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THE CROOKED MILE RIVER MURDERS

A Full-Length Mystery Novel by ROBERT WALLACE

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THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE

JAN. 1968

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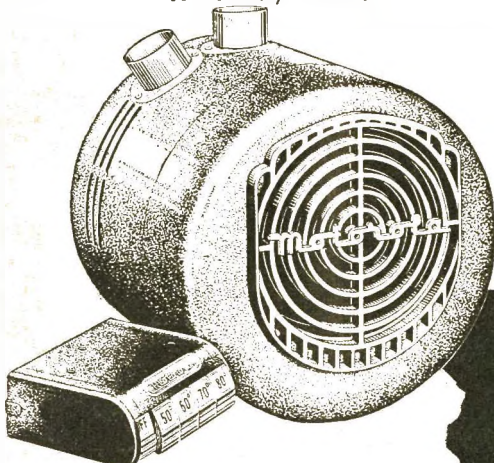
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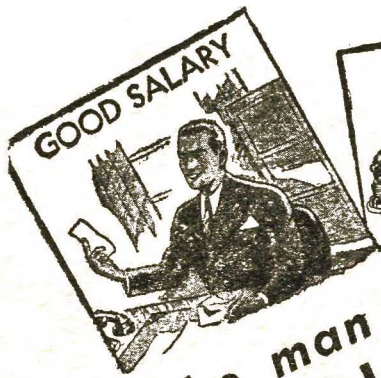
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The PHANTOM DETECTIVE

Vol. L, No. 3

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

January, 1948

A COMPLETE NOVEL

The Crooked Mile River Murders

by Robert Wallace



When Muriel Havens discovers the corpse of a famous Swiss scientist, the Phantom finds himself plunged into a trail of evil crime and intrigue which has grim repercussions the world over! Follow Richard Curtis Van Loan on the manhunt for a ruthless killer! 13

A COMPLETE NOVELET

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When the pinball racketeers put the squeeze on the little druggist they certainly stirred up the hottest hornet's nest in many a year!

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Jack Blake wanted money—wanted it badly enough to kill for its sake

A DEPARTMENT

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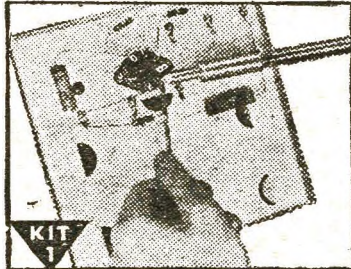
Announcements of coming features, club news and letters from readers

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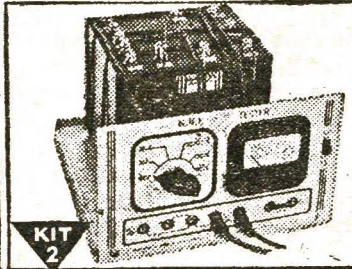


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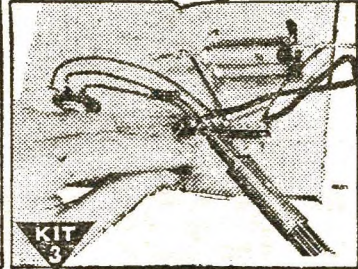
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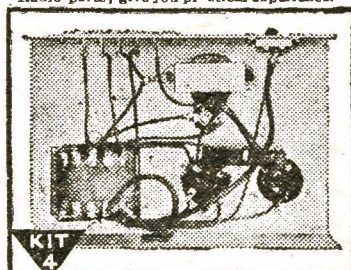
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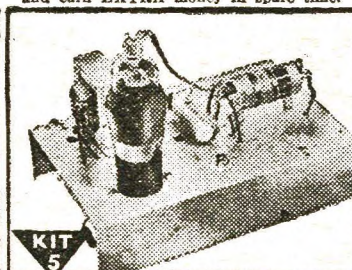
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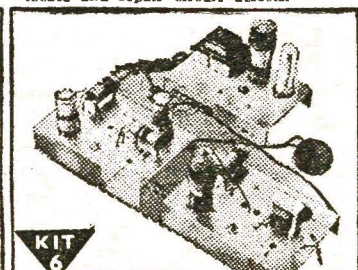
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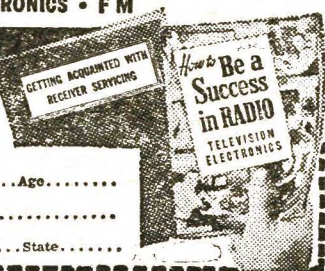
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USUALLY you're pretty safe when you check a hat and coat in a restaurant or night club in New York City or any other large city in the United States. That was one reason why Harley Holt didn't think anything of it when he left his topcoat and fedora with the brassy-haired blonde at Myler's Chop House. When she returned the things to him after his dinner, however, it was an invitation to murder!

Young Harley Holt, the son of a Middle Western newspaper owner, was eager to make his way in the New York newspaper world and hoped to get a hand from Frank Havens, an old family friend. The day after his visit to Myler's Chop House was to be the day of his introduction to the hurly-burly of New York news-chasing activity. But Harley Holt did not live to keep his date with the affable owner of the New York *Clarion*.

Between Myler's Chop House and his hotel, the Victor, on Lexington Avenue, murder caught up to him in the shape of the occupants of a gray coupe. They shot down the young fellow in cold blood.

I passed the Hotel Victor shortly after the shooting, but did not realize what had taken place until, some time later at the home of Frank Havens, Inspector Gregg telephoned to give him the shocking news.

The Mysterious Topcoat

Mr. Havens had the unpleasant task of identifying the bullet-riddled body of the young friend he was planning to launch into the newspaper world. I went along with him to Headquarters and made certain inquiries. At the morgue I had an opportunity to examine the garments and personal possessions of Harley Holt, and I immediately realized that the topcoat did not belong to him.

This suggested that since young Holt apparently had no friends or enemies in New York, the topcoat itself had been used as a means of false identification, and the wrong man had been murdered. I immediately adopted my role of the Phantom Detective

and in this guise called the fact of a possible second murder to the attention of Inspector Gregg.

Witnesses at the Hotel Victor at the time of the shooting were definitely unreliable, but they all seemed to agree that Harley Holt had been brought to a hotel in a taxi a moment before the shooting. The police dragnet turned up the driver of the taxi and he readily admitted bringing Holt from Myler's Chop House to the Hotel Victor.

What was more important, he recalled that the gray coupe had been trailing them. When he drew this fact to the attention of the young visitor from Watervale, Ohio, Holt just laughed.

A Tangled Skein of Clues

My first visit was to the check room at the Chop House, and there the blonde hat check girl readily admitted that she had given Holt the wrong coat, and she promptly gave me the address of the owner of the coat. His name was Clyde Caldwell and he was stopping at the Hotel Pilgrim. I hastened to his room without delay, but I was too late. The killer, who had murdered Harley Holt in error, had now caught up with his intended victim!

This is just the opening of the tangled skein of clues and counter clues making up the interesting narrative which Robert Wallace has entitled "The Clue of the Second Murder."

Curiously enough, both Harley Holt and Clyde Caldwell appeared to be from out of town. Holt came from Watervale, Ohio, and according to identification found on the body of the second murder victim he had recently spent quite a bit of time in Sonajo, Nevada. It was an easy matter to prove that Holt had been murdered by mistake, but that didn't make things any more satisfying to his family and friends. And it merely redoubled my desire to bring the killer to justice.

The idea that a perfectly innocent young

(Continued on page 8)

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THE PHANTOM SPEAKS

(Continued from page 6)

fellow, with a bright future, could be killed in cold blood on the streets of New York, rubbed me the wrong way.

A Visit to Sonajo

The Nevada clue, however, took me to the small mining community of Sonajo and there I worked industriously to uncover the factors that might have been responsible for Caldwell's untimely death. There I ran up against a stone wall of indifference, deliberate subterfuge and sharp-pointed murder threats. Sonajo appeared to be the bulwark of a big industrial empire; its people all believed they were under the protection of a generous patron, and they had no desire or intention to change matters.

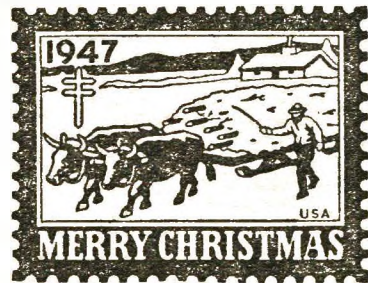
Just how this kind and generous industrial tycoon fitted into the murder of a young man who had once worked for him I did not know immediately. Following the clues that would run their questing fingers into the labyrinth of crime stemming from Sonajo and finding its grim climax in New York City, was a fascinating chase, and a challenge to all of my skill.

But things worked out successfully for me, and I really couldn't help being proud of myself when I finally brought the killers to justice in "The Clue of the Second Murder."

I ran up against a number of novel elements in this case. I met people who had the usual warped perspective and felt that violent crime was the only relief they could secure to escape their humdrum world. There were

(Continued on page 10)

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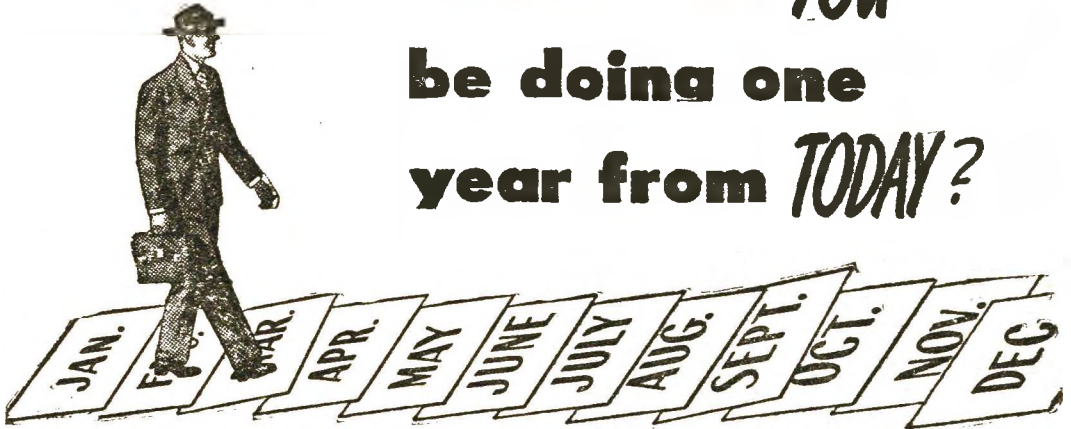
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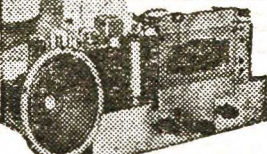
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THE PHANTOM SPEAKS

(Continued from page 8)

serious-minded, carefully calculating individuals, too, who were more than willing to use the weaklings who surrounded them as tools for a succession of killings that left a bloody trail.

Just how this conspiracy of crime was scotched and its people scattered to the prison or the grave makes exciting reading, and I know you'll like the way it is presented to you in "The Clue of the Second Murder." Robert Wallace has done another swell job in chronicling this case. It's the featured book-length novel in the next issue.

Be A "Friend of the Phantom"

TRANSITIONAL periods such as the one in which we are now living always supply the authorities with a number of problems that do not normally confront them. This present post-World War II era is one of those periods, and we find the problems reflected in the newspapers and in our weekly magazines every day in the year.

The United States has been fortunate in having a citizenry that is capable of exerting a strong moral force, a moral force that is again being called into play. One of the groups that is working toward the goal of law-enforcement and respect for constituted authorities is our own reader group, which has been banded together for almost twenty years as FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM. If you would like to associate yourself with us, let us hear from you.

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(Continued on page 111)

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WHY NOT CLEAN UP IN THE CLUBHOUSE WHILE I GET MY CAMERA

SAY, THIS BLADE'S A MONEY. I'VE NEVER ENJOYED A QUICKER, SMOOTHER SHAVE

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THAT'S A BARGAIN!

H-M-M-TALL, DARK AND HANDSOME!

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4-10c

A BOOK-LENGTH
MYSTERY NOVEL



Muriel saw something which caused her to stiffen and utter a strangled scream (CHAPTER I)

THE CROOKED MILE RIVER MURDERS

By ROBERT WALLACE

When Muriel Havens discovers the corpse of a famous Swiss scientist, the Phantom is plunged into a baffling trail of crime and intrigue which has repercussions the world over!

CHAPTER I

TWO SHADES OF RED

THE mahogany speedboat throttled down, turned and cut in toward the crib dock in the cove on the west side of the shining river. Muriel Havens, small, dark and exotic in her white shark-skin slacks and brilliant red jersey, smiled

at the gray-haired, dignified man who anxiously kept his gaze on the ugly looking rocks the speedboat skirted.

"Don't worry, darling, I'm not going to land you on them," the girl said with a laugh. "I know the river as well as my own face in the mirror."

Frank Havens, wealthy publisher of the New York *Clarion* and a string of other important newspapers from Coast to

Richard Curtis Van Loan Goes on the Manhunt

Coast, twisted around and glanced at his daughter with a shake of his head.

"There's always a first time," he said.

"Not with me!" Muriel told him confidently.

She cut the motor to a throaty pant. Gauging the distance into the dock with an expert eye, she gave the wheel a twist. The speedboat glided into its berth with smooth accuracy.

Slim and lithe as a boy, Muriel, bow rope in a tanned hand, swung nimbly up to the dock. Another minute and she slipped the nautical tie-up knot she had made over one of the painted posts. Then she did the same at the stern while her father, a trifle ponderously, climbed out and joined her.

"No fish." He made a grimace. "Well, it was a pleasant cruise anyway. I'm starved. Let's go up and see what Martha has for breakfast."

"Probably some frozen perch fillets all the way from a New York market," his daughter said.

She made the boat shipshape, wiped her slender hands on a piece of waste and shaded her eyes with a palm while she stared across Crooked Mile River.

Opposite, the town huddled. It was a small, rural community in the foothills of the Catskills, about one hundred and thirty miles away from the roaring tumult of Manhattan, in upper New York State. Staring across at the village, Muriel told herself that it might have been ten thousand miles distant. It was peaceful and quiet, unchanged since she had gone there as a child.

The river flowed gently into Lake Emory, south. On the west bank the woods were thick. Such woods were a paradise for campers, for those who made the piscatorial art a hobby—those, like her father and herself, who sometimes felt the need to steal away from the crowded city for a week-end vacation.

HER dark eyes moved from the town to the river. Muriel half expected to catch a glimpse of Danny Brayden's rowboat with the kicker on it. A big, flat-bottomed gray boat with an outboard motor that made a noise like a machine-gun. But there was no sign of it—or of

Danny, the tow-headed youth who did odd jobs around the neighborhood. She had wanted to see Danny Brayden about clearing away some underbrush and poison ivy in the rear of their lodge.

Muriel shrugged, joining Havens who was waiting for her. Later, when she went over to get the mail and the newspaper, she could leave a message for Brayden. Either at the local garage where he hung out or at his shanty on the edge of town.

"How about that shortcut past Camp Rockledge?" her father suggested. "Remember it?"

"In between those two old oaks." Muriel smiled. "The path's apt to be overgrown. You might," she hinted slyly, "ruin that beautiful polish on your shoes."

"I'll risk it. Come along. Our house guest is probably back from his pre-breakfast ramble and wondering what's happened to us."

The long lashes came down over Muriel's dark eyes. For an instant a dreamy look clouded their depths. The "house guest" her father referred to was none other than Richard Curtis Van Loan, the wealthy Park Avenue socialite who had known her father for so many years.

Earlier, Van, in rough tweeds, had gone for a hike.

"This path doesn't look too overgrown," Frank Havens murmured, when they reached the marking oak trees and went in behind a dense wall of undergrowth. "Someone's been along it recently."

Muriel saw he was correct. The tall grass along the path was beaten down, flattened. In places drifts of leaves had been kicked aside. She noticed footmarks in the rich, black soil.

Then she remembered something.

"Of course. Rockledge has been occupied for a month. I almost forgot. Danny told me the Craig estate rented it.

"To whom?"

"Don't know. Danny didn't say and I didn't ask. He mentioned something about a 'Professor.'"

"Probably some university instructor on vacation," her father said. "Wonderful place here for the learned who demand plenty of silence. We'll walk on tiptoe when we pass the camp."

When a Ruthless Murderer Stalks Big Game!

It was quiet. As they went on along the path the silence was broken only by the faint sigh of a breeze high in the trees. The sun slanted through their branches. Faraway, a dog barked, a train whistled at the Crooked Mile crossing, making a thin, eerie wail.

Once, Muriel remembered, Camp Rockledge had commanded a good view of the river. Now, with the passing years and since the death of Hubbard Craig, its



THE PHANTOM

original owner, shrubbery had reared up to make a screen closing out everything except the immediate terrain.

In another few minutes they were near the rock wall that surrounded the property. The main house, a log structure, that was both pretentious and sprawling, stood partially concealed by the heavy-leaved trees. Havens stared at it as they went by. There were no signs of activity about the place. He saw the windows on its north side were shut. No smoke curled from its square, squatty chimney.

The path sloped upward, twisting to the right.

In previous years an elaborate iron gate had closed in the garden where a

rustic summer house faced once colorful flower borders. The gate had long since rusted from its hinges and been removed. Anyone was at liberty now to enter through the stone wall and help themselves to the overgrown rambler roses and perennials that had survived the onslaught of weeds.

Muriel, stopping at the opening, paused a moment and then went through it. Havens, puffing slightly from his climb, watched her move toward the summer house. He saw what her objective was. Near the latticed little building a gorgeous scarlet flower, almost tropical in size and shape, flamed in the weed tangle.

"This I must have," Muriel called over her shoulder. "We'll put it in a vase so we can look at it when we have breakfast. Quite an idea, eh?"

"Quite!"

SHE went closer, bending to pluck the vivid flower. Havens, watching, was about to warn her there was a fifty-dollar fine for trespassing, when he saw her suddenly stiffen. The tanned hand that reached for the flower drew quickly back. A strangled scream choked in her throat.

"Dad!"

Havens hurried to her. For an instant he thought he knew what had happened. There were plenty of snakes of all varieties in the woods there. Muriel, reaching for the flower, must have seen one coiled and ready to strike.

