at her; you know that." I leaned back in the chair and breathed a little easier.

"Where is she?"

"At her place. It's a fourth-floor apartment and doesn't connect in any way with the adjoining apartments. The only way anyone can get in is through the front door. I've got three men stationed there and a policewoman inside with her. She's safe."

"Have you picked up Sam yet?"

"No. He got word somehow that a pick-up was out for him and skipped. He's hiding out somewhere around town, is my guess. I have men combing the city for him."

"Listen, Dan, this is serious." I was sweating and my stomach was tight. I remembered how Sam Ancero was, and I was scared. Not for me, but for Helen Connors. "You've got her covered, but he'll get to her somehow, sometime. She has to come out sometime, and when she does, he'll get her. You don't know him like I do. He's got some screws loose and he's as vicious as a mad dog. He's cunning, too."

"That's what I wanted to see you about. You've got to find him. You know him; you're the only man I've got that does. Find him and bring him in and she'll be safe. No one in the underworld will do anything to help him once he's put away. They'll be glad to be rid of him. As long as he's out, he can hire things to be done, but once he's in here, he's as good as sitting in the hot seat. Find him and bring him in."

I stood up and I guess the fear I felt was showing, because he nodded soberly, "Sure, kid, I know how it is, but she saw the guy and she's the first one who ever has. It's the first crack we ever had at him and we have to chance it."

I left then, before I forgot I was a cop and started begging him to drop it. I couldn't stand the thought of Helen being stalked by the kill-mad Ancero. I went out to my car and drove to her apartment house. I took the elevator up to four

and went down the long hallway to 415. The cops at the door were watching me from the moment I turned the corner and they didn't relax until they were sure who it was. They were being cautious, which was a tribute to Ancero's toughness. They weren't foolish enough to take any chances. I stopped and talked to them a minute before I knocked.

"You're watching close enough, boys," I said, "but don't relax for a second. And don't let anyone you don't know into the place no matter how hard they beg. Even if they look like your sainted aunt."

"Don't worry, lieutenant, they won't get to her," Bill Frailick said and gave me his grin. Having him there reassured me. He's a good man and lightning with a gun.

I KNOCKED lightly on the door. It came open an inch and the pinched face of the policewoman stared out at me. "It's okay," Frailick said and she opened up. She didn't know me and I was pleased that she had waited to be told. The detail was being run right.

I went inside and Helen rose from the davenport and came to meet me. She was tall and her figure was perfect. Her pretty face was a small oval, but what you noticed were the eyes. They were green, green as an emerald is green and you could swim in their depths.

"What's the idea of being in the wrong place at the wrong time?" I asked and grinned. She smiled back and from the smile I knew she thought this was all a lot of foolishness. That wasn't good. That made it tougher.

"They're making too big a thing of it, John," she said gently and put her hand on my arm. "Don't worry about me. I've known Sammy Ancero all his life. He wouldn't hurt me."

"You don't know him at all," I said harshly. "You knew a kid and he's not a kid any more. He's killed people before and he'll be after you. I know him. I know what he'll do. For my sake, do what we tell you until after the trial. Don't think this is foolish, because believe

me, it isn't."

She was watching my face and I think she knew how scared I was, but she still thought I was wrong about Sam. "All right, John, I'll do what you say, if it will make you feel better.

"Fine. I have to run along now, but, I feel better."

"All right, but come up for dinner tonight. I'll go crazy cooped up like this." She rose on tip-toe and kissed me lightly on the cheek and I went out of there.

I drove down to the old neighborhood and pulled in before Ancero's Market. If anyone knew where Sam could be found, it was Marty. I went in and the place was empty, except for Marty, who was unpacking some apples. He looked up and saw me and came up on his feet, grinning.

"John, it's good to see you, boy. It's been a long time. How are you?" He was pumping my hand and there wasn't any doubt about it, he was glad to see me.

"It isn't a social call, Marty." I sat down on the counter and shoved my hat back on my head. "I'm looking for Sam." Immediately, his face shut me out.

"I haven't seen Sam for a long time, John; he doesn't come around much."

"You know where he can be reached; he always thought a lot of you. It's important, Marty, very important. Helen Connors is a witness against Sam in the Farley shooting and Sam's found it out. He'll try to kill her. I've got to find him before he does." Marty's face showed surprise then.

"You don't mean that, John. You don't really think Sam would kill Helen. Why, he's known her all his life. She's a nice girl; he wouldn't hurt her. I know. After all, he's my brother."

I came off the counter and stood in front of him, pleading now. "He's gone bad, Marty. He's got a twist in his head. He was always different, you know that. Now he's a killer and he's crazy. He's like a hunted animal. I hate to be telling you this, but you've got to help me."

"You're wrong, John," he replied coldly and his black eyes had shut me out.

"Sam's bad, I won't argue that, but if he ever killed anyone, it was another gangster, like that Farley. He wouldn't turn against his friends. Now, you better be going." I turned and started toward the door and I felt a million years old. I turned at the door and spoke to him desperately.

"You know how to get in touch with him. Get him and have him call me at noon at the office. The line won't be tapped. You'll do that for an old friend, won't you, Marty?"