But, in the next round of seconds, the newspaper publisher saw that he was wrong. White and shaken, Muriel, drawing back in quick terror, pointed with an unsteady finger. Havens, following its direction, narrowed his eyes.

It wasn't a snake.

What Muriel pointed at was a shoe. A stout, square-toed shoe with a heavy sole made of brown leather. In itself a shoe lying in the weeds wasn't strange. What made this shoe unusual and frightening was the foot that was in it, the gray flannel trouser leg protruding from the door of the summer house!

Catching his breath, Havens pushed his daughter aside. Almost as shaken as Muriel, he parted the shrubbery and with his strained gaze, looked into the day-

gloom beyond.

A man lay there, face down. One arm was flung wide, the other was scissored under him. The floor of the summer house held a coagulated pool of blood. Havens, staring, saw that the dead man on the floor had a knife in his side—a knife whose blade had been driven full length into his body.

Slowly, horror creeping through him, the publisher stepped back, a cold chill beginning to sweep through him. The vivid scarlet flower, the crimson pool on the planked floor of the summer house.

Two shades of red, Havens thought fantastically.

One the tint of death—of murder!

CHAPTER II

VAN LOOKS ON



BACK from his hike through the woods and over the hills, the wealthy Richard Curtis Van Loan was surprised to find that Frank Havens and Muriel hadn't returned to the lodge. He looked at his watch as Martha, the stout, amiable cook-housekeeper-maid came out on the terrace.

"I can't understand it," Martha said. "The folks should have been back half an hour ago. You must be starved, Mr. Van Loan. Suppose I bring your breakfast out here?"

Van shook his head. "I'll wait for them, Martha. Thank you."

Martha sighed and went back to the kitchen. Van lighted a cigarette and watched a brilliant-winged bluebird swoop down from a white birch. Other birds chirped around the stone-flagged terrace. The sun made a golden circle out on the lawn.

A few minutes later he heard voices in the house. The deep tones of his closest and best friend, Frank Havens, the *Clarion's* owner. Havens apparently was talking on the telephone.

Van swung around as Muriel let the screen door bang behind her. One look at her fresh, pretty face was enough to show Van something unfortunate had happened.

"Muriel! You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"I have!" She spoke jerkily as she hurried across to him. "The ghost of a mur-

dered man!"

"Murdered man?"

"Dad's on the telephone calling Sheriff Thatcher!" She tried to control the shiver that shook her. "I wanted to get a flower. A red flower. I reached out for it and—and I almost touched a dead man's shoe!"

Muriel dropped down in one of the chairs at the glass-topped breakfast table. Dick Van Loan, watching some color return to her smooth cheeks, heard Havens end the telephone conversation. The newspaper man came briskly out on the terrace.

"Glad you're back, Dick. Has Muriel told you we ran into murder? Ghastly business."

He supplied scanty details. Listening, Van's gaze stayed on Muriel. Her first shock was waning. She mustered a little smile, stretching out a hand to touch his arm while her father talked.

"I don't like murder before breakfast. Where's Martha? I want the blackest, strongest cup of coffee she can brew. Ring for her."

"We've got to make this quick," Havens went on, sitting down at the table and shaking out a napkin as Martha appeared with a stray. "Sheriff Thatcher says he'll be up in a half hour or less. He wants me to meet him at the summer house. How about you, Dick? Want to watch the law in action?"

"Of course he doesn't!" Muriel put in quickly. "He's going to take me on for a couple of sets of tennis."

"Later," Van told her. "I think I'd like to see how the local authorities handle a murder. If," he said to Muriel, "you'll excuse me."

She looked disappointed as she drew a breath.

"All right, I'll wait until you come back."

"Murder—here in the wilderness—practically at our front door." Frank Havens' strong, purposeful face grew shadowed. "It's unheard of!"

"There's always a first time," Muriel could not help but remind him. "Seems to me I've heard that remark recently."

Ten minutes later, when they went down the path to the Craig property, voices from the overgrown garden at Camp Rockledge told Havens and Van Loan the law had already arrived.

Sheriff Thatcher, stocky, weathered, gimlet-eyed and using his small town authority to the limit, bustled importantly



"Drop that gun, quick!" Ravac commanded, and the Phantom slowly allowed his automatic to slip from his reluctant fingers and fall to the floor (CHAPTER XVII)

around, snapping orders to his three deputies. These men, Van saw, three gawky lads with tin stars pinned to their suspenders, looked like characters out of a silent movie. They seemed frightened and awed when Thatcher directed them to carry the body out of the summer house and place it on the grass.

Van, in an aside to Havens, said, "There's a violation. In all the detective books I read the corpse shouldn't be touched until the medical examiner arrives."

Thatcher turned to Havens. "I understand you found the body. Give me the details."

WHILE the publisher supplied them, Dick Van Loan indolently stared at the corpse. The knife seemed to fascinate him. He shifted his gaze to the murder victim. The man was elderly. His black hair was plentifully threaded with gray, his narrow face was angular and high cheekboned. His forehead, Van observed, was high and intellectual. The brow of a scholar.

He wore a gray corduroy coat over a tan linen shirt and gray slacks. The faint, stale glitter of death was in his staring eyes. From the position of the knife it was evident that the man had passed out of mortal existence without struggle.

Van turned away. He saw the red flower that had first attracted Muriel's attention and so had led to the discovery of the body. Casually, Van walked around it and stopped. A tangle of blackberry bushes caught his eye. He went in closer, interested in tiny bits of what looked like wool fluff clinging to some of the thorny plants. With a shrug he picked these off, dropping them into his gold-cornered wallet. Nobody was watching him so, in the same casual manner, he wandered on further.

The next minute he saw half obliterated footprints in the leaf mold. Deep footprints made by rubber-soled shoes with center corrugations. Again Van found some more of the wool fluff caught by the brambles. He helped himself to those, too and, where the footprints came out on a rocky rise, found himself facing the west side of the sprawling log house below.

He considered its closed windows before he turned and went back to join the others.

"We've got an identification," Havens told Van. "The dead man is Professor

Ernst Selgard, from Berne, Switzerland. He came up here a month ago with his granddaughter. No one apparently knew very much about him. Kept to himself, only went over to town occasionally."

"Selgard?" Dick Van Loan frowned.

"Here comes Doc Lambert," the Sheriff announced.

The local coroner was wheezing his way up the path, bag in hand. He must have weighed something over two hundred pounds. Under a dirty poplin hat, the man's round, moon face glistened with perspiration. He puffed and panted as he lugged his weight up to the garden.

To Van, always groomed to the last perfect inch, Dr. Lambert was a study in untidy slovenliness. Everything about him seemed soiled and wrinkled. He needed a shave as much as he needed a change of linen. Still, Van observed, there hung about the fat doctor a certain vague hint of competence, experience and some ability.

It was almost as if, like the overgrown and run down Camp Rockledge, Dr. Amos Lambert, too, had gone to seed.

Thatcher introduced him to Havens and Van Loan and waved a bony hand at the late Professor Selgard.

"Knifed, Doc! Terrible thing."

"Who found him?" Lambert mopped his flabby face with a grimy handkerchief.

"Mr. Havens, not more'n an hour ago."

Lambert put his bag on the ground and waddled over to the body on the grass. He studied it, fingering his chins. Van saw him shake his head before he used the damp handkerchief to withdraw the knife.

It came out slowly, six bloodstained inches of lethal steel. Lambert stood looking at it, shook his head again and handed it to the sheriff.

"Some initials on the handle, Ben," Lambert said. "See if you can make them out."

The three deputies crowded in closer. Frank Havens and Van craned their necks. "D. B.!" Sheriff Thatcher exclaimed, dramatically. "Why—this must be Danny Brayden's knife!"

Havens said to Van, "Brayden's a local jack-of-all-trades. General handyman. A young chap, nice personality. He's been working for us for the past few summers."

"Jed!" Thatcher turned to the tallest of his three assistants. "Get over to town as fast as you can and arrest Danny Bray-

den. Take him up to my office and keep him there until I get back!"

JED gulped and hurried away. Lambert got busy examining the body, talking while he worked:

"Professor's been dead for twelve hours or more. Must have died instantly. That knife was long enough to sever the left ventricle, get into the auricle. Internal hemorrhage. Shed a lot of blood."

"Seems like I heard you'd been treating him, Doc," Sheriff Thatcher drawled.

"A couple of times. His granddaughter, Adele, called me to come up and see him. Nothing much. Professor had a weak stomach. Straightened him out in no time." He looked up from his work. "By the way, where's Adele?"

The Sheriff's gimlet eyes opened wider. "Say! I forgot all about her. Harv." He jabbed a finger in the direction of a second assistant. "Get down to the big house and see where the girl is. You go along too, Mac. One of you come back and tell me if she's there."

Dr. Lambert snapped his bag shut and, like a hippotamus rising, got to his feet. "Better send the body down to Skelton's mortuary. I'll give it an autopsy this afternoon."

"What else did you know about Professor Selgard?" Frank Havens asked, when Lambert stuffed the damp handkerchief in his pocket and drew his sleeve across his forehead.

"Not much. From what I gathered he hasn't been in this country long. Came from Switzerland by way of Sweden. Said he was going to do some research, writing or something of that kind. Never loosened up and talked much. Neither did Adele." He turned to Thatcher. "I'll be getting along, Ben. See you later."

Dr. Lambert went down the path and a few minutes later both Harv and Mac came around the summer house.

"Nobody at the house, Sheriff," Harv reported. "Place is locked up tight."

Some twenty minutes later Havens and Van Loan, back at the publisher's lodge, gave the dark haired Muriel a word picture of what had happened. Then Van, excusing himself to wash up, entered the house. Muriel, watching his tall, broad shouldered figure cross the terrace, let the dreamy look fill her eyes again.

"He didn't say a word about tennis." She frowned. "Guess I'll have to remind him."

105-2

But time passed—an hour or more—and the handsome, athletic Van Loan didn't reappear on the terrace.

Frank Havens, unperturbed, directed surreptitious glances at his daughter from time to time. Muriel seemed annoyed and puzzled.

"Isn't that the darndest thing?" she said, when the last of the sixty minutes ticked away. "He just walked out on me—without a word!"

CHAPTER III

THE PHANTOM!



HEREVER it was that Dick Van Loan went, he had no explanation when he returned. Greeting Muriel as if he had only been absent a few minutes, he turned to Havens who said:

"Strange how murder news has a way of getting out. Thatcher must have put the story on the wires. Steve Huston's on his way up."

"The Sheriff's not going to lose any chance to get in the limelight." Van smiled. "This is probably the biggest thing that's ever happened to him. Any late developments? How about Brayden?"

"He's disappeared. So has the Professor's granddaughter. The Sheriff has a teletype alarm out for them both."

"Meaning?"

"Thatcher," Havens said, in the same abrupt way, "believes that Brayden killed Professor Selgard and has gone off with the Professor's granddaughter!"

"What was the motive?"

"Thatcher didn't say. From the way he talked, he doesn't need any. Danny's initials on the knife are enough for the Sheriff to know he did it. Adele's disappearance, along with Brayden's ties the thing up perfectly—to Thatcher's way of thinking."

"In the crime classics I read," Van murmured mildly, "motive plays a major part. This Brayden didn't stab the Professor to death without a reason."

"How about Adele? Isn't she reason enough?"

But Van only shrugged and went in to wash up for lunch.

It was after four in the afternoon when Steve Huston, ace reporter for the *Clarion*, arrived. Steve, freckle-faced and packed with the vigor of youth, had made

a name for himself on the paper. Starting as a cub reporter, Huston, with Havens giving him fatherly advice and seeing that he got his chance, had become one of the top feature writers for the great daily.

Havens had a genuine affection for Steve. Somehow Steve was like an echo of his own past. He, like Huston, hadn't been born of wealthy parents. He had had to fight his way up the ladder of success. In the little reporter, Havens saw himself as he had been in his own youth—persevering, energetic, eager and ambitious.

Steve, who knew Richard Curtis Van Loan slightly, shook hands with him. The reporter knew that Van Loan and his employer were old friends. Steve figured that was because Havens had known Van's father. He knew a few other things about the good looking, athletic young man who lived on Park Avenue. That Dick Van Loan was the recipient of a large income derived from the estate left him by his father. He didn't have to toil for a living.

Huston said hello to Muriel and then followed Havens into a pine-walled study.

"When the news of Professor Selgard's death broke this morning I got a hot tip," Huston said. "Seems like this Professor was an important person. At least, that's what Inspector Gregg told me."

He was about to add something else when the telephone on the study table rang. Havens reached for it. From what he said, Steve knew it was a long distance call. Faintly, in the receiver, he could hear the operator saying:

"Washington is on the wire, Mr. Havens. Are you ready?"

The conversation was brief. When it ended, Havens' expression was thoughtful.

"Your information's correct, Steve," he said. "The Professor was so important that certain Government diplomats in Washington have asked me to see that nothing is neglected in the search for the murderer! It's imperative the killer be found!"

Huston, his reportorial talents kindling, straightened with a jerk.

"I knew it! Who was Professor Selgard, Mr. Havens?"

"One of the most eminent of all European research chemists in the field of scientific synthetics. He was in this country as a result of an invitation from this Government. He came to cooperate with our own scientists on a series of highly

important experiments that are soon to begin at the new Government laboratory down at Bluefield, West Virginia."

Steve felt a tingle run through him. The call from Washington and what Havens said could only have one meaning.

"The Phantom Detective!" Huston said vibrantly.

FRANK HAVENS nodded. "Exactly. That's what my call concerned. They want me to notify the Phantom and have the case cleared up without delay. It might be that certain secret formulas are back of the killing—documents having to do with Selgard's experiments."

Huston nodded. The Phantom Detective! That legendary Nemesis of crime and brilliant exponent of modern case deduction. The world renowned, unflinching sleuth whose record of achievements had won him the respect of all those who knew of the crime cases he had worked on and solved.

Steve Huston happened to be one of the Phantom's most ardent admirers. For the reporter, from time to time, had assisted the Phantom in a small way. Steve knew something about the manner in which the great detective worked. He also knew that Frank Havens was the only contact between the Phantom and the outside world.

While these thoughts were running through Steve's mind, Havens had lapsed into a deep silence. Huston waited a minute or two before speaking.

"I'll get what facts I can for a preliminary write-up and shoot them in to the paper," the reporter said. "The city desk is waiting for them."

Frank Havens nodded. "I can give you the background." He smiled wryly. "You see, Muriel and I found the Professor's body this morning!"

It was almost dark when Dick Van Loan made one of his sudden decisions. He was out on the terrace with Muriel. Martha had lighted the candles in the hurricane lamps and winged insects, attracted by the glow, fluttered against the copper screens.

Huston was still away, digging up material for his story and in the shadows Frank Havens smoked a thoughtful cigar.

Van's quick exclamation raised Muriel's dark head.

"What's the matter, Dick?"

"I'm terribly sorry. It almost skipped my mind. I just remember I have a thea-

ter date with the Barry McClains tonight."

The girl beside him gave him a frowning glance. "What does that mean?"

"That I'll have to ask you to excuse me so I can keep it." All of Van Loan's charm was in the request. "The McClains would never forgive me if I don't show up. You understand."

Muriel drew a breath. "We wouldn't keep you here against your will for anything. Yes, we understand. One," she added, "has to be very understanding with you, Dick."

There was an odd light in Van's eyes. Something queer stirred in his heart. He concealed his feelings, trying to hide what he knew must be in his gaze. To him Muriel was different from all other girls. Only she occupied a permanent place in his thoughts.

Had he been the marrying kind, he knew he would have asked her to be his wife. But there was something that prevented—something mysterious and secret that kept his lips sealed. Some day, he always assured himself, Muriel would know. But now, to-night—and tomorrow—he had to keep a tight hold on his emotions, on what was in his heart.

"No use trying to hold him, Muriel." Her father spoke laconically out of the shadows. He got up. "Whenever you're ready I'll drive you to town, Dick. You can get a train in twenty minutes at the crossing. You shouldn't be too late keeping your appointment."

A short time later Van tossed his bag into the big Cadillac and reached for Muriel's hand. Her fingers were soft and warm in his. He saw her eyes in the gloom, upturned to his like dark stars. Van didn't say anything but some magnetic communication in his touch made Muriel's red lips part.

"Be seeing you, Muriel. Don't find any more bodies! And don't try to pick any red flowers for absent minded week-end guests."

"All ready?" Havens said from the driver's seat.

Van released her fingers and a minute later the car was going down the rutted road, its headlights slicing the gathering gloom.

NEITHER spoke for a few minutes. Then Havens began:

"I had a call from Washington." He explained its significance while Van Loan listened without comment to a more com-



FRANK HAVENS

plete identification of Professor Selgard and why he had come to America from Switzerland.

The car reached the river and went over the high steel bridge that spanned it. Still Van said nothing until they were at the Crooked Mile railroad station. There he picked up his bag and gripped Havens' hand.

"Thanks for everything. You're going to communicate with the Phantom. Good luck!"

Several people on the platform glanced at Van curiously while Havens drove off and the hum of the rails told of the approaching train. Van Loan picked up his bag and walked to the end of the platform. It was dark there beyond the last wan light. So dark that when the train pulled in, airbrakes hissing, no one was close enough to observe which car he boarded.

The platform was empty when the train rolled out.

But Dick Van Loan hadn't left on the train. Rounding the last coach, he had crossed the tracks and, a shape of shadow in the night, had cut off and was walking down a lonely road that led away from Crooked Mile Village.

He walked rapidly south for a half mile. Then, reaching a wooded section on the outskirts of town, he cut into some property that looked like a farm at the edge of the woods. It was owned by Havens and consisted of an old, unoccupied cot-

tage, some outbuildings and a barn. The barn, toward the rear, proved to be Van's destination.

He headed for it, familiarity with his surroundings obvious in the sureness of the direction he took. Some of the significance of a secret bond that existed between the owner of the *Clarion* and himself, the real reason for his trumped up excuse to leave Muriel and Havens' woodland retreat, was to be clarified within the next round of minutes.

Van slid the barn door open, stood listening until he was sure there was no sound in the murk, nothing to tell him that he might have been followed away from the railroad station.

A big black car stood parked in the gloom. It was one of the three super-powered jobs that he owned. Outwardly, the cars resembled sleek, special bodied, expensive automobiles. But they were more than that. Each car had a certain significance tying in with the secret between the owner of the *Clarion* and the wealthy young socialite.

Van unlocked and opened the rear door.

He climbed in, shutting the door after him. A touch on a button concealed in the back of the front seat dropped a panel that brought into view what looked like a small mirrored makeup table. Indirect lights around the mirror lit up the glass.

It was a makeup table and Van had devised it for one specific purpose.

That purpose was made plain without delay.

Bending to the mirror, his hands reached for small jars of skin creams and cosmetics, for color crayons and pencils. He used these with dexterous skill born of long experience. A minute or two passed and then a new face appeared in the mirror.

The handsome, aristocratic countenance of Richard Curtis Van Loan blotted out. In its place came the features of a new character. This was a cold-faced man with a slight spread to his nostrils, a wideness to his mouth, a heaviness to his jaw line. Tiny wrinkles were at the corners of his eyes.

No actor, making up for a difficult character role, excelled the artistry possessed by Van. The face he created was perfect to its last detail. He drew a color comb through his brown hair giving it a sandy tint and without wasting a minute was out of the clothes he wore and into a tweed suit that had been folded neatly in

a garment compartment under the rear seat.

A rather shabby felt hat went with the suit. Also a snub-nosed automatic. The entire metamorphosis had taken no more than ten minutes. Van studied himself carefully in the mirror before pushing the makeup table back into its front seat niche.

Then, swiftly, he slipped out of the car and left the barn.

Richard Curtis Van Loan, suave and elegant, had entered it a few short minutes previous.

It was the famous Phantom Detective who pushed the door shut after him and glided off into the night!

CHAPTER IV

IN A BEAM OF LIGHT



RICHARD CURTIS VAN LOAN was the Phantom.

Incredible as it seemed, the bored and blase young society man played a dual role. Frank Havens had been responsible for it. Years past, in his vigorous campaign against crime in

all its sinister guises, Havens had found he needed more than the powerful force of his newspaper chain to combat those enemies of society who used every criminal device to defeat the ends of justice.

Havens found that it was absolutely necessary for him to discover a counter-remedy. Someone more intelligent than those against whom he waged his campaign. Someone gifted with superior talents. A person of intrepid courage, possessing a keen, analytical mind, intuition and the ability to use modern, scientific methods to achieve the utmost in results. He had almost despaired ever of finding one in whom all these qualities were embodied until, by chance, Dick Van Loan, son of an old friend, had given proof of his deep interest in crime detection and a novel aptitude for solving the most baffling cases.

Van had been a student of crime since his university days. Both by temperament as well as education, he was admirably fitted to play the part Havens required. So, the Phantom Detective had come to life, mysterious, hidden from the world until his services were urgently needed, known only to the wealthy newspaper publisher and to no one else.

A long list of brilliant and successfully completed cases was proof that Frank Havens had made no mistake when he had called upon Van to become the relentless Nemesis of Crime!

Leaving the barn, Van Loan headed back toward the railroad station. His first objective in the murder of Professor Ernst Selgard was Camp Rockledge. That morning his trained eyes found things of interest on the Craig property. He determined to get back there for a more thorough investigation.

Two antiquated flivver taxis were at the station. The Phantom climbed into the first.

"I want to go up as far as Sunset Boulder," he told the driver, a sleepy looking country boy who needed a haircut.

"Yes, sir. Be right with you."

The boy got out to crank the car. Van, marveling that such ancient machinery still functioned, winced as the engine suddenly roared and throbbed into life and vitality.

The taxi rattled away, springs squeaking. He named Sunset Boulder, a small settlement of camps beyond the bridge, because alighting there wasn't likely to arouse suspicion in his driver's mind, even if the driver had enough mind to be suspicious. He could be visiting any of the camps in that vicinity.

They went down the main street of the village. The Phantom noticed the taverns along it were doing good business. Quite a few customers were lined up at the box-office of the only movie house. Pedestrians strolled the pavements. On the corners, knots of citizens drew together, in deep conversation.

The Phantom knew what they were talking about. Nothing as exciting as murder had happened at Crooked Mile in years.

Van's brows went together thoughtfully. When he had left Havens and Muriel for his "walk" that noon—the walk that had puzzled the dark-haired girl—he had gone back to the summer house and the garden. He had skirted the sprawling log building below, but he hadn't tried to gain admittance then.

The Phantom preferred the cover of darkness for his operations.

Over the bridge, the taxi went on for a half mile more. When it stopped Van paid the toll, got out and set off for the huddle of the camps. But the minute the dilapidated flivver had turned around and

was out of sight, he cut off sharply, made his way back to the road and went on and up to the Craig property.

The moon rode low in the eastern sky, half hidden by clouds. A few stars overhead were misty in the night. The indications were rain before morning. The Phantom wanted another look at the grounds of Camp Rockledge before rain fell.

In a few minutes he had reached the aperture in the stone wall and produced a special hooded flashlight with a magnifying lens and a directional beam.

HE LET the beam play over the floor of the summer house before he circled the briar bushes from which he had taken the wool fluff. It lighted the footprints in the loam as he went on past the rocky knoll where they ended and down the stope that led to the house.

No lights were at any of the closed windows. A faint breeze rustled the trees. It was as quiet as it had been that morning when Havens had heard the dog barking far away, the eerie whistle of the train.

That morning the Phantom had marked the location of a door on the east side of the building. The flashlight out, he approached it noiselessly. Oddly, for all of the quiet and desertion, he could feel his nerves grow tight and taut, an old familiar warning of impending danger.

He shook his head a little, smiling thinly. Of all places where menace might lurk, this building seemed the least likely. Yet, his intuition, sharpened on the whetstone of experience, seldom failed. Van wound his fingers over the weathered knob of a door that was probably used as a servants' entrance when the place was occupied.

He was prepared to use his master-key, that ingenious invention of a celebrated Viennese locksmith, to gain admittance. A tingle ran through him when he found the key wasn't necessary. Under his grip the knob turned and the door swung open.

The flashlight's beam darted along a stone floor. It stopped and Van bent over. Reflected in the light were several dark stains along the floor. They might have been made by dampness. But, as he suspected, they weren't. The finger he touched to one showed him a red blur.

Blood! The Phantom's eyes narrowed. That morning, in his casual stroll away from Dr. Lambert and the Sheriff, he had decided one thing. Professor Selgard hadn't been knifed to death in the sum-

mer house. He had been killed elsewhere and his body taken and dumped where Muriel Havens had found it.

The Phantom nodded to himself. The Professor had been killed in the log building and carried out. The murderer hadn't bothered to return to remove the blood drops. Or, possibly, he hadn't had the time or opportunity. The Phantom went on, the light showing the way down the stone-floored corridor.

Several rooms on either side had open doors. Two were used for storage. Old furniture and barrels were piled up in pyramids. In another room was a pump that supplied water to the building. The Phantom went on to the end of the corridor, the last door.

That was shut but unlocked. He opened it and drew a quick breath. The beam of his torch, wandering around, showed him he was in a laboratory. Though Professor Selgard had occupied the premises for a month, the laboratory itself was not yet in full working order.

A number of pieces of apparatus were still in wooden crates. The Phantom examined the equipment that had been put together. It was all of top grade manufacture, scientific apparatus for research work of the type used in the finest laboratories. He looked it over with deep interest. In his own Bronx workshop he had similar paraphernalia that assisted him in his experiments.

Again the flashlight roamed over the floor. More of the blood spots made a trail across the room as far as the door on its left side. The door was half open. The Phantom stepped into a small office.

It was in a whirl of disorder. The drawers of a large mahogany desk had been removed, their contents dumped out and scattered about. Oddly, several steel filing cabinets along one wall were untouched. Van stared at them musingly before he turned his attention to the office floor.

The bloodstains there were larger and more ominous. He nodded to himself. As he had suspected that morning, Professor Selgard had been murdered in the house. In this room, the Phantom saw. His face hardened.

Sheriff Thatcher hadn't thought it necessary to waste any time looking over the building. To the Phantom that was a stroke of luck. Thatcher and his deputies hadn't tramped all over the place. Office

and laboratory were fresh for his inspection.

SYSTEMATICALLY, Van sifted through the litter on the floor. It consisted mostly of old correspondence. One of the first things he unearthed was a rolled scroll from the Vendome Academie de Science in Paris. It was a certificate of merit given Selgard for his contribution to chemical research. With it, evidently, had gone a bronze medal.

The Phantom discarded that and waded through the letters. They were written in French, Swedish and German. Van, a linguist of ability, had no trouble translating them.

A lot of them were from grateful students of the Professor. From all over Europe they had written expressing their thanks for his interest in them. The Phantom shook his head as he continued on with his search.

The next minute he found a note that interested him. It was from someone who signed himself Pierre Faubry. It read:

If you would undertake this mission it would assist us greatly. We Faubrys, in the aftermath of conflict, have fallen upon evil times. Unable to go to America ourselves, if you could handle the matter for us, our debt to you would be incalculable. When you are in Paris again, please come to see us.

Van tucked the letter away in his pocket. It might or might not have a direct bearing on Selgard's death. But it was worth looking into, worth retaining.

A second letter, under an overturned chair, also aroused his interest. That was unsigned and said:

Ravac was here yesterday. I'm sure he knows about it. Be on guard. I do not trust him or the beautiful Simone. A pair of scoundrels!

The writing was on thin onion skin paper. There was no signature, date line or address. The Phantom's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Professor Selgard had been warned. Van nodded as he added that letter to the other in his pocket.

When he found nothing further he got up and went to the steel filing cabinets. Their drawers were unlocked. The first one he touched rolled smoothly out. In it he saw neatly arranged typed documents. Papers that had to do with Selgard's experimental work.

The other drawers in the cabinet were filled with the same type of records. The Phantom glanced in at them before he shut the drawers. The fact the killer had

made no attempt to disarrange the documents was significant. It substantiated a theory that had come to him that morning when he had watched the local law at work in the summer house.

The next instant the Phantom's flashlight blacked out.

Straining his ears, he stiffened to stone. His nerves had telegraphed a new danger signal. He listened. For a long, tense minute he heard nothing except the sigh of the breeze, the flutter of insects at the screen.

Then, so low and quiet as to be almost unheard, he caught the sound of footsteps in the laboratory!

The Phantom's mind worked fast. The killer returning to remove the evidence of his crime? He shook his head. The body had been found and the law had taken over. It was a little late to cover up now.

Then—what? Possibly a return to continue with the search that hadn't been successful?

The footsteps came closer. Van was reaching for his gun when, like a sun blazing from behind black clouds, the long lance of a torch sliced the dark and struck him fully in the face.

He tried to duck out of its dazzling gleam. From the doorway he heard a low, smothered exclamation. The husky cough of what he knew was a silenced gun came synchronously with the whine of lead.

The Phantom went rubber-legged.

With a thud he slumped to the dusty, littered floor!

CHAPTER V

SMALL AND BLONDE



VICIOUS and deadly, the slug from the silenced gun had whistled perilously close to the Phantom's head. His fall was an old ruse to bring his assailant in closer, close enough to be grappled with.

But the person who fired at him didn't take the bait.

Instead, the office door slammed, the key turned in the lock and running footsteps faded out down the stone-paved corridor.

Van jumped up. Swinging around to the nearest window, he shoved back its catch and pushed the screen out. It took precious minutes to get it away from its fastenings. When he was over the sill



Then the white drawn lips moved, trying desperately to form words, while the Phantom tensely leaned forward
(CHAPTER VIM)

and on the ground, the running footsteps sounded from the direction of the road.

Another round of seconds and an automobile engine turned over, caught and thrummed. When Van reached the wall he saw the glow of a red tail light, a pinpoint of fire in the night, disappearing in the distance.

He watched it blot out. The night closed in around him again. Only the sigh of the breeze and a faraway boat on the river broke the heavy silence.

The Phantom sheathed his automatic. He turned and went back to the house. He hadn't noticed any parked car on his way up the hill. His would-be assassin must have run it off the road and concealed it behind the heavy underbrush. But who was he? What was he doing at Camp Rockledge?

Van shook his head. His near-killer must have been there for some time. He might have been in the Professor's office. He might have seen Van's approaching flashlight, heard him open the outer door. The Phantom shrugged. The slug with his initials on it had been too close for comfort. He smiled faintly. One thing was sure. The case was beginning to grow interesting.

He entered the house through the east side door. Footprints in the dust showed him the one who had taken the pot shot at him had stood near one of the storage rooms, well in from the door. Van looked at the fresh footprints in the thick dust there before he went back to the laboratory.

Five minutes or more passed. He had almost concluded there was nothing further to detain him and had about decided to use the telephone in the Professor's office to call Frank Havens when a new sound came to him.

Once more it was the pant of a car. Stopping this time instead of racing away. The Phantom extinguished his torch and waited. The car went on, but someone had gotten out of it. Someone had entered the Craig property and was coming toward the house with light, quick footsteps.

The Phantom heard feet on the front porch. Then the jingle of a key and finally a door shut. Overhead the footsteps, moving with obvious certainty, crossed a floor and grew fainter in another section of the house. They broke out, loud again, on stairs ending somewhere down the corridor. A minute ticked away before the

Phantom, drawing back into the gloom of the laboratory felt a current of air stirring as someone entered!

A click kindled the cluster of globe-shaded lights opposite where the Phantom stood tensely poised. Their fluorescent glow fell on white porcelain shelves, along a sink made of stainless steel and on the unopened crates and boxes. In the light Van saw a girl hurry to the little office beyond.

She was small, vividly blond, hatless. In a gray tweed suit, shiny leather handbag tucked under one arm, her slippered feet beat out a quick rhythm on the floor. She was close to the door when she stopped short, as if feeling the tug of the Phantom's watching eyes.

Van heard her gasp as she wheeled swiftly around. Then she saw him and her eyes, behind a screen of lashes, widened. Her red lips parted, but she managed to suppress what he knew was a frightened scream. She peered at him uncertainly, her hands trembling along the edge of the bag she held.

The Phantom stepped out from what had been gloom-shrouded concealment. The girl watched him, fascinated. Van smiled reassuringly. He dipped a hand in his pocket and produced the Detective Bureau badge he usually carried with him for just such occasions as this. He could have displayed the tiny jeweled domino mask plate that was always with him, hidden in a secret pocket. That insignia was the Phantom Detective's personal identification.

THE badge, however, did what he expected. Terror faded out of what Van saw were violet eyes. Her hands stopped their trembling and she seemed to relax. "You're Adele Selgard," Van said. "My name is Martin. I'm with the New York police."

She gave him a puzzled frown.

"I don't understand. What are you doing here? And where's my grandfather?"

The Phantom met her suddenly worried gaze. Then she hadn't heard the news. She was unaware of what had happened, didn't know that there was a teletype alarm out for her arrest.

"Where have you been?" he asked, slowly.

"In New York." A frown drew her narrow, arched brows together.

"Who brought you up here from the station, if you returned on the train?"

"Some friends of mine. The Addisons. Mrs. Addison rode up from New York with me. Her car was parked at the station. She gave me a lift."

The Phantom's face turned grim. It was going to be hard breaking the news. But it had to be done and done quickly. Adele Selgard, he was confident, could be a big help to him.

Briefly, trying to cushion the shock of his disclosure as much as possible, the Phantom explained what had happened to her grandfather. She took it better than he had thought she would. A quick agony of pain twisted her curved mouth and a gasp caught in her throat. But she steadied herself resolutely, the color draining out of her face, leaving it mask-like for an instant.

"Who did it?" Her voice was husky and tremulous.

"I don't know, yet. I'm hoping you can shed some light on it." The Phantom watched her closely. "If you feel up to it I'd like to ask you some important questions."

She nodded and slumped down in one of the laboratory chairs. Van walked across to her. In a few minutes he had her background.

She had been born and brought up in America, both her parents dying several years previous. Left an orphan, when she was finishing her second year in college, Adele Selgard had found employment in Manhattan with the Merritt Foundation. Van knew about that. The Foundation, an institute sponsored by several wealthy friends of Frank Havens, was a clinical research laboratory for the training of young scientists in all types of work. She said she had been with the Foundation for the last year.

"When my grandfather received the Government invitation," she continued, "he wrote and asked me to give up my job so I could assist him. I did and for the past month I've been up here with him." She indicated the crates. "This equipment should have been delivered weeks ago. It has held up some advance work he had planned to do before leaving for West Virginia."

The Phantom said, "When did you go to New York?"

"Yesterday morning, on an early train. Grandfather asked me to deliver a package for him. I had planned to do some shopping in town and he thought I could attend to his errand at the same time."

"A package? Do you know what was in it?"

"Yes. An old Swiss watch. Grandfather said that it was an heirloom. He impressed its sentimental value upon me and said I was to be very careful not to lose it. It was to be repaired, put in running order. I left it with a man whose name is Conrad Schiller, on East Fifty-eighth Street."

Van's eyes narrowed. An old Swiss watch? His keen mind filed away the name of the person Adele Selgard had delivered the package to. He changed the subject deftly.

"What do you know about Danny Brayden?"

She shook her head. "Not very much. He came up here sometimes to work around the place. He helped unload these crates. That was about a week ago. Why?"

"Brayden is wanted for murder," the Phantom said. "It was his knife that killed the Professor!"

ADELE SELGARD'S violet eyes widened. She tried to cry out but her voice caught and broke.

"No, that's impossible! Why should Danny Brayden want to kill grandfather?"

"You, too, are under suspicion," Van continued. "Sheriff Thatcher has an alarm out for your arrest. Fortunately," he added, "you must have an alibi. Where did you stay in town?"

"With a friend—a girl named Libby Rogers, who worked with me at the Foundation."

The Phantom waited a minute or two. Then he said, "Did you ever hear the Professor speak of anyone called Ravac?"

"No, never!"

"Or a woman named Simone?"

Again Adele shook her blond head. The Phantom looked at his watch. He believed what the girl told him. And, as he expected, she had supplied him with valuable information.