"All right," he said heavily after a long time. It was all I was going to get, so I walked on out. I drove back to the office, refusing to think. I went upstairs and closed myself in the office and waited. It was eleven-thirty then and the next thirty minutes were the worst I'd ever known.

AT EXACTLY twelve o'clock, the phone rang. I yanked it off the hook.

"Hello."

"That you, Boyle?" Sam's voice was cold and disdainful.

"Yeah, Sam, it's me. I want to make a deal, Sam, a good deal for you."

"I'm not interested," he said and laughed his crazy laugh.

"Wait. Hear me out. If you'll turn yourself in, I'll see to it that you get to cop a plea. No hot seat, just a little time in stir. It's a good thing. Take it."

"I've got a better thing," he said. "I'll come to trial and I'll get off. That's a better deal, copper." And of course he could never get off if Helen was alive. He didn't say it, but his meaning was clear enough. I was sick then and then the red haze of murder spread before my eyes. "You got anything else to offer, copper?" he asked.

"Just one thing, Sam. Put it down in the book, because I'm not kidding. If anything happens to Helen Connors, I'll hunt you to hell. You'll never come to trial, Sam. If I find you, I'll kill you on the spot. If someone else finds you, I'll come down to your cell and I'll kill you there. I'll shoot you in the belly and watch



you scream and plead and I'll spit in your face. I mean it, Sam. You know me. You know I mean what I say." It stopped him and I could almost feel him thinking. When he spoke again, his voice was high and wild.

"Yeah, I know you mean it, Boyle. You're a tough one, too. If it was anyone else, they'd be scared stiff, but Sam Ancero ain't scared. I'm tougher'n you ever thought of bein'. It just means I gotta take care of you, too, before they pick me up." The phone clicked and went dead.

I got two good men and I spent the afternoon searching the town. We hit all the likely hide-outs and I talked to every stoolie I knew, but I got nothing. The boys would have told me if they had known, but they didn't know. The city was as familiar to Ancero as the palm of his hand and he couldn't be found. And at five o'clock the radio squawked out my name. The radio sergeant sounded excited when I answered. There had been a shooting at the Forsythe Apartments and one of our men was down. The Forsythe was Helen's apartment house. I rode across town with my heart slugging in my chest like a triphammer. I slammed to a stop before the building and was out of the car and running before the two men with me had started to move.

I took the elevator to four and it seemed to be crawling upwards. I was out in the hall, then sprinting for 415. I came around the corner and a big cop with a tommy-gun chopped down on me. He almost cut it loose before he saw who it was. There were other cops with guns standing around and all of them were nervous. Captain Malone knelt on the floor beside Bill Frailick. Bill had a flock of holes in his chest and he was dead.

**W**HAT happened?" I asked harshly.

Malone looked up at me and there was green murder shining in his eyes.

"Two of 'em stepped into the hall from the stairway back there," he nodded and I looked down the hall and saw the two figures sprawled out at the entrance to the stairwell. "One of 'em cuts loose with a

chopper and Bill gets it. The other two boys start blastin' and end it quick, before anyone else gets hurt. They were tryin' to break through and get her. The two hoods were Tony Lanzoni and Herb Friesen, both workin' for Ancero." His face was dead-set and white showed at the corners of his mouth.

"Is Helen still inside?"

"Yeah. I've called every off-duty man back to duty and no-one rests until we get him. You get hot, Boyle, and find him for me. I don't care how you bring him in, but bring him."

I nodded grimly and then knocked at the door of the apartment. The police-woman opened up and let me in. As soon as Helen saw me, she ran to me and I held her close.

"It was horrible, John. The guns started and when it ended and we opened the door that poor man was dead. He died protecting me."

"It was his job, honey. Don't think about it. But now you know we weren't being foolish. You aren't to leave this apartment until the time of the trial, or until Sam is dead."

I told the policewoman she could go for a couple of hours and then I took Helen's arm and led her to the kitchen and pushed her gently down in a chair. I found the whisky and the vermouth and mixed a shaker of Manhattans. I got two of them in her and it helped. Afterwards, I fried us a pair of steaks and we ate. Helen wasn't hungry, but I made her eat the meat and she felt better.

When we had finished, we went into the living room. She curled up in the big easy chair, but I paced the floor nervously, trying to think of some way to shake Sam out in the open where we could get a crack at him.

"I'm scared, John," Helen said. "I didn't believe that he would kill me, but now I know and I'm scared stiff. It's terrifying to know that someone is hunting for you, trying to kill you. I feel so helpless."

"That's natural. I'm scared, too. Sam's off his rocker and has been for a long time.

*(Turn to page 102)*

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It's hard to figure what a guy like that's going to do. But until we find him, you're going to stay put."

"But he's after you, too. He'll shoot you from ambush. You won't have a chance. You'll have to hide, too."

"I have to keep looking for him. He'll come out after me, and he might give us a chance at him. If both of us are on ice, he'll lay low."

"Why won't Marty tell you where he is?"

"He doesn't realize how far Sam's gone. They're brothers and Marty can't forget that. If I could ever make him realize that Sam is trying to kill you and me, he'd turn him in fast enough."

**T**HEN an idea whirled me around and I ran for the phone. Maybe, just maybe, I had stumbled on the answer. Helen started to ask a question, but I cut her off with a wave of my hand. I dialed the number of Marty's fruit stand, knowing he stayed open until nine o'clock. He answered after a short wait.

"This is John, Marty. Listen, kid, I'm going to ask you another favor, a big one. You heard about the cop that was shot this afternoon?"

"Yeah, I heard." His voice was cool.

"They were trying to get Helen, Marty, and the cop got in the way."

"It wasn't Sam," he said, but there was a shade of doubt in his voice.

"It was Sam's men, because we got 'em. Now listen, kid, I want you to do this. You contact Sam and let him know I'll be there at your place at nine o'clock, when you close. Tell him I'll be there alone and that I don't know you're contacting him. If he's the fair-haired boy you think he is, this won't hurt him. If he isn't, it's time you were finding it out."

He thought about it for quite a while. "You'll come alone? No tricks?"

"No tricks, kid. You have my word."

"All right, John, I'll do it. But you're all wrong about Sam." He hung up and I turned to Helen with a triumphant grin.

"We've got a chance; he's going to do it. Sam won't pass up a chance at me,

especially since he trusts Marty and knows I'll be there alone. He'll figure I wanted to question Marty." Helen stood up and came to me. She put her arms around my neck and looked up into my eyes.

"Be careful, darling," she said, very softly. I saw what was in her eyes and I bent my head and kissed her, feeling very humble. I knew then that we had been fools, that we should never have stayed apart so long. But it wasn't the time to say anything, not with Sam Ancero looking for me. I put her gently away from me and went to the door.

"You stay right here until I come back, understand?" She nodded and blew me a kiss as I stepped out into the hall. They had taken Frailik away and there were four new men there now. The police-woman was with them and she went into the apartment when I came out.

I went downstairs, got my car and started across town, really moving. It was already eight o'clock and I wanted to get to the market before Sam had a chance to lay a trap. Everything hinged on getting him inside.

I parked directly in front of the market, which was still open, and hurried inside, my back muscles crawling as I passed through the lighted doorway. Marty was waiting on a late customer and didn't look at me until the woman had gone. Then he turned his black eyes on me and I saw that they were glittering wickedly.

"If you're wrong, John, I'm going to break your neck."

"If I'm wrong, I'll let you. Now, pull all the shades." He went to the windows and pulled the shades and then clicked the locks on both front and back doors. He came back to the counter where I was sitting and he saw the .45 automatic I had laying there beside me. I shoved it at him.

"You might need this. If I'm wrong, just keep it out of sight. Sam'll have some playmates with him." He stared at me for a minute, but in the end, he picked it up and stuck it in his waist-band, under his apron. It didn't show.

We sat and waited then. Time crawled by, gradually tightening our nerves until we were as jumpy as a pair of cats. I lit a cigarette, didn't like the taste, and ground it out. Marty had a bunch of grapes in his hand and he kept popping one into his mouth and then spitting the seeds savagely across the room. I glanced at him and saw harsh, deadly implacability stamped on his broad face.

The door handle rattled slightly at ten after nine. Marty looked at me and I nodded. He slid off the counter and walked to the door. I went along beside him and stopped to the left of the door, against the wall. I didn't draw my gun and I realized suddenly that I didn't feel anything at all. I was as cold and nerveless as death. This was for all the chips and I knew it and that was that.

THEY came through the door fast and sliding, like the rats they were. There were two of them, sallow, young-old men with the mark of the professional gunman written all over them. They saw me there against the wall and wheeled on me. They weren't carrying guns in their hands and they didn't start anything right away. I moved out from the wall to face them and then one of them turned toward the door and nodded and Sam Ancero came in. He looked the same, so little he was hard to believe, with his savage face and his small eyes and his out-size nose. But there was a difference in the face now and at first I couldn't place it. When I did, it came as no surprise. The difference was that now he was crazy, as nutty as a fruit cake. That was what made the difference in his ugly face. It was a long time before anything was said. Then it was Marty, standing behind the three of them, who spoke.

"John's got a crazy idea, Sam. He says you're tryin' to kill Helen Connors. I told him he was screwy." Sam ignored Marty completely and spoke to me.

"I told you I'd get you, Boyle, and now I got you."

"Maybe, Sam, but you missed Helen. You won't get another chance. The wit-

ness against you is still alive and you'll burn." I was playing for the audience and it was working.

"I'll get her, copper, just like I got you. They can't keep her bottled up forever and when they bring her out, I'll get her." I didn't look directly at Marty, but over Sam's shoulder, I saw his eyes widen. A look of unbelieving horror spread across his face. His voice cut across the room with the sharpness of a swung axe.

"You tried to kill Helen, Sam?"

Sam flung his words over his shoulder, keeping his crazy eyes on my face. "Hell yes, I tried to kill her and next time I won't miss. Now, shut up and keep out of this, Marty. This is between me and this dumb cop. Don't worry about any trouble. We'll take him somewhere and dump him."

I was watching closely now, waiting for a sign. It was coming. The two thugs were bent slightly forward and their hands were getting restless. I made my choice between them. The skinny one would be the fastest, so he got it first. Then the fat boy. After that, if Sam Ancero wasn't taken out, I got it.

"Turn around, Sam," Marty said softly, "this is between you and your brother." It was just loud enough to be heard, but it pulled Sam around.