"Here's what I suggest, Miss Selgard. I want you to keep undercover for a day or two. Friends of mine have a camp up the road. The Havens. I'll arrange for you to stay with them for the time being."

She nodded. "I'll do anything you want if it means finding the—the one—"

"Good." Van's tone was brisk. "Another thing. See your friend who brought you up from the railroad station and tell

her to keep your return a secret. I want the Sheriff to continue hunting for Brayden and for you. He'll be out of my way."

The Phantom used the telephone in the office. spoke guardedly to Frank Havens and explained in a few words what had happened. He arranged for Adele Selgard to stay with Muriel for a day or two and ended with a curt request:

"I'll need Steve. Is he still there?"

"Yes, but he's planning to take the last train back to town," Havens answered.

"Tell him to meet me at Crooked Mile village in a half hour." The Phantom remembered the names of some of the taverns he had glimpsed along the main street. "At a place called Logan's."

"Right."

Van went back to the blond girl. She was sitting apathetically where he had left her. For the first time it seemed as if a full realization of what had happened weighed her down. She winked away tears, desperately trying to control her emotions.

"It's all arranged," he said. "One thing more before I leave you. Do you know where Brayden lives?"

"Yes. He hasn't a telephone. I stopped off there once to tell him we needed him for a job."

She supplied particulars and a few minutes later Van saw her on her way to the Havens' camp.

It was a twenty minute walk down to the bridge, over it and into the village. The Phantom moved along at an even pace, the night breeze in his face, the misty stars overhead hiding their light.

Recollection of the one who had fired at him in Selgard's office crossed his mind. His unknown assailant had a distinct advantage. The long beam of the flash that had played on the Phantom's face had made the man familiar with him. Van shrugged. In a way that familiarity might prove helpful. He was known. Someone had tried to kill him. When his enemy saw him again a second attempt would be made.

And, in that kill effort, the enemy would have to come out in the open!

Other thoughts crowded the Phantom's mind. The two significant letters in his pocket. Adele Selgard's story. Her trip to New York. The package she had left with Conrad Schiller at the East Fifty-eighth Street address. Each item was an important puzzle piece in the murder drama. . . .

The village still was buzzing with excitement when Van reached it. The tavern he had noticed and given Havens as a rendezvous, where he could meet the red-headed reporter, was on the south side of the street, two blocks away from the station.

THE Phantom noticed a car parked some little distance away from the swinging doors that led into the place. A long-hooded coupe, dark blue in color, stood lightless at the curb. Van gave it an idle glance in passing and went to the tavern.

A tobacco haze floated along its low, raftered ceiling. Sawdust lay like snow on the floor. About twenty men were either at the wide bar or distributed at a number of tables in the rear. A pinball machine had a noisy group around it. No one paid any attention to Van as he sauntered in and found a place at the damp mahogany—except one man.

The Phantom felt he was being stared at. He made no effort to discover whose eyes were on him for a minute or two. Then he let his own gaze focus in the mirror behind the bar. It only took a second to place the one peering at him.

The man hastily shifted his eyes. Van, whose photographic mind had been trained to register and retain impressions with the swiftness of light, saw that the other was a squarely built man, somewhat on the heavy side. He had a dark skin, a young-old face and a two-inch forehead under black lacquered hair. Sloe, oval eyes, ink-dark, long sideburns and an almost Slavic caste of countenance gave him a foreign look.

His clothes were neither cheap nor expensive. He wore a white shirt and a regimental striped tie, brown shoes that were not, when the Phantom made a point of noticing, square-toed.

The man gulped down his drink and went out. Musingly, the Phantom watched him go. He would know him again when he met him, if he ever did.

A remembered voice turned his head toward the tables in the rear. Comfortably slumped in a chair, the slovenly Dr. Lambert, bottle and glass before him, was holding forth on the manner in which Professor Ernst Selgard had been slain, the autopsy he had made that afternoon on the body. A hushed, morbid-minded audience listened to the grisly details as the fat Lambert rolled them off his tongue

with apparent relish.

The Phantom saw the local coroner had three sheets in the wind. He drank his own lime and seltzer, keeping the entrance covered with his glance.

Ten minutes passed before Steve Huston came in from the street. Steve went to the bar. He ordered a beer and tried to appear casual as his eager gaze roved over the thirsty customers in the place. His glance slid past Van without recognition, continuing on to the tables.

The Phantom poked him with an elbow. "Beg your pardon. Got a match?"

Steve jerked his head around. Van's right hand moved up to his left ear. A quick tug on its lobe and Steve's eyes brightened. That was the old signal of identification between them.

"Phantom!" Huston's lips formed the word without voicing it.

Van made sure no one was listening. "Finish your drink and let's get out of here," he said and nodded toward the door. "I'll meet you outside."

A minute or two later Steve joined him on the sidewalk. The Phantom waited until they were almost at the railroad crossing before he opened up.

"What's the news from Thatcher's front office?"

"Nothing," Steve shook his head. "At least, the Sheriff didn't have anything when I phoned just before I left the camp. He's pretty sure though that Brayden will be picked up sooner or later. Also, Miss Selgard."

"She got up to the camp safely?"

"Yes. I don't know who's more attractive, she or Muriel. Blond or brunette. They're certainly easy on the eyes."

The Phantom's amusement at Steve's observation faded. "I've learned a few things," he said. "The Professor wasn't murdered for the approved motives of our best fiction writers—for secret documents he possessed, or formulas having to do with his research work."

"That was my first theory," Steve admitted.

"He was killed in an effort to obtain something. But not his papers. They're in steel filing cabinets, untouched. The knife artist was after something else, something, I'm sure, he didn't get."

STEVE drew a breath. "You think Miss Selgard leveled with you? After all, she's pretty enough to get away with anything."



MURIEL HAVENS

"I'm sure she told a straight story. However," Van said, "when we return to town I'll get either you or Dorlan to check on her alibi."

"Where are we bound now?"

The Phantom, following Adele Selgard's directions, had turned east two streets further on and was walking toward the river.

"To Danny Brayden's place. Brayden fits in somewhere. I don't mean because the knife Professor Selgard was killed with belonged to him. There's another angle. One I want to have a first hand glance at."

Steve Huston made no reply. As always, he never ceased to marvel at the thoroughness of the one beside him. Time and again he had seen the Phantom snatch clues out of thin air and build them into important and revealing patterns.

The road down to the river twisted. From somewhere behind them the Phantom heard the rumble of an approaching car. The car came along a minute later, a long-hooded coupe.

Van and Steve stepped back to let it pass. At the window the Phantom caught a glimpse of the white blur of a face, a fleeting, dusk-obscured impression.

He watched the car disappear into the murk.

It was the same car that had stood near the tavern a short time before. Somehow the Phantom mentally tied it up with the man who had been at the bar—the one with the sideburns and the lazy, ink-dark eyes!

CHAPTER VI

THE SHACK



QUARTER of a mile and they turned right. Below a slope the river ran, black in the moonless night. Some semblance of a stone walk, behind a high lilac hedge, curved away to Danny Brayden's lightless shack.

It stood, a shape of shadow, in the dark. The Phantom's flash went on. The light played over the front door, focusing on a rusty padlock. Huston shook his head.

"Looks like the Sheriff might be right. That Brayden's left for a long trip."

"A very long trip," the Phantom said under his breath. "We won't waste time forcing the staples. There must be a window. Let's take a look."

There were two windows on the south side of the place. Both were protected by rusty screens. Both were half open. Steve frowned. That didn't make sense. Nobody padlocked the front door and went away leaving their windows open. Or did they?

The Phantom's torch roamed over the first screen. He gave the flash to Steve to hold, removed the screen and propped it up against the building. Steve, handing the light back, saw the Phantom examine its mesh at close range.

He began to understand the other's interest when he noticed something that had caught and was clinging to the rusty wire. Something that looked like tiny bits of wool fluff. Something that made the Phantom quickly reach out and remove them.

Van said nothing as he put them in his wallet. But they were significant. The same particles he had found on the brambles at Rockledge. His eyes narrowed speculatively. What he had told Steve about Brayden's "long trip" was conclusive to him now.

But he made no comment as he climbed through the window and gave the little reporter a hand.

A musty, damp smell permeated the place. There was no electricity. A kerosene lamp, on a makeshift table, gave off the odor of oil. He moved the beam of his flashlight around, over moldy blankets on a cot in the corner, piles of newspapers, odds and ends of tools and hardware.

He turned the beam back to the lamp. The Phantom's sensitive fingers touched

the chimney. He examined the wick.

"This lamp wasn't used tonight," he said.

The beam of the torch played over the floor. Once it had been covered with linoleum. That had cracked and pieces of it had been removed. The wooden floor showed through in places.

Huston saw the torch's light stop its promiscuous wandering. Its beam grew steady. The Phantom dropped to a knee, reaching out with a hand. In the glow of light Huston saw that he had picked up several splinters of glass.

The Phantom looked at them for a minute or two and let the torch weave back and forth again. Finally he straightened up.

"There must be a bottle around somewhere."

"Bottle?" The reporter's tone was surprised. "What kind of a bottle?"

"The one these pieces of glass came from."

The main room of the shack opened into a rear lean-to that served as kitchen, wardrobe and woodshed. A two-burner, battered old oil stove stood under the slit of a window. A rusty hand pump was beside a stained sink. From several pegs hung a pair of paint-splashed overalls, an oilskin coat and a sweater.

A door, low and locked, was to the left of the sink. The Phantom opened it and considered the pile of trash heaped outside.

A myriad of tin cans, junk and empty bottles made an unsightly mess. Huston noticed the Phantom intently let the light he held play over the debris.

"This is it!"

There was a note of satisfaction in his quiet exclamation. Returning to the kitchen, the detective displayed his find. Steve leaned forward, peering at the quart gingerale bottle the Phantom had brought in.

Splinters of glass were missing from its base. But Huston was more interested in the red smears decorating it. So was the Phantom. He examined them with careful attention.

"Blood!"

"What does it mean?"

THE PHANTOM shrugged. To Steve's surprise he left the bottle in the sink and led the way back to the other room. Another minute and they were outside again, the screen back in place at the window they had entered by. A warm rain

had begun to fall. Out on the river a fish jumped.

Before they left the shack, the detective went back to the padlocked door. For a minute more the eye of the torch roved around the ground. He leaned over once or twice but whatever interested him was unknown to Huston.

"We'll have a look at Brayden's boat and then get back to town," Van said shortly.

But there was no boat tied up at the narrow dock at the river's edge. The Phantom picked up a long piece of rope. One end was knotted around one of the dock's supporting stakes. The other end he showed to Steve.

"Cut clean."

Huston was puzzled. "Why cut?" he asked.

"Somebody turned Brayden's boat adrift. They were in a hurry and didn't bother to untie it. They cut the rope and let it drift."

Steve shook his head. "You don't think it was Brayden? Making his getaway?"

The Phantom's voice was grim. "He didn't make a getaway. That bottle told its own story. It was used as a bludgeon—on Danny Brayden's head!"

"But where's his body? The shack was padlocked."

"It was padlocked after Brayden was carried out of it. I found bloodstains on the ground outside the main door. He was probably laid there while the padlock was snapped."

"But where is he now?"

The Phantom nodded toward the crawling river at their feet. "Probably in there!"

Back on the road, the rain in their faces, the Phantom headed back toward the village. He walked rapidly, Steve beside him. The little reporter's mind whirled. He knew the Phantom's methods. That the one beside him was always taciturn and noncommunicative in the first stages of any case.

But Steve had learned enough to know that the Phantom was certain Brayden had been murdered!

He tried to tie that fact in with the structure of Professor Selgard's killing. It didn't fit. Sheriff Thatcher had an alarm out for Danny Brayden. Brayden, according to the law, was a murder suspect, not a victim of violence.

Steve was still trying to link the two unrelated threads when they reached the main street of the town.

Now the rain had cleared the sidewalk of pedestrians. The Phantom continued on as far as Logan's Tavern.

"I want to check on a character I noticed here before you came in," he said. "Not that I think I'll get any information. It's routine."

INSIDE, the bar was still crowded. The Phantom's quick gaze darted around. The fat Dr. Lambert, alone now, was dozing in his chair, mouth open and eyes closed. He had his shoes off, his feet stretched out on an adjoining chair.

There was no sign of the lacquered-haired man with the sideburns and sloe eyes.

The Phantom spoke to one of the bartenders, asking a question or two.

"Yeah," the man said. "Seems to me I do remember a party answering that description. But I don't know him, never saw him before. We get a lot of transients. They stop off and that's the last we ever see of 'em."

Steve had a beer while Van made his plans. Temporarily, there was nothing to keep him there any longer. The next development in the murder of Professor Ernst Selgard would be staged in New York. The trail seemed to lead to the crowded metropolis. And he reminded himself that he had an urgent, secret communication to send to the American Embassy in Paris.

Before he spoke to Steve, the Phantom's thoughtful glance moved back to the fat Dr. Lambert. It centered on Lambert's shoeless feet, on the pointed toed black shoes which the man had removed for comfort.

"You're going back to town, Steve?" he asked the reporter.

Huston nodded. "Soon as I can get a train. Selgard's death is front page material. I've got to get my story in shape for the morning edition."

"I brought my car up. How about riding back with me?"

"Swell."

"Wait here and I'll get it," the detective said.

Leaving Huston at the bar, he went back into the rainy night. Starting off at a brisk pace for the barn and the car he had left there, the Phantom's mind grew crowded with thoughts.

Playing a large part among them, the recollection of the sleeping Lambert came back to him sharply, importantly.

CHAPTER VII

WORD FROM THATCHER



IN NEW YORK. Richard Curtis Van Loan's address was on upper Park Avenue. His sky high suite was atop an apartment house built in layers. For his own convenience, and the Phantom's necessity, there was both a private entrance into

the place and an elevator with no stops between the ground floor and his rooms.

He was known there only as Van Loan. In the disguises of the Phantom he came and went without interruption or questioning. It was an ideal location, centrally situated, out of which he could operate swiftly and unhampered.

The elevator stopped at Van's floor. He unlocked the door of his suite and went in. He had no servants, a thing that surprised his many socialite friends. As the Phantom Detective he couldn't employ domestic help and retain his privacy. A woman came daily to clean, most of his meals were either sent up from a little French restaurant around the corner or eaten out.

It was after midnight. Manhattan, following its daylong activity, was quiet. The lights in the skyscrapers to the south had gone out. The rain of Crooked Mile River had not yet fallen over the vast metropolis.

Van switched on lights and went through his luxuriously appointed lounge room. Choice antiques, selected with collector's skill, reflected the warm glow of electricity. Cherry, old and mellow, rubbed to a satin patina. Ancient glass and silver, rugs and pre-Revolution samples of early Americana were on every hand.

His bedroom was Napoleonic, with a high, carved bed and bright coloring. Van touched the concealed button behind the headboard of the bed. That put in motion velvet-smooth current to fold back a section of the wall.

As it opened before him an inner room was revealed. A small, windowless room, indirectly lighted and fitted up as a miniature laboratory. It was cluttered with his scientific precision instruments, his ray machines, microscopes and the other paraphernalia necessary for his deductions and crime work.

There was also a wardrobe in which an array of clothing hung in neat rows, an

arsenal from which he could select any type of weapon and a photographic dark-room cubicle tucked away in a corner.

The Phantom sat down before a porcelain-topped table. Somehow this room sent his thoughts back to Camp Rockledge and Professor Selgard's laboratory. Thoughtfully, the Phantom took the wool fluff he had collected from the briars near the summer house and the rusty screen in Brayden's shack and put them on a glass slide.

As he expected, they were identical. He reached for a tiny vial of a greenish chemical. A touch of its glass stopper to the bits of wool and he slipped the slide into his Greenough microscope. He made an adjustment or two and brought them into sharp focus. The chemical had dissolved some of them into minute particles.

Van pulled the slide out and crumpled the fluff between his fingers. It was partially wool, partly cotton. Obviously from a man's coat, not a sweater as he had first thought. A coat that would be a blue-gray in color and not too expensive, from the cotton content.

He discarded the bits and reconstructed the events of the past hours. He had been almost certain from the first, that despite Brayden's initials on the death weapon, the handyman hadn't used the hunting knife. The angle at which the blade had been driven into Selgard's body was significant to him.

He checked back over Adele Selgard's story. Then he pondered his findings at Danny Brayden's shack. Once more he centered his attention on the two letters he had taken out of the Professor's office—the note about the Faubry family—the warning on the onion skin paper.

Both, the Phantom knew, played a major part in the death of the scientist from Switzerland.

The last thing he did before turning in was to word a secret code message and dispatch it through channels that would take it directly to the American Embassy in Paris. . . .

At breakfast, with the rain clouds gone and the sun streaming across the lofty terrace outside his living room, the Phantom glanced at the first edition of the *Clarion*. Steve, as usual, had done a good job on the Selgard murder story. It was on the front page, headlined "Swiss Scientist Murdered In Woodland Camp." Huston gave the account a flavor of intrigue and mystery.

HE BROUGHT out its international angles, spoke of Bluefield, West Virginia and the Government's research laboratory there. He linked that cleverly with the Professor's death, miles distant. But, as Van had suggested, Steve had soft-pedaled Adele's connection with the case. Only once he mentioned her and that was as the granddaughter of Selgard.

Still in the same disguise he had created for the Phantom in the car at the barn, Van Loan left his apartment and went directly to the Clarion Building. Frank Havens had come in on an early train and was at his desk in his sumptuous private office.

The publisher pushed aside a heap of correspondence when the Phantom was announced as a "Mr. Martin to see you." Havens looked tanned and rested from his vacation at the lodge. Only a trace of worry was in his gaze when Van dropped into a chair beside his big desk.

He shook his head at Van's first question. "No new developments since you left. Thatcher is still hoping his alarm will turn up Miss Selgard or Brayden, or both. The girl is undercover, with Muriel and Martha as you instructed. She'll stay there until you issue new orders."

The Phantom nodded. He could always count on Havens for cooperation. "The sheriff should have a break by this time," he said. "I don't mean by his own efforts. Murder has a way of leaking out—making itself apparent, coming to light despite the most careful methods of keeping it hidden."