MARTY STOOD there with the big .45 in his hand and Sam's back hunched in surprise. At that instant, I saw the skinny gunman's eyelids flicker. I snapped my hand up to the .38 in the clip-spring holster under my arm and chopped down. My first slug caught the skinny guy right in the mouth and he pitched forward in a shower of blood, dead before he hit the floor. I jumped sideways as the fat one fired and felt a slug slam into the fruit stand beside me. Then I threw three shots as fast as I could yank the trigger and saw them slam like a sledge against the fat man's chest. He made a very polite curtsy, coughed once with a liquid sound, and went down with a crash. I put my gun on Sam Ancero, but he still stood motionless in front of Marty.

"All right, Sam," I said, "we'll be going downtown." He didn't even look around. He was staring at Marty, who held the .45 loose and pointed at the floor.

"Put down the gun, Marty; you wouldn't shoot your own brother."

"Reach up with your left hand and throw away your gun, Sam," Marty said and his voice sounded very weary. "You're going to stand trial for what you did. Do it, or I'll kill you where you stand."

Sam began to edge his left hand upwards, but his right was rising with it. And then he was drawing, his arm flicking upward with frantic speed. The .45 in Marty's hand jumped level and bellowed once, the sound unbelievably loud in the closed room. The slug caught Sam in the chest and threw him back against me. I caught him and tried to hold him up, but he was as limp as a sack of potatoes, and he simply wilted through my arms to the

sawdust-covered floor.

Marty stood with the smoking .45 in his hand and stared at his brother. There wasn't anything to say at all. I went to the phone and made my report to Captain Malone.

"Good, good," he said when I had finished. "Then no one got hurt?"

I paused a minute and then I said, "No, no one got hurt," and put the phone gently back on the hook. I came out into the main part of the store and Marty was sitting there beside Sam, holding his dead hand. He looked up at me and I wished I hadn't seen what was in his eyes. I wanted to say something, but it wouldn't come.

"So long, kid," I said finally and walked away. I got in my car and drove slowly uptown, to Helen and the welcome warmth of her arms. But all the way, I kept seeing Marty Ancero's face as he sat back there and held that dead hand. I felt like hell.

## PICKLED PICKEREL AND PUTRID PICKLES

**P**ICKLED pickerel and putrid, non-bouncing pickles tended to get a score of fellows into some law trouble recently in Orange and Dutchess Counties, New York. Fishermen noticed that there were too many dead pickerel (and other fish) in a brook. They hazarded a good guess as to what had killed those fish, and notified police. Came the cops, viewed the scaly corpses, reached the same verdict as had the fishermen, and said, "A case for the federal boys—definitely."

Came some revenue agents shortly, angled around, located a "still" near the brook, set a trap, sprang same, and reeled in 15 bootleggers—who were promptly haled into court and indicted on charges of defrauding the government of \$520,000 in alcohol taxes. The error those concoctors of "unlawful hootch" had made was in dumping the mash from their still into the brook. It was this discarded mash that had pickled the pickerel (but permanently) and led to their downfall.

As for the "affair of the non-bouncing pickles"—it took place in Ellington, Connecticut. Seems the State Food & Drugs Department takes a mighty sour view, indeed, on those pickles which refuse to bounce—as a pair of "picklers" learned much to their sorrow.

These picklers were plodding along their profitable way bottling and peddling putrid pickles to everybody and anybody—until somebody took sick, and registered a complaint with the Food & Drug people. The F. & D. people, with the aid of federal inspectors, acted swiftly and seized a batch of pickles from one of the picklers' warehouses.

"Ripe, healthy pickles," quote Food & Drugs Commissioner Frederick H. Holbrook, "should not only remain whole, when dropped from the height of one-foot, but should, also, bounce."

The confiscated pickles (which were decomposed and contained rattail maggots) were put to the test. They not only *failed* to bounce, but splatteringly disintegrated. So, naturally, the pair of picklers were promptly pinched for peddling such putrid pickles to the poor public.

—Joseph C. Stacey



# NEEDLED TO DEATH

By ELIZABETH H. SUTTON

*Gertrud was a career girl, and her career was . . . MURDER!*

THE first time that Gertrud Gulick killed, it was almost unpremeditated—you might say, unintentional. She didn't know Obie Roberts; she had talked to him at the most no more than twenty minutes, only long enough to stare greedily at the thick wad of bills in his wallet and to take note of the showy tortoise shell and gold cigarette case set with an opal and ruby.

The police were four months looking for that case and when they found it they

thought they had the murderer. They were puzzled, too, by the weapon used. The medical examiner and his assistants offered several suggestions. All of them proved incorrect.

It was such a tidy stabbing. And that was not surprising because tidiness was Gertrud's most noticeable characteristic. It was surprising, however, that she should have thrust the hypodermic syringe into her pocket after having given an injection with it, and then forgotten it.

She came off duty at 11 o'clock the night of June the twentieth. She was an unattractive girl, her face too long and faintly lopsided. Her skin was pitted—she had suffered from acne in her teens. But her figure was not bad and she dressed rather well. Many girls far less prepossessing acquired husbands and babies, but at thirty she was still single and desperately anxious for a husband.