"You're talking about Selgard?"

"I'm referring to Danny Brayden," the Phantom said, explaining what he and Steve had turned up at the shack.

Frank Havens listened, troubled. When Van finished, he said, "More complications. Who killed Brayden? Why?"

"The same one who knifed Selgard. Why?" The Phantom shrugged. "I think I know. However, I won't give my theory until the facts are in. I can tell you this. The State Department doesn't have to worry. The Professor wasn't murdered because of any secret documents."

Havens' brows went up. "You're sure of that?"

"I'm positive. It was an entirely different reason, another motive that directed the blade of the hunting knife toward the scientist's heart!"

"I'll pass that information along immediately. I know it will relieve the minds of a number of our top officials at Washington." He stopped and frowned. "What is the other reason, the real motive?"

"When I have that, I'll have the case solved," Van answered.

He gave Havens a few more crisp instructions and was getting out of the chair when one of the telephones on the big desk rang. Havens picked it up. The Phantom, starting toward the door, stopped midway when he heard the crackle of the operator's voice:

"Crooked Mile calling Mr. Frank Havens."

"This is Mr. Havens."

Another voice cut in. The publisher looked at the Phantom while he listened. He spoke briefly, rang off and drew a quick breath.

"Thatcher?" Van asked.

"Yes, about Danny Brayden. You were right. Brayden's body was found an hour ago, near a bend in the river where it runs into the lake! A couple of fishermen discovered it."

The Phantom nodded gravely. "His head was bashed in. Brayden was dead when he was thrown into the river."

[Turn page]

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AND TUNE IN: TWO NETWORK SHOWS! "The Adventures of Sam Spade" Sunday evenings, CBS Network; "King Cole Trio Time" Sat. afternoons, NBC Network.

Frank Havens' eyes widened in blank surprise.

"How did you know? That's exactly what the sheriff just told me!"

CHAPTER VIII

OUT OF THE SHADOWS



LOSE to the throbbing heart of Times Square, The Green Spot, one of the most popular Broadway taverns, was wedged in next to the theater whose marquee told the passerby the musical hit it housed was in its third successful

year.

The Green Spot, a metropolitan edition of Logan's Tavern at Crooked Mile village, often proved useful as a meeting place for the Phantom. It had the advantage of being easy to reach and within short walking distance for Steve from the *Clari-on*.

Like most places of its type, the bar was in front. A back room with juke box and pinball machine contained tables for loungers. Bookmakers made it a headquarters for the compilation of bets and payoffs. One telephone booth in the back was in constant use each morning from eleven o'clock until post time at the tracks.

Now, as the Phantom entered The Green Spot, it was a little early for the handbook clan. The tables there were empty except for one where the red-headed Huston waited for him with Dorlan.

Chip, at one time had been closely associated with the Phantom Detective and his cases. Van, had found Dorlan admirably suited to his purpose. Chip was small, with snapping blue eyes, wiry and hardened by a boyhood spent in the San Francisco slums. The Phantom had trained him in his own methods of crime detection and Dorlan had been an apt pupil.

Considerable water had flowed under the bridge of time since Chip's last association with the celebrated crime expert. Dorlan had left him to join the Army. During the war the hard hitting Dorlan had been shifted around until, at a word from the Phantom, he had been assigned to Military Intelligence.

In that branch of the service, Chip's training under the Phantom's guidance, had proved valuable to the Armed Forces

and Chip had built up a considerable reputation for his undercover work in the apprehension of spies and saboteurs. He had won himself a citation, too.

And now, coming back to the Phantom after his war years, he brought with him the experience gained in the Army together with a maturity he had lacked before he had gone into the service.

Steve Huston snapped his fingers when he saw the Phantom come in.

"Here he is now, Chip."

Making sure there were no listening ears, Van joined them. He pulled out a chair and sat down. In a few terse words he gave Steve the news that had come over the telephone before he had left Frank Havens' office.

The redheaded reporter reached for his pencil and the notebook that was as much a part of him as his freckles.

"So Brayden's killing worked out according to your calculations, Phantom."

"The bloodstained bottle was clue enough for that." Van moved his shoulders. "I want you to telephone Mr. Havens' lodge. Get Muriel on the wire."

He rattled off the number, Huston jotting it down.

"What do I ask her?"

"Have her put Miss Selgard on the phone. From her I want a complete description of the antique Swiss watch she recently took to New York for her grandfather."

"Right. Anything else?"

"Yes. When Miss Selgard was in town she stayed with a girl friend who worked with the Merritt Foundation. Her name was Rogers, I believe. Check on Miss Selgard's alibi, for the record."

Steve nodded and went into the telephone booth. Chip Dorlan, who had been waiting patiently, leaned forward.

"Anything on the books for me, chief?"

"How are you on steamships?"

Dorlan looked dismayed. "No good. I get seasick too easy."

"This is strictly a land assignment. Here are proper Police Department credentials." The Phantom handed over an envelope. "With them are a list of various trans-Atlantic lines, those with passenger ships that have docked within the last month."

"That's better." Chip looked relieved. "What do I do with them?"

THE PHANTOM bent forward and spoke impressively.

"Comb over the passenger lists. You'll find them on file. Start with the Blue Star Line. Professor Selgard came to this country from Cherbourg on the *Brittany*, one of their boats. See if you can find any record of a passenger named Ravac who might have been on the same ship."

"Just 'Ravac'? No first name?"

"Not so far." Van smiled thinly.

Chip pushed back his chair and got up. "I'll get started right away. Shall I contact Steve, as I used to?"

"Get in touch with Mr. Havens," the Phantom directed.

Dorlan left and a few minutes later the redheaded reporter, finished with his long distance call to the lodge at Crooked Mile River, came out of the booth.

"Got all the dope for you." Steve sat down and smoothed out the page containing the shorthand notes he had made. "First, a description of the watch!" . . .

The twilight had turned to darkness when the Phantom left the Park Avenue apartment that night. He slipped through the shadows, the nocturnal roar of the city in his ears. After he had left Huston at The Green Spot that morning, Van had gone to Conrad Schiller's shop on East Fifty-eighth Street.

But with no luck. The shop had been locked, no one had answered his knock.

For the second time he made Schiller's place his destination. The Phantom headed up the avenue. He was satisfied the necessary machinery to trap Selgard's killer was in operation. He wasn't quite so sure about the other angles he had to investigate, that of Schiller, the watch repairer, and the package Adele Selgard had delivered to him. He wanted to talk to Schiller, to see the man.

No thread, woven into the intricate design of any murder pattern, was too inconsequential for the Phantom's undivided attention. A large part of his brilliant successes had come through his keen ability to link together things which, in ordinary police investigation routines, appeared too trivial to be important.

The simple delivery of an antique Swiss watch had aroused the Phantom's curiosity. He wanted to learn more about that watch and to that end was making a second stop-off on East Fifty-eighth Street. Schiller might or might not figure largely in the mystery of the Professor's death.

Van approached his destination. Originally, at a time when the neighborhood

had housed some of Manhattan's socially prominent, the old private house the Phantom reached, had undoubtedly been the home of wealth.

Now the city's march of uptown business had engulfed it in a whirlpool of commercialism. The building had been remodeled into a ground floor shop with offices and lodgings above. A series of painted signs, one above the other, on the left side of the front door gave names and floor locations.

The Phantom glanced at them casually. *C. Schiller, Watch Repairer*, had the figures 293 after his name. The door was hooked back and in the gloom beyond a flight of uncarpeted stairs led steeply to the floors above.

The Phantom went up the steps. 203, Schiller's workshop, was at the end of the landing, near the front of the house. The Phantom stopped at Door 203. Quiet closed in about him, deep and unbroken. No light showed around the crack of the door or along its sill.

To all appearances, Schiller, as on that morning's visit, was out.

This time Van didn't turn away with a shrug. Instead, he reached for his masterkey. He listened for footsteps coming up the stairs, heard none and slipped the key into the lock.

To be discovered breaking into the shop of Conrad Schiller, at that time of night, might offer complications. He continued to keep his ears alert for warning sounds while he quickly adjusted the delicate mechanism of the key.

A light twirl on its shank and its flanges spread cleverly to fit into the wards and tumblers of the lock. A turn, a click and the door opened.

The Phantom stepped through it.

BLACKNESS, a degree darker than the landing, swirled around him. A faint breeze stirred a drawn shade at one of the two windows in the workshop. The ticking of many clocks and watches made a monotonous metallic chorus in the murk.

The beam of the Phantom's torch, suddenly switched on, cut the dark like a golden knife slicing black velvet. It darted over a workbench directly across from where he stood, over cabinets and a heap of tools, until it reached the floor.

Then, as his gaze fastened on the upheaval there, his nerves tightened.

Much like the littered disorder in Professor Selgard's office at Rockledge, the

man-made cyclone that struck Schiller's shop had left a clutter of confusion in its wake.

The contents of wall cupboards had been pawed over and tossed across the floor. Cardboard gift boxes, some with bright colored paper decorating them, had been trampled underfoot. The drawers in the workbench gaped open. Most of them had been pulled out and gone through.

The Phantom's glance shifted to the rear of the shop. A length of dreary curtain, hanging wearily from a pole, shielded a paint-peeled door. He brushed that aside. The door opened into a narrow passage and the passage, his torch showed him, to the living quarters of the watch repairer.

The Phantom passed a small, dark kitchen. There was another door ahead—open. He stopped at its threshold.

Air, fresher than that in the front of the place, blew in through an open window. It swam past the Phantom's face, clean and cool. He stood motionless, wondering at the crawl of his nerves. His highly developed, intuitive sixth sense began to pick up vibrations. It telegraphed a warning, a message of imminent danger.

The eye of the flash moved from the open window and what Van saw was an iron fire-escape outside it, to the bed in the room. A man lay across it. He was fully dressed and, as the torchlight focused on him, the Phantom saw his partially bald head, his thin face, wrinkled and gray, his eyes, narrowed as if in mortal pain.

One outstretched hand on the bed's patchwork quilt moved convulsively. A sound like breath being squeezed into constricted lungs made a faint, rattling noise. The pillow on which the man's head rested held a significant crimson stain that, as Van looked, seemed to widen before his gaze.

He moved in closer to the bed. His first glance was sufficient to show him what had happened. The one on the patchwork quilt—Conrad Schiller, without question—had been shot.

The Phantom bent over him, his narrowing eyes on the bullet wound bored into the left side of his chest. Van saw he had been shot at close range, from the burn and the powder marks on his white shirt, above and around the welling red stain on it.

At close range—and not many minutes previous!

Blurred eyes looked up at him. Whitely drawn lips moved, trying desperately to form words. Tensed, the Phantom leaned to catch their meaning.

"Schiller!" His own voice was low and vibrant. "Who did this?"

The lids began to come down over the harassed eyes. The man's life was ticking away like the clocks he had repaired. His mouth trembled as he forced words across his pale lips:

"Black—black." He seemed groping for some positive word in the mists closing in around him. "Back—in the back—"

He made one more vain attempt to say something, gasped and stopped. The lids went up and left his eyes wide and staring. His head lolled on the pillow and, his gaze riveted on the man, the Phantom knew the few words he had choked out were his last.

Van had not time to analyze their meaning. He straightened, the light in his hand going out. From somewhere closeby his strained ears caught a new sound.

Footsteps, swift and catlike, crossed the room, toward him.

Before he could change the flashlight from one hand to the other, and make one of his lightning gun draws, a man lunged at him!

CHAPTER IX

EMPTY HOUSE



SO QUICK and unexpected was the attack that the Phantom stumbled back. He felt the rug slipping under his feet. The bed post struck his arm and probably saved his life. It jarred him off balance, turning his head so the full force of the weapon used by his unseen assailant arrowed past his temple, slid by his ear and vented its full impact on his left shoulder.

A numbing pain opened the Phantom's fingers clutching the flashlight. That thudded to the floor. His attacker must have thought it was a gun. He struck again, savagely.

The Phantom as a ruse moaned thinly and let himself sag.

It ended as quickly as it had begun. Another flurry of light, fast footsteps faded into the short passage. A door closed and the Phantom, before its echoes had died away, was at the open window.

He knew exactly what had happened. Schiller's killer had been interrupted in making a getaway by the Phantom's entrance into the room. The man, hot gun still in hand, must have concealed himself in deep shadow. He had stood there, silent and immovable, listening to the watch repairer's faint, muttered words.

The Phantom didn't waste any time. In a flash he was out on the fire-escape, descending its iron-rung ladder to the floor below. He dropped off it, landing on broken cement, cushioning his fall with bended knees. To the left he saw the out-



STEVE HUSTON

line of an entrance to an areaway and made for it quickly.

According to his calculations he had a moment's head start on the one who had left the workshop on the second floor. Or had he? He drew a breath of relief when, at the end of the areaway which paralleled the front steps of the building, he had a diagonal view of a man coming out of the front door of the house.

The Phantom, bending low gave the man time to reach the sidewalk and turn left toward the avenue beyond, before he went up the three steps out of the narrow passage, and followed.

Tailing a suspect was an art the Phantom excelled in. Long experience had made him perfect in all its fine points. He never hurried or pressed in too closely. Adroitly and skillfully, the detective played his man, allowing plenty of leeway, but always hovering in his wake, ready to close in at a minute's notice.

He saw the other was looking for a taxi. Twice the man signaled cabs that went down the avenue. They were occupied and didn't stop. Following along after him, the Phantom got impressions of his prey when the other passed through the shine of the avenue's arc lights.

The Phantom's eyes narrowed. There was no mistaking his squarely built figure. The Phantom's photographic mind turned back to the tavern at Crooked Mile village. He was sure the one he followed was the dark-skinned, Slavic looking man with the young-old face and the black, lacquered hair who had been at the bar there.

It began to tie in, to make a pattern. Crooked Mile River and Conrad Schiller's workshop, the place where the Professor's granddaughter had delivered the old Swiss watch. Schiller murdered, the place in an upheaval, a duplication of Selgard's office at Rockledge.

To Van it was obvious and plain. The killers had been after the watch. They had missed it at the upstate lodge. They had hoped to find it at Schiller's. The question was—had they been successful? Or had they dealt murder for a third time without reward?

The Phantom couldn't answer that. He didn't know, but he intended to find out. Suddenly an antique Swiss watch had projected itself importantly into the tangled mystery of this case which certain top Government officials had urged Frank Havens to bring the Phantom in on.

Was the man he followed the answer?

Van drew a deep breath. Time, too, would settle that. The thing now, he saw, was to learn what the other's destination was, to find out where he was going.

Two more streets and the squarely built man ahead of him got a taxi. It rounded the corner, slowing at his signal. The man climbed in and the cab started off. The Phantom's gaze swept the avenue anxiously. There was no second taxi in sight, nothing in the way of a vehicle except a station-wagon rolling toward him.

IT STOPPED as the traffic lights changed. A street distant the Phantom saw the taxi his quarry had climbed into had also halted. The Phantom opened the right door of the station-wagon and dropped down on its leather seat.

Its driver, a middle-aged man who wore a wide-brimmed hat and a loose topcoat, checked whatever indignant exclamation he had been about to utter when, in

the glow of the dashboard, the Phantom opened his hand and let him see the official badge in its palm.

"Cop!" The man's laugh was one of sudden relief. "For a minute I thought it was one of these fancy New York hold-ups."

"I've got to ask your help." Van clipped it off short. "That taxi ahead. I'm following the man in it. Can you stay behind the cab, until he gets out?"

"Sure. I'll be glad to try. Only I don't know much."

"Just do what I say. He doesn't know I'm shadowing him. He won't be suspicious of a station-wagon. Keep him covered but don't crowd him."

The lights turned green and the traffic moved on. Van's newly found chauffeur introduced himself as a Thomas Blake, from Pennsylvania. He was in town with his wife on a short vacation. He had left her with some friends at a Greenwich Village apartment and was driving down to pick her up. He explained while they rolled along, the Phantom's sharp eyes fixed on the tail light of the cab they followed.

"This'll be quite a story to tell the folks back home," Blake said. "What's he wanted for?"

"Murder!"

Blake's mouth opened. "*Murder!* No wonder you stopped me! Who—who did he kill?"

"You'll read it in the papers tomorrow. Watch out. That taxi's about to make a left turn. Work over so you can swing with it. But not too close—give him distance."

The cab straightened out on the side street. Van saw they were in the upper Thirties, in a neighborhood similar to that where the dead Schiller had done business. Here was the same swirl of trade overlapping a few stubborn residents who clung persistently to their old homes.

The taxi began to edge over to the curb. The Phantom saw it was stopping in front of a private house. It was too dark to determine the number on the fanlight over the door, but he didn't need it. The house was the sixth in from the avenue.

"Shall I stop?" Blake registered excitement.

"Keep going. On to the next corner. I'll drop off there."

His driver drew a breath. His anticipation began to dwindle. The Phantom knew that he had probably figured he was to sit

in on some thrilling cops and robbers climax.

But Blake said nothing as he obeyed instructions. He stopped at the designated corner. The Phantom opened the door.

"Thanks. You've been a big help."

With that he dropped off and melted into the shadows of the street. Blake shook his head and drove on.

The Phantom walked back. The house in front of which the cab had stopped showed no lighted windows. The taxi itself had pulled away and was starting down the street. A glance assured the Phantom it was empty.

He passed the house, turned and walked back. It began to dawn on him that the building had an air of desertion expressed in the drifts of sooty grime on steps and areaway. The shades were down in the first floor front windows. Wire screens had been placed over the basement windows, inside the iron grille.

The Phantom, drifting by the house, narrowed his eyes. Empty and deserted. Yet the man he had followed down from Schiller's shop, had gone into it. He walked a few paces further on, swung around and went back to the house.

A double glass door was a shield for the small vestibule behind it. More of the dirt accumulation was heaped inside it. Circulars and newspapers cluttered the tiled floor. The Phantom used his flash long enough to see the fresh footprints in the dust.

The inner door was locked. A carved bronze knob turned in his hands but didn't release the lock. For a second time that night the Phantom's master-key was pressed into service. A minute later he quietly pushed the door open and stepped inside.