Perhaps it was this very desperation that frightened men away, for marriage had always been an obsession with her—the only goal worth achieving.

UNOBSERVED by two other nurses, she paused at the entrance to the dressing room and listened to their conversation.

"Stevie's out with Claire tonight," said one running a comb through her clipped curls.

"I don't know what she can see in that long drink of water," retorted the other. "It would be nice if this hospital could get something besides married men and dopes for internes."

"He's not so bad," the first replied, considering. "Kind of easy-going and good-natured."

"Which is why he lets Gulick keep him." The second lit a cigarette and settled herself for an interesting vivisection. "He just hasn't enough energy to say 'No' when she suggests they go some place and she'll foot the bill. If he doesn't watch out one of these days she'll go down to the city hall and buy a license and say 'Here's five bucks for the preacher, let's get married.' And he won't know what it's all about until she's been Mrs. Owens for a couple of years."

The first nurse laughed. "Oh, I don't know. He's pretty gone on Claire."

Her companion blew out a puff of smoke and nodded wisely. "Granted. But if Gulick can provide him with the little luxuries he loves, she'll get him."

Gertrud turned and walked swiftly and silently down the darkened corridor and left the hospital. The hot Chicago night stifled her. Instead of going to her apart-

ment she walked down North Ave. to Lincoln Park. She hadn't guessed that Stevie had a date; when she told him she'd be through work at 11 o'clock he muttered something about a medical meeting at Northwestern.

For a moment rage at him and that sly, conniving blonde engulfed her, then frantic worry replaced it. Was she going to lose him as she had lost Vern and Red?

This was the third time she had written her family that she was engaged. She could almost feel their laughter beating against her eardrums once they learned that Stevie, too, had slipped from her grasp. She couldn't remember a time when her mother hadn't remarked to someone, anyone, "It's too bad Gertrud didn't get my looks the way the other two did. With that long jaw and pointed chin of her father's she'll never get a man. You wait and see."

She walked, unconscious of the moist, green smell of shrubbery, not even feeling the gentle brush of the lake breeze. When at last her sturdy legs felt tired she sat down on a bench near the south lagoon hardly aware that a man was already on the other end of it.

OBIE ROBERTS looked up. Gertrud's white uniform showed plainly, and the darkness, like a painter's glaze of ultramarine and umber, softened and enriched her face.

He cleared his throat. "Swell night."

Without interest she agreed.

If the police had had any knowledge of Obie's character, they would have realized that he practically brought about his own demise. As it was, they concentrated on what they knew, but previously had been unable to prove—that he was a purveyor of marijuana and heroin. So they searched among his associates for motive and opportunity.

What really killed him was his insatiable need to brag.

He had been talking to Gertrud less than ten minutes when he pulled out his gold and tortoise shell cigarette case.

"Take a look at that," he said. "Bet you

never saw anything like that before."

Indifferently she murmured, "It's nice."

"You can't see it properly in the dark."

Fishing in his pocket he brought forth a lighter and handed it to her. "Snap that on and you'll get a better idea."

She complied.

"See?" He pointed a claw-like finger at the front of the case. "My own idea entirely. Right there on that little gold plate where the initials are supposed to be engraved, I got an opal and a ruby. Do you get it? Opal, ruby. O. R., Obie Roberts. Pretty unique, huh?"

If Gertrud could have roused herself sufficiently to show a little enthusiasm he wouldn't have felt it necessary to take out his wallet and riffle through its fat contents to look, he said, for his card to give her.

The money fascinated her. There was a lot of it, some limp and worn, some of it crisp and crackly.

She couldn't tear away her eyes. From the time she was a "probie" she had talked casually about her father's large farm in northern Wisconsin. It was a three-room shack on two scrubby acres; in the winter he hauled wood; in the summer he did odd jobs around town.

Stevie liked luxuries and Claire had only what she earned and not all of that since she supported her mother. Gertrud wanted the money so badly that she thrust her hands in her pockets to keep from snatching it. And it was then that her strong, white fingers curled around the hypodermic syringe put there earlier in the evening and forgotten.

It was rather like watching a movie. She knew what was going to happen; she didn't exactly want it to happen but she couldn't stop it any more than she could have stopped a film. Her hand came out slowly and with unhurried deliberation plunged the needle deep into Obie's heart. He gave a surprised little grunt and settled against the back of the seat as if he were relaxing. Automatically, she pulled out the needle and returned the syringe to her pocket.

For a blank moment she wondered what

was going to happen next, just as she might have wondered at a movie if the film had broken. Then, still without haste, she took the wallet from his limp hand, stood up, and remembering the cigarette case, slipped it from his pocket and walked off.

Stevie was off duty the following weekend and since Gertrud's case had left the hospital and she hadn't yet put her name on the register for a new one, she was free.

Saturday morning she sought him and found him.

"Stevie," she began and let her hand rest lightly on his arm, "could you do me a big favor?"

"What is it?" He was long and blond, with an amiable, indecisive face.

"Dad's sent me some money." She raised her close-set eyes to his. "He knows I've been dying for a car and he suggested I try to pick up a good second-hand one. But I don't know a thing about cars so I thought that if you weren't doing anything special this afternoon perhaps you'd help me choose one." She dropped her glance and added, "It might be fun if we found one to drive some place out of the city and have dinner."

**T**HE next time Gertrud killed it was premeditated. An opportunity arose, she saw its possibilities and she was quick to improvise a plan.

This second killing in Lincoln Park with the same, as yet unidentified weapon, set the newspapers to screaming *homicidal maniac at large*. The police strove mightily to establish a connection between Obie Roberts and Joe Madden, and failed for the very excellent reason that there was none. The two men had never met, and except for Gertrud, whom each had seen for the first time within minutes of their deaths, they had no common acquaintance.

July passed pleasantly for Gertrud. The second-hand Ford she had bought was a real success. She explained to the registry that she didn't care to take the three to eleven shift any more, but was available for either of the other two. Evenings, when Stevie was off duty, they drove



away from the stirring city heat and followed the outer drive north along Lake Michigan.

Claire was a scrub nurse in surgery and since the services had changed the first of the month, Stevie was on P.D. and saw her infrequently. He had a birthday the fourteenth and Gertrud suggested an evening at the Pump Room. She had wrapped the cigarette case and gave it to him when they got in the car.

"Just something a little different I happened to run across in Lawrence of London's," she murmured with a deprecating smile.

He untied the ribbon and pulled back the wrappings carefully. "Say, that's really neat," he exclaimed. "I never saw one just like that before." He turned the case over in his hands enjoying the feel of the smooth tortoise shell. The two jewels intrigued him. "An opal and a ruby," he said. "Now I wonder how they happened to put them there."

"I can't imagine." She laughed lightly. "But it seems so appropriate, our two birthstones together. July and October. When I noticed them I just couldn't resist getting it for you."

"That was nice of you, Gert," he said awkwardly. "Thanks a lot. I'll keep it for special occasions."

It was in the middle of August that Stevie confessed to Gertrud that he was in rather a jam. He had a fondness for playing the horses and he'd run up an account of \$125 with his bookie. He didn't know where he was going to find the money and Joe Madden was pressing him pretty hard for it.

"I'll take care of it," she told him swiftly. "Don't give it another thought. Where is this Madden?"

"Just call him," said Stevie. "He'd go anywhere to collect a thin dime."

Gertrud's intention had been to pay the money herself. . . anything to bind Stevie closer to her. But she didn't have it. The money she'd gotten from Roberts was gone. The car and their evenings together cost a lot because Stevie enjoyed the really nice places. And just the previous week

she had splurged on an elaborate negligee thinking it would be perfect for her trousseau.

Stevie had never actually proposed, but from the first, Gertrud talked about marriage and children and a home, and since he never said he wasn't going to marry her and he did continue to accept her invitations, she had been encouraged as far back as last May to write her mother that she was engaged to an awfully nice man and they hoped to be married after he was established.

THE plan of killing Madden and so riding Stevie of his debt hit her fully matured. There was no need to mull over elaborate methods. Her first idea was simple and, she felt, workable.

The following evening at 8:30 she telephoned Madden.

"I'm a friend of Dr. Owens," she told him. "and he was called out of town unexpectedly this morning. Before he left he gave me some money for you, but I got busy and forgot all about it. Could you pick it up?"

"Sure," he said. He probably guessed that she was the one providing the money but it made no difference to him who the sucker was so long as he got it. "Whereabouts are you?"

"That's the trouble," she said. "I'm just leaving now with some friends to go down to Lincoln Park and I don't want to keep them waiting. But I could meet you there, right by the LaSalle monument. It wouldn't be any more bother for you than coming here."

"Okay," he said. "Make it 9:30 and I'll be there."

"I'll have on a black linen dress," she told him and hung up.

She was there, waiting in the shadow of the statue when he arrived. She moved forward, her white arms and face gleaming eerily in the gloom.

"Mr. Madden? I'm Stevie's friend."

He looked around apprehensively.

"Where are your buddies? I thought you said you were coming here with some people?"

She laughed easily. "They decided to go on to the beach for a swim but I thought I ought to wait for you since I'd promised Stevie I'd give you the money."

"Okay," he said. "Where is it?"

She fumbled in her handbag. "Oh dear, we women carry so much junk." She brought forth the syringe clenched firmly in her fingers and moving a step closer to him thrust the needle into his heart. He gave a startled ejaculation and pitched forward. She caught him and with professional competence eased him to the ground. She waited only long enough to remove the money from his billfold.

The medical examiner in his report stated that although he was still puzzled by the weapon he felt it was safe to assume that whoever had done the killing had a good knowledge of anatomy. A person might be lucky once and slide through the ribs to the heart but to do it twice would be a coincidence so unlikely that it could be disregarded.

**IT WAS** the third murder that was Gertrud's undoing. And yet that was almost as spontaneous as the first.

It was 7:30 in the evening late in October. They were sitting at a table, Claire, Stevie and Gertrud, in The Sausage Shop, a tiny rathskeller whose back entrance was across the alley from the hospital. Vic Orazzi came in; he'd parked his truck in the alley and was after the special, spare ribs and sauerkraut. He always stopped every other Tuesday and had some acquaintance with the hospital crowd. He was fat, 50 and very firmly married but Claire's fragile blondness unfailingly drew him. Seeing an empty place at their table he joined them.