A MUSTY, dank smell of unaired rooms was permeated with the scent of a cellar probably wet from spring and summer rains. The air seemed dusty, heavy as he moved a few steps along the entrance foyer. His flash stabbed the surrounding gloom.

On either side were empty rooms. Rooms with stained, peeling wallpaper, cracked window shades drawn fully down. He saw a marble-enclosed fireplace, blackened from the gas logs within it. No sound, except the faraway stir of the city, came to him.

The torch looked for footsteps. The Phantom saw the impression of shoe

marks close to the front door. But they ended there. He found no other evidence of them as he examined the parquet flooring close to the stairs and in the rear of the foyer.

He shook his head, puzzled. To him it was amazing that in an era of housing shortages there should be an unoccupied building in the heart of the metropolis. A man had entered the house, but there was no sign of him, no indication, except the prints of his shoes, to show he had been there.

Van started up the stairs. He went from room to room, on the second and third floors, finding nothing except the silent emptiness.

The kitchen was through a butler's pantry in the rear. Wide and square, with an iron hood jutting out over an old fashioned gas stove. He tried doors until he found one that led to the cellar. He listened, but no sound came up to him from the black regions below. Slowly he went down the steps, into the chilly dampness.

The front part of the cellar showed him a rusty furnace, empty coal bins. A worn strip of linoleum led across a moldy cement floor to a laundry. That, in turn, opened into a space designed for storage and cold air preservation for foodstuffs.

A half wooden, half glass door with boards nailed across its upper portion, let in a glimmer of light. Reaching it, Van found that his intense search had some reward. The door had been opened recently. The lower part of it had made a half circle in the dust. The outline of a shoe was distinct there.

There was no key in the lock. The master-key did its work quickly and Van went into a backyard. He began to understand something of what had happened. The empty house hadn't been the man's destination. Instead, he had used it as a throw-off. He had used it to conceal his real destination. And that, the Phantom knew, when he looked around, could be any of the houses whose backyards adjoined the one he was in.

To discover which, meant a neighborhood investigation, a house to house search with warrants and all the other formidable red tape of the law.

Tight-lipped, the Phantom returned to the laundry, locking the door behind him. His visit hadn't been entirely in vain. At least he had discovered the general locale of where Schiller's killer had gone. He filed the information away in his mind

and went out to the street.

Before he returned to Park Avenue, and Richard Curtis Van Loan's lofty penthouse, the Phantom used a drug store booth to telephone Headquarters and notify Inspector Gregg of what he had found in the living quarters back of Schiller's workshop.

CHAPTER X

THE PHANTOM MOVES



PROMPTLY at eleven o'clock the following morning, the Phantom, out of disguise and as Dick Van Loan, found Frank Havens waiting for him in the visitors' room at the Patrons Club.

That exclusive meeting place was near Fifth Avenue, in the lower Sixties. Van, a member of a dozen other clubs, was always amused when he entered the place. Somehow it reminded him of the British Museum, its Egyptian Room, its mummies on display.

Elderly tycoons—capitalists and industrialists—long since retired and with nothing to do except kill time, made the place a headquarters. They dozed in the leather chairs, yawning over the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, or sat peering out into the Avenue where life passed in a glittering parade; a parade that had passed them by.

Havens, seated in the foyer, greeted Van when he came in and steered him into the empty library. Admiration and approval glinted in the publisher's gaze. This morning Van, in perfectly tailored gray flannels, with a blue cornflower in his lapel, seemed more attractive than ever. Tall, slim and in perfect physical condition, the charm that had made him a favorite of the social set, was in his casual smile and debonair manner.

But that disappeared when Havens waved him into a chair and pulled another up close.

"I heard from Gregg, earlier this morning. What's this about the murder on East Fifty-eighth Street last night?"

Van explained with his usual brief conciseness.

"The motive is obvious. Professor Selgard sent an old Swiss watch to Schiller for safe keeping. Schiller was killed for the watch."

"But how did the murderer know that the watch had been brought to New

York?" Frank Havens asked. "Surely, Selgard must have been secretive about it. Did his granddaughter talk?"

"She was probably followed." Van Loan's handsome face shadowed. "People who deal in murder have well laid plans. They don't leave angles open. I have an idea that while they operate from Manhattan they have an agent, or agents, up in Crooked Mile."

Havens nodded. "Who could have telephoned them when Miss Selgard was seen taking a train for the city?" he suggested. "But even that doesn't explain how they knew she had the watch with her. Or does it?"

Van shook his head. "No, that's part of the mystery. Later, I'm going up there. I want Muriel and Miss Selgard to return to New York. It's much too dangerous for them to be alone there at this time. Besides, I have another errand in that neighborhood I must attend to."

"Is there anything I can do while you're away?"

"No. I'm to meet Steve and Chip Dorlan later. You might keep an eye open for a long message in code from our Embassy in Paris—an answer to a request for information I sent them."

"Information?"

"Concerning the family of a Pierre Faubry. I want to learn more about this Faubry. He's the one who originally gave the watch to Professor Selgard. I've asked that he be interviewed and his report included in the Embassy's response."

"An old Swiss watch?" The *Clarion's* owner frowned. "I've seen dozens of them in second-hand stores. What possible value can it have?"

"When I learn that," Van replied, "I'll have the motive for the first two murders, as well as the third."

He left the Patrons a short time later, fulfilled a luncheon engagement at one of the exclusive avenue dining places and, back in disguise, was at The Green Spot ten minutes before Chip Dorlan made his appearance.

One glance at Chip was enough for Van to understand his mission hadn't turned up any results.

"No good?"

Dorlan shook his head. "Nothing on the party you're interested in. I went over the passenger lists carefully. The name of Ravac wasn't on any of them. Sorry, chief. As you know, I don't like to flop on an assignment."

THE Phantom laughed. "You didn't. There was only one chance in a thousand of finding Ravac on the lists. He undoubtedly used an alias. Anyway, I've got a new assignment for you. How are you geared in real estate matters?"

"In high." Dorlan leaned closer. "Let's have it."

"This is a vacant house on Thirty-ninth Street." Van supplied the address. "An empty house used as a front to get to a nearby rendezvous. See what you can do in the way of learning who owns that property and the houses around it. Get all the details you can and have them ready when I get back."

"Right."

Dorlan left and a few minutes later the redheaded Huston came into the tavern.

"Looks like I've beaten Chip in," Steve said.

"He's been and gone—on a new lead. Sit down, Steve. What did you learn?"

"That Miss Selgard's alibi is okay. She stayed overnight with Miss Rogers. Her story's on the level. Like she said she's been with the Foundation, working as a secretary. Nothing to worry about there."

For a moment the Phantom mused. Finally he looked at his watch and turned to Steve.

"Ready for a trip up to Crooked Mile village?"

Huston stared. "Yes, sure."

"Then come on." The Phantom got up. "Time and crime wait for no one. Let's get started."

His big black car rolled into Frank Havens' property at the edge of town a few hours later that afternoon. Leaving it in the barn, Van and the little reporter walked to town. Steve had been briefed on the way up. He knew exactly what he had to do and, when they were on the main street nodded and separated. The Phantom walked leisurely on until he came to a sign that read, *Cypress Road*. There he turned east.

Passing the house that shortly would be the scene of his next move in the murder drama, he continued along to the intersection beyond. A stationery store adjoined a garage. The Phantom went in and purchased a pack of cigarettes. He used that as an excuse to linger at the magazine rack.

Over its top he had a view of Cypress Road, the house he had passed. He watched it intently. It wouldn't be long, he was sure, before his instructions to

Huston would produce results.

Five minutes ticked away. Then ten.

It was when the owner of the stationery store was beginning to look hard at Van that the Phantom turned away from the rack.

A man had come out of the house he was watching. He walked around to a garage in the rear. Another minute or two and a dusty coupe backed down the driveway. It turned and rattled off.

The Phantom left the store and approached the house at a quicker pace. He had reason to know it was empty. He looked at it with narrowing eyes, taking in the details of its size, its porch, its screened windows, a front lawn that needed cutting and the drive that required weeding.

Unless he was wrong in all his theories, the house, and what he expected to find within it, were important links in the chain of his case. He had told Steve he was returning to the country town to catch a killer. He intended to do just that, rapidly and without the loss of further time.

The kitchen door at the back of the house was open. Evidently the citizens of Crooked Mile weren't troubled by uninvited visitors. A cherry tree shaded the backyard. A woman was doing garden work a few houses away. But she didn't raise her head to stare at the Phantom as he quietly opened the screen door and entered the house.

Inside, Van moved with unerring accuracy. As steel drawn to a magnet he went directly to a bedroom on the second floor. Like the lawn and the weed-grown drive, the room was untidy. Though it was late in the afternoon the bed hadn't been made. Articles of clothing were scattered carelessly about.

The Phantom centered his attention on a closet. No more than two or three minutes passed before he had what he wanted. He felt a quick, satisfied thrill. Article number one! But there was still something else he had to get.

FINDING that took more time. He tried the attic, after the closet failed to disclose it, without any luck. A coat closet near the front door drew another blank, but the cellar, when he went down into its cool dampness, finally revealed the thing he looked for.

His watch told him that nearly an hour had elapsed. The first part of his plan

had gone forward on schedule. Making a newspaper package out of what he had found, the Phantom left the house and started back toward the main street.

Reaching the village, Van directed his steps to the same block Huston had set out for a short time previous. His destination was halfway down it, Sheriff Thatcher's combined home and office.

The dusty coupe stood in front of Thatcher's house. Van, the package under his arm, opened the gate and went up the flagged walk. Inside he could hear voices, a jovial laugh that sounded familiar, Thatcher's nasal drawl.

Then the Sheriff said, "Someone coming to see me. Excuse me just a minute."

Thatcher was at the front door when the Phantom reached it. The Sheriff gave Van a curious, searching stare and beckoned him into a room down the hall. He shouldered the door shut, sudden excitement making his Adam's apple bob up and down.

"That newspaper reporter says—"

The Phantom opened his hand. In its palm his small jeweled identification insignia glittered briefly. Thatcher swallowed hard. Like most of the minions of the law, seeing the tiny mask-plate for the first time, and realizing its significance, his initial reaction was one of awed wonder.

Swiftly, Van gave him a series of low-voiced instructions. Thatcher nodded and opened the door. Still with the package under his arm Van followed the man into his front office.

Two people occupied it.

One was Huston, notebook balanced on his knee, pencil in hand. The other was the fat Dr. Lambert.

Steve caught Van's eye. So far the ruse had worked perfectly. Steve had persuaded Sheriff Thatcher to call Lambert on the telephone. Thatcher had told him a reporter for the *Clarion* wanted an interview, and Lambert, hurrying down, had left his house free for the Phantom's investigation.

Huston slipped the notebook in his pocket while Lambert, breaking off in the middle of what he was saying, turned around to see who Thatcher had brought in. The Phantom met Lambert's inquisitive gaze.

"Doc, meet Mr. Martin," the sheriff said. "He's a New York detective. Came all the way up here to make an arrest, so he says."

"Is that so?" Lambert coughed. "Who's he going to arrest?"

The Phantom laid his package on a convenient table. With Steve watching, he took a couple of steps forward.

"The Sheriff is going to do the actual apprehending," he said mildly. "I'm merely supplying the necessary evidence."

Thatcher's unsteady hand dropped to his belt. It went in under his coat and came out with a Colt .45.

The fat man coughed again, shifting uneasily in his chair, his gaze glued to the big gun the Sheriff produced.

"Who are you going to arrest?" he asked again, a crack in his voice.

"You—for Professor Selgard's murder!" The Phantom's voice was like the steel in the Sheriff's hand. "For Brayden's killing, too!"

Dr. Lambert started to get up. His pudgy hands clutched the arms of the chair. He raised himself a few feet. Then, as if the effort were too much, he sank back into it. The ruddy color went out of

bought that jacket at Fay's store over at the Falls. He had a half dozen, same color and material. Lots of people have coats like that!"

The Phantom tossed the jacket back on the table. "What made me suspicious of you, Lambert, were the shoes you had taken off at Logan's Tavern," he said. "Pointed shoes, uncomfortable for one not accustomed to wearing them. It was a trifle too obvious. You didn't have time to remove the prints of your square-toed shoes up at Rockledge. You figured someone would see them and check on them. So, to divert suspicion from you, you got yourself a pair of new and entirely different shoes. Only an amateur would have gone about it that way."

The other thing in the package was the pair of shoes Van had finally found tossed in a rubbish heap in the corner of Lambert's cellar. Square-toed, with rubber soles, dried mud still clung to their corrugations.

It was the sight of the shoes the Phan-

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his round face. He began to shake slightly, reminding Steve of a disturbed bowl of jelly.

"This is ridiculous!" he snarled. "I don't know anything more about the Professor's death—or Danny's—than—"

He chopped off the rest of it as Van began to open the package he had laid on the table. Parting the newspaper wrappings, the Phantom unfolded a coat he had taken from Lambert's closet.

Blue-gray in color, the right sleeve the Phantom pointed to had a series of what looked like moth holes and pulled threads.

"This is your coat, Doctor?"

Lambert gulped and nodded. "Yes. How did you get it?"

THE Phantom turned to Thatcher.

"The night he visited Brayden's shack by the river, Lambert left some souvenirs on the rusty screen. Bits of wool from this sleeve. I found more of them caught in the brambles near the summer house at Rockledge."

Lambert drew a hand across his face. He was breathing hard, wheezing as he had the morning he had come up the path in his official capacity of coroner.

"This is absurd!" he blustered. "I

tom held up that made the fat man crack. Suddenly Lambert seemed to go all to pieces. While Steve watched silently, sudden perspiration began to trickle down the man's round face.

His eyes went blank with fear. He opened his mouth, but no words came. Only the whistle of his breath as he sucked it in and expelled it.

"He stole the knife to put you on Brayden's trail," the Phantom said to Thatcher. "Brayden must have surprised him at the shack when he was taking it. The way Selgard was killed was revealing, too. An ordinary murderer wouldn't have known where to insert the blade to bring the quickest results. He would have just hacked at his victim. But a physician, with his knowledge of arteries and ventricles, would be more scientific about it. Lambert is a physician."

The man in the chair passed a trembling hand across his eyes.

"I—I was half drunk. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't mean to kill Danny. I didn't know he was around. He came in and—and—"

"You picked up a bottle and fractured his skull with it!" the Phantom finished for him. "You weren't too drunk to get

CHAPTER XI

NAILED

rid of the body, or to figure that Brayden, out of the picture, was a perfect suspect for the Sheriff."

"What was his motive for killing the Professor?" Sheriff Thatcher asked, his gun covering Lambert.

"That is something Lambert is going to tell us," Van answered. He turned to the doctor. "How easy or hard the law goes with you, depends on how much help you can give me."

The fear-blank eyes met the Phantom's steady stare. In their depths Van saw a faint flicker of quick hope.

"What—do you mean?"

"You were working for someone. You were under orders—to get something that Selgard had. Something someone wanted. Murder wasn't part of the bargain. That was an unfortunate circumstance. You didn't intend to kill the Professor. You probably planned to leave Brayden's knife there as a piece of evidence, after you left with what you went for. Selgard must have come in on you while you were ransacking his office."

Both Huston and Thatcher exchanged a wondering glance. The way the Phantom explained it was smoothly authoritative. Before their eyes they could visualize the crimes as they had been committed.

"What was he after?" Thatcher asked.

"An antique Swiss watch," the Phantom answered. "A watch Selgard brought to this country, a watch which is badly wanted by a man named Ravac."

Lambert strained forward in his chair. Amazement widened his frightened gaze. He peered at the Phantom as if he were seeing a fantastic figure that had stepped out of a nightmare. Someone with supernatural powers who knew all the answers to things he hadn't seen.

"Ravac!" Lambert husked. "You know about him!"



OR a grim moment or two the Phantom was silent. Steve, familiar with the way Van built his cases to climaxes, drew a breath. He saw that the look of incredulous surprise Dr. Lambert displayed was shared by the weather-bitten Sheriff. Thatcher, too, stared at the Phantom as if he weren't real.

"What did Ravac do—promise you money when you brought him the watch?"

Lambert, slumped in his chair, inclined his head. He had taken out the soiled handkerchief and was mopping his damp face. He began to talk, slowly, in a flat tense voice:

"A long time ago, I was connected with a Chicago hospital. I wasn't Lambert then. I had another name. I was top surgeon, with more work than I could handle. I started drinking to bolster me when I was tired. I won't bore you with the details. Maybe you read about them. A mistake on the operating table. It was hushed up for awhile, before the newspapers got it. I had left by then. It didn't matter—my reputation was gone."

Van let him talk without interruption. Out in the street a car passed. Someone called a greeting from it and a boy whistled cheerfully as he went by.

"I drifted around," Lambert continued. "First, the big cities. Then the towns. Once or twice I thought I had a good grip on myself—that I could make a comeback. I used to dream of that. Lots of money again, being important, being looked up to. Being tops in my line. Then I came here."

[Turn page!]

Now She Shops "Cash and Carry"

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Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

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He mopped his face again. His fingers were nervous on the hem of the handkerchief. Steve felt almost sorry for him as he resumed:

"About six weeks ago this Louis Ravac stopped at my house one night. He told me that Selgard had rented the Craig property and would be up here for awhile. He seemed to know all about the Professor. He said Selgard occasionally suffered from a stomach disorder, that undoubtedly he would be sending for me. He seemed to know something else—about me—and my weakness. He came to the point. He told me I could make ten thousand dollars, that he'd pay me that much—for—"

"Stealing the Professor's Swiss watch," the Phantom put in.

Lambert nodded. "Ravac said it wasn't stealing. The watch had been in his family at one time, some servant had taken it and later sold it to Selgard. He made it sound convincing, I almost believed him. I wasn't too particular about whether it was true or not. I needed the ten thousand he offered. I wanted it. I had to have it."

"What else?" Van prompted, when Lambert stopped.

"Not much more. I told Ravac I'd get him the watch. I never had much chance to look for it because of the Professor's granddaughter. She was always around when I went there."

"But there came a day when Miss Selgard went to New York," Van said. "You had instructions from Ravac—to telephone him whenever the girl left."

Lambert nodded again. "With the girl gone, I thought it was my chance to make a real search. I took a couple of drinks to brace myself and went to Danny's place first. Selgard's house was dark when I reached it. I didn't have any trouble getting in, I was sure the Professor was asleep. But he wasn't. He walked in on me while I was going through his desk. I didn't intend to kill him. He started to struggle with me, he was yelling—and before I knew it I had the knife in my hand!"

His voice broke. He shuddered and put his hands over his eyes as if to shut out an unforgettable picture.

"Where were you supposed to get in touch with Ravac?" the Phantom asked.

"He gave me a telephone number. It's in my wallet, here." Lambert produced it, handing it over.

"That's the only address you have, the

only means of communication?" The man nodded.

"Let me have a description of Ravac," Van said.

LAMBERT supplied that and the Phantom filed the details away in his analytical mind. He was a tall, slim, soft spoken man with just the trace of an accent. In his early thirties, he was always well groomed, with dark, wavy hair, faintly sprinkled with gray at the temples, an aquiline face and no distinguishing marks.

"Lock Lambert up," the Phantom instructed Thatcher. "Later, I'll talk to your Prosecuting Attorney about him. I want the news of his arrest kept quiet. I don't want any leak. It's essential that Ravac learns nothing about it."

"I'll do my best," the sheriff promised. "But you know how news travels in small towns. Folks are likely to ask questions when the Doc ain't around."

"Can't you take him to another town?" Steve suggested. "Jail him there and let people believe he's away on a vacation trip or something."

"Yes, that might do the trick." Thatcher brightened. "Sure. I'll run him over to the Falls. Mebbe we can all go over together, in your car."

It was twilight when the Phantom's black sedan returned to Crooked Mile village. He crossed the bridge and parked halfway up the road to Havens' lodge. Steve left Van to wait and was gone about ten minutes.

He came back with Muriel and Adele Selgard. Huston, doubling in the role of Red Cap, piled the luggage in the trunk compartment and climbed in.

A shape of shadow in the twilight, the Phantom met Muriel's eyes. She smiled faintly, holding the door so she could sit in front with him.

"So we meet again." Van leaned to close the door.

He turned his head to see if Huston and the Professor's granddaughter were comfortable in the rear. Then he touched the starter and the big car headed for the crowded city about one hundred miles away.

Muriel Havens kept her gaze on the one beside her. Over the months she had seen the Phantom in many of his disguises. Like her father, she always marveled at the perfection of his characterizations. She did now, studying his face, the lean profile he turned to her.

Long ago Muriel had given up the idea of trying to learn the Phantom's real identity. That was a close-guarded secret between her father and him. But she was sure of one thing. No man, with the exception of Dick Van Loan, had ever intrigued her imagination or fascinated her as this mysterious man she sat beside.

Sometimes she wondered if she were in love with him. Half in love with him, half in love with the dilettante Van.

She thought of that as the lights of the little town dropped away behind them and the car plunged on through the deepening night.

While the Phantom drove, his mind was busy with the details of the case. He had nailed the killer of Professor Selgard and Danny Brayden. The slovenly, drink-sodden Lambert was behind bars. But, Van knew, that wasn't enough.

He had only gone halfway. There was still the mysterious Ravac to find and deal with. Ravac, who had used Lambert as a tool! Ravac who, also, the Phantom was confident, had turned loose the black haired man with the lazy eyes to take care of Conrad Schiller.

And, most important, there gleamed through the web of the trio of murders the shine of an old gold watch. A Swiss watch, so badly wanted by Ravac, that he stopped at nothing in his effort to get it.

The Phantom brooded.

What was the significance of the watch? What was its secret? What was its value? Why was it in such demand that this Ravac dealt the cards of death in his desperate grasp for it?

CHAPTER XII

BLUEPRINT FOR MURDER



UPON reaching Manhattan, Van drove directly to Frank Havens' house. Steve Huston said good night and hurried off to the Clarion Building. After a few words with Muriel, the Phantom caught Havens' significant look and, excusing himself, followed the publisher into his paneled study.

"Word from the Embassy?"

"Yes. It came a half hour ago. A very long message in code. I have it here."

Havens unlocked the desk drawer and handed the Phantom the envelope he took from it. Van glanced at it and tucked it

away in his pocket.

"Looks like I have a job decoding it. Any word from Dorlan?"

"He phoned earlier. He has what you want."

"Good. Chip's a night owl. Tell him to meet me in two hours at the Satin Slipper. He knows where it is."

"In two hours," Havens repeated, reaching for a telephone.

A minute or two after the Phantom left Havens' house, and had turned east on the quiet side street, he knew he was being followed. It came to him abruptly in the warning jar of his nerves, just as he had sensed peril in Schiller's bedroom.

Without changing his pace, the Phantom continued on. Being tailed was no novelty. The secret enemy he fought against knew that Frank Havens was the push button that summoned the Phantom Detective out of the obscurity he dwelt within when his services were not needed. In that respect, they had a decided advantage.

They could always watch the Clarion Building, or Havens' house. They could center their attention on Steve Huston. Both the publisher and the reporter were open targets when crime was on the warpath and the slogan was to stop the Phantom at all costs.

In this instance, someone had been planted to watch the newspaperman's home. He had probably been loitering in a dark doorway down the street. When the Phantom left he must have caught a glimpse of him and followed.

Van smiled thinly to himself. He wanted a look at the one who shadowed him. More than that, he decided that some conversation with his pursuer might be helpful. Who was he? The squarely built man he had trailed to the empty house on Thirty-ninth Street the previous night? Or another of Ravac's hirelings, another tool like Lambert?

He decided to find out.

On the avenue, where the street ended, the Phantom turned left instead of right. He slowed, his quick eyes searching for some convenient tavern or grog shop that would serve his purpose. Two blocks further on he found one on the west side of the street. A small, crowded place whose trade seemed mostly cab drivers and night workers snatching a few minutes off for a quick one.

From the corner of his eye Van made sure the man following him was still loi-

tering behind him. Then he cut into the tavern. Instead of stopping at the bar he kept on going, past the thirsty line up at the mahogany—to the rear where a sign said *Wash Room*.

He drew in behind a slatted door. It was made to order for looking out without being seen. Through the slats he watched the front entrance. A minute passed—another—and then a man came in.

He entered almost warily. His attitude, the way he craned his neck after he pushed himself into the bar line, was a perfect marker. This was the one, Van was sure, who had done the following. He studied the man while the other, vainly attempting to find him in the crowd, began to register worry.

He was a tall, almost lanky individual. His chief characteristics were a long, horselike face and a hooked, beaky nose. He was young, not yet out of the twenties and, unlike the man with the long sideburns and the lazy black eyes, didn't look foreign.

This one, the Phantom observed, might have been a clerk or one who held down a menial job of some sort. He had an unhealthy, sallow complexion and his clothing was none too good. There was a shine to his blue serge suit, his shoes could have done with a polish and his striped shirt might have been cleaner. He ordered a beer, still trying to locate the Phantom.

Finally, while Van watched, he saw the man had noticed the wash room sign. The Phantom stood immovable, waiting. Slowly, as if in deep thought, the other finished his beer and set the glass down. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and, plainly unable to make up his mind, let his gaze roam around the place again.

The Phantom could almost read his thoughts. He was trying to decide the next move. Should he investigate the wash room or should he go back to the street and wait for the Phantom to come out?

He came to a decision the next moment. Dropping the change from the bill he gave the barman in his pocket he wheeled around and went out. Van let a couple of minutes elapse and then leisurely emerged from the place.

But when he was out on the pavement he found his erstwhile pursuer had disappeared. Except for a patrolman coming on beat, the street from corner to corner was deserted.

Evidently, Van told himself, his tail had quit for that night. Maybe the cop, coming on duty, had scared him off. Or, possibly, it had suddenly dawned on the lanky man that the one he had followed was trying some stratagem of his own.

A cab came along and the Phantom rode it up to a street away from his apartment.

As he had told Havens, the job of decoding his Paris message was a long and tedious one. It took time, but it paid off. The Embassy had supplied all available information, including a report from the Prefect of Police and the Chief of the Surete in Paris.

But they had been unable to locate Pierre Faubry. The man had left Paris and gone to one of the provinces. He was being sought by the French police. The Embassy official who had dictated the message promised further word as soon as Faubry was located.

The Phantom filed the decoded report away, touched up his disguise and, using his own private elevator and exit from the apartment house, hurried off to keep his appointment with Dorlan.

THE *Satin Slipper*, a night club of the cheaper variety, was close to Longacre Square, upstairs over a combined flea circus, freak museum and penny arcade. Van had selected it because he knew Chip liked New York night life when it wasn't served in dinner clothes and pastel evening gowns.

The ex-San Franciscan took his amusement rugged and without a chaser. The floor show at the Slipper was rowdy and slapstick from the opening gags until a pair of knockabout comedians came on to roll them in the aisles.

Dorlan was taking it with a wide, happy smile when the Phantom reached the place, spotted his table and joined him. Van sat back, waiting for the festival to end. He got a kick out of watching his young assistant enjoy the proceedings.

The floor show ended and Van got down to business. In the noisy confusion of the *Satin Slipper* there was not much danger of their conversation being overheard. Still, playing it safe as he always did, the Phantom made sure that neither the man he had seen first in Logan's Tavern, nor the lanky person who had trailed him so industriously, were among the customers.

"What did you learn, Chip?"

"Plenty, chief." Dorlan produced some

folded papers. He spread them out on the table, waited for the band to dim down on a torrid South American number and went on, "The house on Thirty-ninth Street belongs to the estate of Ezra Cole. It's held in trust and can't be sold or rented until some other matters are settled. That's why it makes people drool when they pass it."

The Phantom's sharp eyes saw that Chip had made a sort of map of the district on the paper. Squares represented houses, thin lines were backyards, broader lines were streets.

"How about the other houses around it?"

The Cole place was designated by an X. Dorlan laid a finger on the squares on either side of it. He began to rattle off the names of property owners and leasees:

Murphy, Wilmerding, Patton, Johnson, Ledyard and Thompson. The Phantom, listening intently, shook his head. None of the names offered any lead, anything to go on. And yet the man with the Slavic face had made one of those houses his night's target.

"No deal?" Chip looked disappointed. "I thought maybe you'd latch onto one of those names."

"One of them is right. Which?" The Phantom shrugged. "I'll take your map along with me." He folded it into its original creases and put it in his pocket. "One thing more, Chip. This—"

The Phantom opened his wallet and took out the telephone number the flabby Dr. Lambert had given him in the Sheriff's house at Crooked Mile. Van had checked it with the telephone company and had written a name and address on the card he dropped in front of Dorlan.

"The Swiss-American Importing Company." Dorlan read the writing slowly. "Willard Building, Madison Avenue." His bright blue eyes fastened questioningly on the one across from him.

"Here's a chance for you to put some of your Army Intelligence training to work. That telephone number is the means of communication given by a killer to one of his tools. It might mean a lot or nothing. Tomorrow morning drop in at the Swiss-American Importing Company. Dream up a plausible story, try to see the head man and absorb the set-up. I want accurate descriptions of everyone you see there."

"I'm your man," Dorlan said, briskly.



CHIP DORLAN

"About the house on Thirty-ninth Street?"

"I'll take care of that," the Phantom assured him.

The band began to beat out the hot licks of a new jiggle number. People were getting up to dance. The Phantom stood, pushing his chair back. But his destination was not the waxed oblong of the crowded floor.

With a word to his wiry little assistant, Van left the Satin Slipper, let the doorman whistle up a taxi and climbed into it.

"East Fifty-eighth Street," he directed, and shut the door after him.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE JAR



TWO questions confronted the Phantom.

One: Had Conrad Schiller's slayer found the Swiss watch? Two: What had the old watch repairer tried to convey in the words he tremulously choked out before he died?

As the cab went north and then east, Van did some hard and fast thinking. Whether or not the watch had been found was something only time could answer.

Schiller's workshop had been thoroughly ransacked. Professor Selgard's office at Rockledge had been given the same kind of rough treatment without success. It was more than probable that Schiller, realizing the worth of the watch, had hidden it carefully.

Van's mind turned back to the message from the Embassy in Paris. The future well-being of an aged Parisian citizen depended entirely upon the watch. His face shadowed as he recalled the specific information contained in the message.

Then he began to brood on the second question. "*Black. Back. In the back.*" The Phantom's brows drew together. Did the words, jumbled and apparently meaningless, represent a key to where Schiller had put the time-piece?

A picture of the litter in the workshop crossed the Phantom's mind. Cardboard gift boxes trampled underfoot. Had what the slain Schiller mumbled meant that the watch might be in a black box, somewhere in the back of the shop?

While he was pondering the question the taxi drew up in front of the address he had given the hackie. The Phantom paid the toll on the meter, let the cab go and went up the steps.

Schiller's body had long since been removed by the morgue cart. At the Phantom's orders, nothing in either the workshop or the living quarters had been touched beyond the routine examination Gregg's plain-clothes detectives had made in their search for clues. For the third time, since Muriel Havens had found the dead Selgard in the summer house, the Phantom Detective stopped before the door numbered 203.

He used the key Gregg had supplied him with, went in and switched on the lights.

Except for the heavy footmarks of the law, the place was the same as it had been when the Phantom had discovered the dying man on the bed in the other room. His eyes roamed around swiftly. There were plenty of the gift boxes, but none of them were black.

Neither were there any black boxes on the shelves behind the workbench or in any other part of the room. He walked slowly about, his keen, analytical gaze probing for some slight evidence that might be snatched up and worked out into a clue.

Again he was disappointed.

He tapped the walls, thinking possibly

there might be a hidden recess. But no hollow sound came from the rap of his knuckles. He examined the floor, looking for a cut in the linoleum paving it—some seam, cleverly dovetailing to indicate a floor hiding place.

He shook his head, straightening. Nothing there.

In turn he tried the same procedure in the passage, the kitchen and the bath without result. That brought him to the bedroom. He turned on a light and listened to the muted voice of the city.

The fire-escape window he had used as an exit was closed and double-locked now. The stained quilt and pillow case had been removed from the bed. They had been taken, Van knew, to the police lab. The mattress had been turned back. Dust hung from the exposed bed springs in gray festoons.

The Phantom with patient perseverance started all over again. First, the walls. Then the floor. After that, he examined the room's closet with painstaking care. It seemed a hopeless task. Nothing indicated that he was even close to finding what he looked for.

With a shrug he came back to the center of the room. He stood there, puzzled and perplexed, his glance going around for a final tour of the bedroom.

Where would a safe, secret hideout for a watch likely be located? The Phantom put himself in Schiller's place. An old friend had entrusted a valuable object to his care. Where, if he were Schiller, would he secrete it?

SELGARD undoubtedly had warned Schiller that the watch was the prize for which desperate men were gambling. In that case, Schiller would be more than cautious about where he bunked it. Not in the workshop. That was too obvious. And not, the Phantom decided quickly, in the bedroom.

He wheeled around suddenly. A frosted light in the bathroom glimmered on tiles that needed scouring. The white enamel medicine cabinet over the basin was Van's first objective. He went through it quickly, but not missing anything on the way. His net result, when he closed the mirrored door, was nil.

Nothing else in the bathroom warranted his attention after he checked it over. That left only the kitchen. He entered that, pulling a dangling, greasy string that turned on the bulbs in a ceiling fixture

CHAPTER XIV

UGLY AND OMINOUS

and faced the few dishes in the sink from which Schiller had eaten his last meal.

The Phantom propped himself up against the broom closet and looked at the dresser. On its sink-level shelf were blue and white containers for various household necessities. Each had a script identification in flowing blue. *Sugar, Salt, Flour.* Standing there, idly considering the jars, the Phantom's gaze, shifting to the floor, saw a faint drift of what looked like white powder.

He followed it with his eyes. A little of it near a cupboard door, the faintest sprinkling on the shelf. He walked over and noticed the shelf itself had been dusted clean in several places. Dusted, evidently, by a quick handkerchief that had removed some of the white powder spilled there.

Van moistened a finger and picked up a sample of it. Its smooth, velvety texture, its faint odor told him it was flour. He went to the sink and studied the dishes. He scrutinized a coffee cup, and a saucer to which the yellow stain of eggs still clung. Crumbs of toast and another saucer containing five prune pits.

Nothing there had been made of flour. The Phantom's pulses began to quicken. Suddenly he had a deep sense of being on the right track. Swiftly he drew a jar labeled *Flour* out of line and removed its cover.

It was half full. He dipped his fingers into it. There was no watch concealed beneath the white heap, but something else met his touch. That was a piece of folded paper.

The Phantom pulled it out, shook the flour from it and held it to the light. His eyes narrowed as words, scribbled in pencil, swam before him.

He had found a note on it—a note addressed to him! It read:

Phantom—When you find this it will serve to let you know that someone, a trifle more clever than you, has what you are looking for! A man can be made to talk—but only when he is alive!

Follow the Exploits of
the Black Bat, Nemesis
of Crime, in

**BLACK BOOK
DETECTIVE**

15c AT ALL STANDS!



LARGE, bronze-framed and glass-enclosed, the directory board in the marble-lined entrance hall of the Willard Building, on Madison Avenue in the mid-Forties, faced the battery of elevators. Chip Dorlan, reading the names and suite numbers on it, found the one he wanted and joined those waiting for an elevator to come down.

The Swiss-American Importing Company was on the seventh floor. Room 711, according to the board. Seven-eleven! Chip's lucky number. The same combination of black spots that had eked many an Army pay in G.I. sessions with the galloping cubes.

He pushed his way into the elevator, trying to steal a glance at himself in one of the side mirrors. He wanted to see if he looked realistic enough for the role he had decided to play. The suit he wore had just come back from the dry cleaners. It was well pressed, fit his small frame without a wrinkle. And his felt hat was fairly new, the second he had purchased since leaving the service.

As the elevator went up and the floors clicked away with monotonous regularity, Dorlan, again, gave thought to the job confronting him. He believed he knew why the Phantom had picked him for it rather than the redheaded Steve Huston. The characters the Phantom was tangling with evidently knew Huston by sight.