Claire glanced at him pertly. "Well," she demanded, "are you going to tell me how it happens you're driving a truck?"

She had been impressed several weeks earlier when he had told her he was vice-president of the Lake Front Liquor Co., wholesale distributors, but she was inclined to discount it since the only times she saw him he was driving one of their trucks.

He grinned uncomfortably and rubbed his bald head. But he was anxious to impress her with his substance and position. It was still a source of surprise to him for in his earlier days he had been a small time bootlegger in one of the outlying towns. He leaned forward and spoke confidentially.

"You see, Iowa's dry, but the people get thirsty there same as anywhere else, so every two weeks we run a load down to East Dubuque. That's this side of the Mississippi in Illinois. Nothing illegal in it, of course, because the boys from Iowa come over and pick it up from us. So we're in the clear."

He cleared his throat and spoke more softly. "They're glad to get it so they give us a little extra in cash over and above our usual price. My partner and I would just as soon the drivers didn't know that." His small eyes gleamed. "After all, Uncle Sam takes most of what a man earns these days; if you can make a little extra without telling him, you might as well."

Gertrud only half heard what he was saying. She was watching the large diamond that winked on the little finger of his right hand. She was planning to go home for a week at Thanksgiving and she knew that her two married sisters would want to know if she'd gotten her diamond yet. A diamond set the official seal on an engagement. How their eyes would pop if she came home with one the size of that. Their first reaction would be to say that it wasn't real. But there was a jewelry store in Eagle River. A person could take it there and have it valued.

Claire looked at her watch and said she'd have to be getting home since she'd promised to help her mother make over a dress. Stevie yawned and said he was going to lock himself in his room to study. Board exams were coming up soon. Gertrud said goodnight and went out the front door but her feet unconsciously carried her around to the back alley. The big truck with its red and yellow lettering was parked in deep shadow. She climbed up into the cab and waited.

Orazzi came out presently, chewing a

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toothpick, his jacket open, hands in his pockets. He didn't notice her until he was almost in the cab and he was startled.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

She spoke placatingly. "I'm sorry if I frightened you, Mr. Orazzi. I didn't intend to. But there was a—a favor I wanted to ask of you and I didn't like to do it in there with so many people around."

"Yeah?" His voice wasn't encouraging and his eyes narrowed. He was in the cab, now, swung around in his seat, facing her.

She smiled at him, and with her left hand smoothed her hair. His suspicious glance followed the movement.

"It's this." She leaned forward clutching the syringe and plunged it swiftly into him.

Because she was trained to handle heavy, inert bodies it wasn't difficult for her to slide him across the seat and slip into the driver's seat herself. She abandoned the truck in a deserted court off Armitage Avenue and returned to her apartment. There had been far more money in his wallet than she had dared hope and the diamond was beautiful. Throughout the evening she sat twisting it, fascinated by its blazing, liquid colours.

**O**RAZZI'S body was found the next morning. It didn't take long to identify him nor to learn that he'd been carrying a large sum of money and customarily wore an exceptionally fine diamond. As Lieutenant Hilliard pointed out, the killer wasn't so crazy that he didn't know what money was for.

The first break in the case so far as the police were concerned came when Hoffmann, the owner of the rathskeller, called in and told them that Orazzi had eaten his dinner there. The medical examiner had already told them that he must have died within minutes of finishing his meal.

The homicide department descended in a swarm on the neighborhood. Intensive questioning revealed the names of those present in the rathskeller while Orazzi ate his supper and the names of his companions at table.

And within an hour the police had

picked up the interesting fact that Stevie Owens played the horses and had formerly placed his bets with a bookie named Joe Madden. They went to his quarters to wait while he finished cauterizing a tonsilectomy bleeder, and in his top bureau drawer they found the tortoise shell and gold cigarette case.

"And it's as easy as all that," said Lieutenant Hilliard.

When Stevie returned to his room accompanied by a police officer they took him straight to headquarters for questioning.

Stevie refused to say where he had gotten the cigarette case. Perhaps it was some hidden streak of gallantry in his make-up; perhaps it was because the idea of anyone he knew being a killer was completely incredible; perhaps he was worried for his own skin. At any rate he denied all knowledge of it.

That wouldn't have deterred the police but unfortunately he produced an absolutely unbreakable alibi, sworn to by one of their own number. He had left Orazzi eating his supper and returned immediately to the hospital to find a police officer waiting to question him about a child who was in a critical condition as the result of being beaten up by a drunken father. Stevie was with the officer for almost two hours and before that time had elapsed, Orazzi was dead.

Lieutenant Hilliard returned to his office and threw himself into a chair. "It's got to be him." He swore feelingly. "Who else had contact with all three of them?"

"Maybe he did the first two and someone else did the last," suggested Sergeant Burns.

Hilliard ignored the remark and sat frowning. Presently he looked up. "This Gulick, isn't she his girlfriend?"

Burns nodded. "According to one of the nurses she's buying him on the installment plan."

"What do you mean?"

Burns grinned. "She foots all the bills when they go out."

"Where does she get the money?" Hilliard demanded.

[Turn page]

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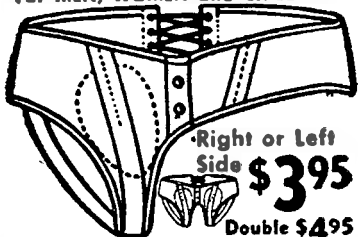
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"Her old man's got a big farm in Wisconsin."

"I think I'll check on that," said Hilliard.

GERTRUD was nervous. It hadn't taken long for her to learn by way of the hospital grapevine that Stevie had been taken to headquarters. That didn't especially alarm her; she thought probably all three of them who had been sitting with Orazzi would be closely questioned. What worried her most was that the police might take it into their heads to search her apartment. She could never explain the money. There was over a thousand dollars.

She sat in a chair by the window staring down at the busy street. Presently she got up, went to her desk and took out two large envelopes. She put half the money in each, addressed them to herself, care of the Hotel Stevens and wrote *please hold* on the envelopes. She slipped the diamond ring on her finger and stared at it for a long time. She couldn't bear to let it out of her possession for even a short time. On the way back from the mailbox she stopped in a grocery store and bought a package of bubble gum.

When Lieutenant Hilliard and Sergeant Burns arrived with a search warrant she was courteous and quietly self-possessed. She told them to look where they pleased. Their search was efficient and painstaking. They found exactly nothing.

They asked her questions. Her replies were gentle, almost apologetic. She had returned from the rathskeller meeting no one she knew on the way. She had been tired and taken a hot bath and then gone directly to bed. She was sorry but there was no one to substantiate her story.

Yes, she knew Stevie bet on the races occasionally but she didn't recall ever hearing the name of his bookie. She had never in her life heard the name of Obie Roberts. No, she didn't know anything about a cigarette case, and she couldn't remember ever having seen one that fitted its description.

It was like bouncing a ball against a

smooth, tiled floor.

The supply of questions finally ran out and Hilliard sat silent in his chair, his gaze moving absently about the room. His glance fell and lingered on a large chewed wad of bubble gum stuck to a torn scrap of paper on the desk. His ten-year-old daughter had the same unlovely habit of preserving chewed hunks of gum. The sight of them always made him feel faintly disgusted. He looked away.

This was the most immaculately tidy place he had ever seen. Every ash tray, except those Gertrud had provided for Burns and himself, was shiningly clean; everything was orderly with an almost sterile neatness. His eyes returned to the gum once more. It was the one slovenly item in the entire apartment. He got up from his seat and crossing to the desk he picked it up and tugged gently at it. A sticky piece came away in his fingers revealing the faint glimmer of gold beneath.

"I guess this does it," he said. "We'll take it along for evidence, and you, too." He shoved the ring, gum and all into his pocket and nodded to Burns.

Gertrud went a little berserk then and clawing at him with frustrated fingers tried vainly to regain her diamond. When it became apparent that the diamond had passed forever from her possession, she lapsed into a lethargy. This lethargy gripped her throughout the trial, her conviction and subsequent appeals. Even the commutation of the death sentence to life imprisonment failed to disturb her.

### Answers to Quiz on Page 95

1-f, 2-h, 3-j, 4-g, 5-c, 6-d, 7-i, 8-b, 9-e, 10-a.

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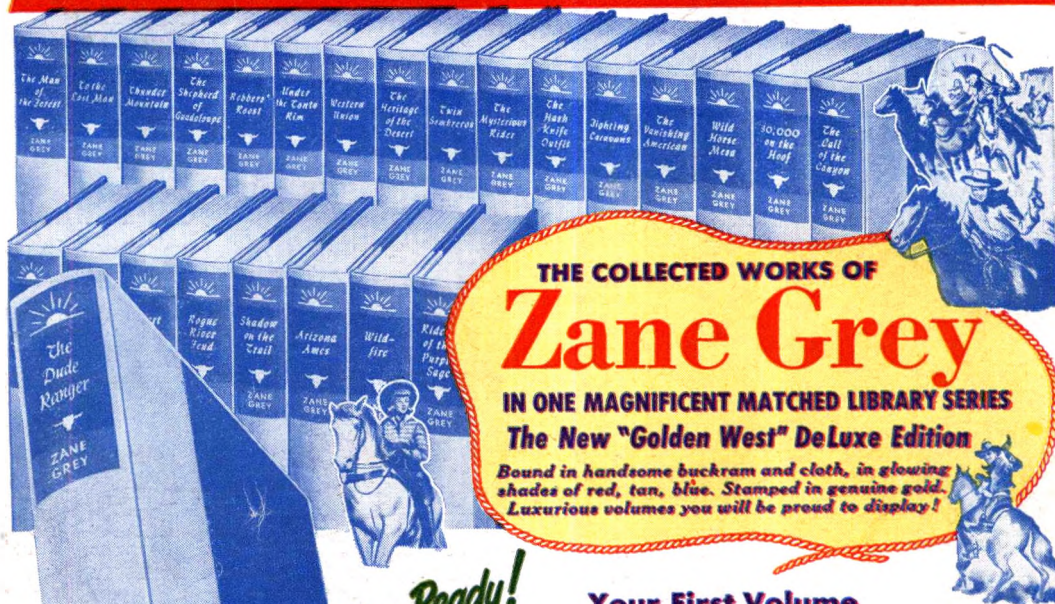
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