He, Dorlan, because of his recent reunion with the master detective, and the fact this was the first case he had worked on in years, had the solid benefit of not being known, and, of being able to move in close—in places where Steve couldn't go.

He had decided upon a course of action. He had gone over it until he thought he was letter perfect. After all, it didn't look like too tough an assignment. To Chip it resembled the groundwork for something the Phantom was preparing for future use.

Just a general look-over of the Swiss-American Importing Company, a complete description of whomever he met, a clear picture of the set-up.

The elevator stopped and he got out. He was in a long, sunny corridor. The click of typewriters was on every side, some

muffled by shut doors. Dorlan walked along, looking for 711. He found it around a bend in the corridor, opened the door and walked in.

He was in a small ante-room, neither gaudily nor cheaply furnished. The room had a railing with a gate in it that separated one half from the other. There was a bench on the near side, a water-cooler and a small table with two or three magazines on it.

On the other side a girl sat at a desk, reading a paper-covered reprint novel. She wasn't particularly attractive. She wore spectacles and had her hair arranged in two brown buns. Chip smiled to himself. His boss wanted details and details he was going to get.

The book closed. The girl sat up a little straighter in her chair. She had muddy eyes behind the lenses of her glasses, a rather thickish nose and sort of a foreign look. Put in some tattered garments, Chip thought, remove her high-heeled shoes and nylons, and she would be a perfect counterpart of the peasant women he had seen in Central Europe.

He met her look of inquiry by taking out his wallet and thumbing a card from it. A job printer friend had run them off an hour previous. They were hardly dry. Chip gave her the card which read:

Leonard M. Spencer, Novelties.
Altoona, Pa.

"I'd like to see your manager." He made his tone friendly.

The girl read the card and held it balanced between her fingers.

"You're a salesman?" Her voice had a husky blur of it. Chip tried to catch its accent, to place approximately where she hailed from.

"Not a salesman," he corrected. "A buyer."

The eyes behind the glasses looked him over more thoroughly.

"What do you buy?"

"I'm opening a novelty store in Altoona. First of the month." Dorlan tried to warm her up with a smile. "I happened to see your name on the board downstairs. How about clocks? Cuckoo clocks, for instance?"

She stared at him for a minute longer. Then she got up and opened a door in one corner of the room. Before she closed it Chip had a glimpse of an inner office, of a shaft of sunshine slanting through Venetian blinds, of cigar smoke. A voice speak-

ing on the phone broke off when the girl opened the door and went into the room.

SHE was gone nearly five minutes. Dorlan used that time to more completely scrutinize the ante-room. He began to realize that, for a business place, it wasn't any too well appointed. There were no filing cabinets, no typewriter visible, none of the accoutrements of the usual office.

The girl's return broke in on his thoughts. She unlatched the gate.

"Mr. Wisner will talk to you," she said, nodding toward the door she had come out of.

"Thanks." Chip picked up his hat, went through the gate and up to the door left ajar for him.

He pushed it wider, the inside office gaining shape and size as he stepped in. A man sat at a desk, a long cigar between his fingers. Dorlan, who had the facility of getting immediate impressions of people, took him in with a single, comprehensive glance.

If he had expected someone stamped with the usual criminal brand, Chip was disappointed. The man at the desk who, in a quietly pleasant voice said, "Come in, Mr. Spencer. Sit down, if you please," was tall, perfectly groomed and had all the polish and elegance of a Continental society man.

He, too, was foreign in appearance. From one of the Balkan countries, probably. His wavy, dark hair, brushed well back from his high, intellectual forehead, his aquiline face, deep brown eyes and straight nose gave him a scholarly look. He might have been a diplomat to Chip's way of thinking—anything except a business man in a Madison Avenue beehive of industry.

The dark brown eyes roamed over Dorlan. Chip sat down in the indicated chair. That was to the left of the desk, placed in such a position that the sun streaming in through the blinds fell directly on his face.

For some unknown reason, which he couldn't explain or analyze, Dorlan felt a qualm of uneasiness. This man, "Mr. Wisner," as the girl had called him, was a shade too suave, too unctuous for Dorlan's liking. Somehow he reminded Chip of the war criminals brought in for questioning. Slippery, mild mannered, and doubly dangerous because of that, they also had been soft-spoken men, deceptive in a first glance, but as deadly as coiled vipers. Chip had the impression that the man

facing him exuded poison.

"What can I do for you exactly, Mr. Spencer?"

Chip came back to reality with a snap. His mentally rehearsed lines were delivered glibly. As he had told the young lady he was opening a novelty shop in Pennsylvania. He was looking for imports. Cuckoo clocks, particularly. Nobody seemed to have any or could suggest where he could buy some. The name "Swiss-American" had struck him when he had noticed it on the board downstairs.

Did Mr. Wisner's firm deal in clocks with automatic birds that chirped the time?

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Spencer." Wisner sounded regretful. "Our product is entirely different."

"What is it? Mind telling me?" Chip tried to sound like a small town business man, a trifle gauche, overly persistent.

"We deal principally in embroideries. But," Wisner added quickly, as if worried that his visitor might seize upon them for an order, added, "unfortunately we have none for sale at the moment. All our shipments have been delayed."

There was a note of finality in his quiet tone. Dorlan, taking in the view of the sparsely furnished office, moved in his chair. In the ante-room he heard a door open and close, voices.

"Do you know of any place where I can buy some clocks?"

Wisner shook his head. "No, I do not. So sorry, Mr. Spencer."

Dorlan began to get up from the chair. He was on his feet when the door of the inner office opened and a man came in. Instinctively Dorlan went on guard.

The man who entered was different from the one who called himself Wisner. This man was stockily built, with lacquered black hair, a two inch forehead, a dark skin and a thin-lipped mouth. His chief characteristic was a pair of sleepy eyes, black as his hair. Dorlan didn't have any trouble placing him as a Slav.

But there was something he couldn't place. That was the man's quick stare of interest in his direction. He came to a stop halfway across the room, finally removing his heavy gaze from Chip and transferring it to the one at the desk.

"What does he want?"

THE question was delivered in a low, vibrant voice. A tight-toned voice which, to Dorlan, seemed full of menace.

Wisner, evidently puzzled by it, frowned as he smoothed back his long hair.

"This gentleman is a buyer, Peter. He is looking for some clocks. I told him we had none and he is about to leave."

The other man swung around and went back to the door. Chip saw him turn the key in the lock. He walked up to the desk, his right hand in his jacket pocket.

"Buyer? Clocks? He is also something else!"

Wisner's head jerked up. "What do you mean?"

The sleepy eyes had lost their lazy look. They riveted on Dorlan, gleaming with black fires. The thin lips crawled back over white teeth. Peter laughed harshly.

"The minute I came in I knew I had seen him somewhere before. I remember now. It was in the street, on Broadway, he was with that redheaded reporter on the *Clarion*!"

Dorlan stiffened. The ease with which Peter pegged him, combined with the look in Wisner's aquiline face and the locked door, rang a warning bell within him.

"So!" Wisner said, beginning to get up. "Trying to trick us!" Peter laughed under his breath. "He thinks we're a couple of fools!"

On his feet, Wisner said, "You're sure about it, Peter? This is serious. I can't have you making a mistake."

"Of course I'm sure! My eyes don't lie to me. I never forget faces!"

The warning bell ringing in Chip's ears began to echo. He knew he was in a spot. He could try to bluff it out, but he was sure it wouldn't work. He had to think of something else if he wanted to save his skin and he had to think fast.

These two men were deadly and dangerous. From what Dorlan had picked up from the Phantom and Steve, concerning the triple murder case, he understood they played for keeps. They were smart operators. They didn't draw any lines. Murder was part of their game and anyone who stood in their way had an even chance of coming to a quick and violent end.

Dorlan eyed the distance to the door speculatively. Two against one! He was willing to fight for his life, but he wanted better odds than those being handed him.

He shook his head, making a final try. "There seems to be some mistake. This gentleman says he's seen me before. That's hardly likely. I only got into town last night."

Wisner stepped aside and in the same motion the man with the lazy black eyes moved in closer. His hand came out of his pocket quickly.

His fingers were clamped about the butt of a snub-nosed .45 automatic which covered Chip, ugly and ominous in the shaft of sunlight that lanced in through the Venetian shade!

CHAPTER XV

711



His watch was indicating two o'clock, that afternoon, when the Phantom stopped in at Police Headquarters.

He had made it a practise of long standing always to work alone on a case. His methods were completely different from those of Homicide. Yet, occasionally, Van found Inspector Gregg and the detective bureau helpful.

By the same token, Gregg sometimes found it necessary to get the Phantom down to Centre Street for cooperation and collaboration. This visit, Van had learned from Havens who had handled Gregg's call, was one of those times.

Gregg hadn't explained, but Van had an idea the Inspector wanted to see him concerning Schiller's murder.

In the busy building Van made his way directly to Gregg's front office on the second floor. It was across from the detectives' Squad Room and next to the Exhibit Room. A cop on duty gave the Phantom a questioning look.

"I have an appointment with the Inspector. The name," Van told the man, "is Gray."

The cop's face cleared like magic. The questioning look turned to one of wonder. He had put two and two together and figured out that this "Mr. Gray" was some important big shot. Gregg had dropped more than a hint as to that. And someone in the locker room had mentioned the Phantom Detective being on the case.

The cop cleared his throat and hurried to usher Van into his chief's office. The Inspector, a grizzled, middle-aged man with a ruddy complexion and a perennially worried look, was at his desk, talking into one of the battery of telephones before him. He reached around it to shake Van's hand and the Phantom saw the same look of approval in his eyes that

Havens had displayed when he had first glimpsed this new disguise.

The Phantom sat down. Gregg went on with his conversation. It had something to do with a suspect, picked up in an outlying Brooklyn district, who was wanted for questioning in a truck hold-up.

Van crossed his legs. In his own way, the Inspector was a capable person. He lacked imagination, but achieved results by sheer persistence based solidly on routine police tactics. He seldom deviated from the general departmental pattern. Time and again Gregg had come up with the right solution after weeks and sometimes months of intensive undercover work.

Van knew that the Inspector had a deep respect for the famous Phantom. And, Van also knew, Gregg should have. On countless occasions, when he and his men were at a dead end, when a case bogged down so completely that failure seemed inevitable, the Phantom, summoned by Havens, had come to the rescue.

Gregg knew something else. That was the fact the Phantom never took the credit for his brilliant deductions and unflinching solutions. He always let the Inspector have the glory. Van smiled to himself as he thought of it. Personal satisfaction in outwitting a criminal brain was reward enough for him.

The Inspector slammed the receiver back on its hook and turned with a grunt. "That's a fine disguise, Mr. Gray. Sometime, when you're not too busy, you can come down and give my boys a talk on how to change their faces."

"Disguise," Van answered, "isn't something that can be taught in a few minutes. It's a talent, brought to its peak through years of experience." He smiled whimsically. "In a way, a disguise can be as much of a liability as an asset. I learned that long ago."

"You've got the art down to a science now," Gregg said, admiringly. "I suppose you're wondering why I asked Mr. Havens to have you stop off here."

"About the murder on East Fifty-eighth Street?"

"Exactly." Gregg inclined his grizzled head. "I won't bore you with the details. Schiller was shot with a forty-five caliber gun. The murder weapon wasn't found. There were no prints anywhere in the place—no clear ones. No clues, either. Nothing to establish a motive or supply a lead. How does it go with you?"

"Slowly." The Phantom shrugged.

"But I have some information." The Inspector tipped back in his squeaky chair. "I've found a woman who believes she saw the killer—killers. Her name is Martha Davin. She runs a vocal studio on the top floor of the place on Fifty-eighth Street. Maybe you saw her sign at the front door."

"I did. She's here?"

"Outside, waiting. I thought you'd like to talk to her."

"I would. Ask her to come in."

THE woman who entered the room a few minutes later was typical of the type of elderly woman who, either a widow or a spinster, eked out a precarious livelihood through the medium of music. She was thin, gray-haired, plainly dressed and obviously nervous.

She looked quizzically at Van when Gregg introduced him as "Mr. Gray," took the chair the Inspector pushed around for her and sat down with a cough.

"Mr. Gray wants to ask you a few questions." Gregg went back to his own chair at the desk.

"The Inspector tells me you have an idea you saw Conrad Schiller's killer," the Phantom said.

"I saw two men leaving Mr. Schiller's shop," Miss Davin explained.

"Suppose you tell me about them."

Van's tone was mild and friendly to put her at ease.

"I went to the movies. On Lexington Avenue, the second show. That started about a quarter to nine. It was a few minutes before eleven when I left the theatre. I live in the rear of my studio, on the top floor. I remember seeing a car parked in front of the house. I didn't pay much attention to it. Mr. Carlo, the furrier in the basement, often has friends calling on him at night."

"Do you remember what kind of a car it was?"

"A coupe. Dark colored." When Van nodded she went on. "The front door is always unlocked. I went up the stairs. I remember there wasn't any light around Mr. Schiller's shop door. That's one reason I thought it rather peculiar when, halfway up to the third landing, I heard his door open. I was curious enough to turn around and look down. Two men came out."

"Can you describe them?"

"Yes. I had a good look at both. It isn't

any too light on the stairs but I'm sure I'd know them if I saw them again."

The Phantom listened attentively to the descriptions she supplied. The first was a perfect fit for the beaky nosed tail who trailed him away from Havens' house. The description of the other was that of the man Van had first noticed in Logan's Tavern at Crooked Mile village, the one with the sideburns and the sloe, black eyes.

It verified his suspicions, but offered little else. He had hoped that one of the two might be the man who called himself Louis Ravac. The Phantom was certain that Schiller had been killed at Ravac's order. He wanted a word picture of what the mysterious master-killer looked like. What he had gotten was Miss Davin's impressions of Ravac's two hirelings.

He thanked her and, a few minutes later, left Headquarters and went up to The Green Spot.

He was to hear from Dorlan concerning the Swiss-American Importing Company at two o'clock. It was twenty minutes after that hour when Van entered the tavern. He went through to the back room to find Steve Huston, a *Clarion* spread out before him, wrinkling his forehead over a crossword puzzle.

"Chip hasn't been in?"

"Not yet." Huston put the paper away.

"Odd." Van frowned. "He should have been here twenty minutes ago."

Steve looked across at him. "And it isn't like Chip to be late."

The Phantom moved his shoulders. "He might have turned up something he thought important enough to dig into. We'll wait."

"Any sign of a break in the case, Phantom?"

"Not yet. I have a few assorted facts stored away for future use. I'm hoping that Chip will come through with a valuable lead."

The little redheaded reporter knew better than to press for particulars. He raised his eyes to the clock over the door and then looked out at Broadway with its usual matinee crowd and traffic tide.

AN HOUR passed. Then thirty minutes more. Steve, always marveling at the Phantom's patience, was squeamish and uneasy at the long delay. It began to dawn on him that something might have happened to Dorlan. He hadn't figured that angle before. He always gave Chip

credit for being able to take care of himself pretty well in any kind of situation or emergency.

But, Huston knew, there was always a first time.

"I don't like this," Van pulled his sleeve down over the watch strapped to his wrist. "If Chip were unavoidably delayed he would have called before now. Come on, Steve. Let's check on it."

"Where?"

He got his answer when the Phantom stopped a cruising taxi with the directions, "Willard Building, Madison Avenue," and climbed in after him.

Neither spoke during the short run across town. In the marble-lined foyer of the Willard Building, Huston noticed the one with him scrutinize the people entering and leaving the elevators before he turned to the directory board.

"Seven-eleven," the Phantom said, leading the way into an elevator.

They went down the seventh floor corridor. At the right door they stopped. The door was shut, so was the transom over it. The Phantom's disguised face hardened when he tried the knob and found the door was locked.

"I like it even less, now," he said under his breath.

"Maybe they've closed up for the day. After all, it's after four o'clock," Huston volunteered.

"I think we'll have a look inside," Van said.

With that he produced his master-key and opened the door. He motioned Steve in, shut the door after them and let his frowning glance take in the details of the sparsely furnished ante-room.

Steve, looking around, watched the Phantom open the gate in the railing that bisected the room and push wide a rear door that led into another office.

A Venetian blind was all the way down, its slats closed so the circling sun couldn't intrude.

It made a sort of grayish half-light against which a desk, chairs and hatstand stood out in sharp relief.

The Phantom pulled out the top drawer of the desk. Then a second and third. He shook his head and Steve saw the worried expression that came into his eyes.

"Something's gone wrong!" he said.

"How do you know?"

"The people who ran this place have left—in a hurry!" the Phantom continued. "Look at these empty drawers. There's

not even a pen on the desk or a bottle of ink!"

The reporter felt something like a cold chill sweep through him. If what the Phantom said was right, and he seldom erred, Dorlan was in a jam.

"Phantom! You don't think—"

"They won't cut him down immediately." Van's tone was brittle. "If they have him, if they've tripped him up, they'll want to use him as a means to obtain all the information possible. They'll want to find out how much I know—how far into the case I've gotten—and, if possible, what my next move will be."

"Chip won't spill!" Steve said it reassuringly.

"That's why they'll keep him alive—until he does." The Phantom shook off his worry. "Let's find out more about those who used this two room suite. Here's a detective bureau badge. Get the superintendent up here. Tell him I want to talk to him."

Steve was gone some fifteen minutes before he returned with a brawny, blond Swede who said his name was Larson. Plainly disturbed by the sight of the badge Steve had used as a persuader and the fact he was wanted to answer police questions, Larson, with his job in mind, came in quickly.

In a few minutes the Phantom had the story. The double office had been subleased by a man named Franz Wisner. He employed one person, a girl clerk. Larson didn't know anything about Wisner's business, what he did, what he bought or sold. But he did have, at any rate, a clear and comprehensive description of the man to offer.

VAN filed it away, for the first time in possession of what he was confident were the details of Ravac's appearance. He was reasonably sure that Wisner must be Ravac's alias. There was a slight chance the two were separate individuals, but Van didn't think so. Ravac had given Lambert the telephone of this office and it didn't seem likely that anyone, expecting a message any time from the fat doctor, would be a person who only called occasionally at 711.

"Now," he said briskly, when Larson finished speaking, "I'll take your elevator operators in turn. I want to find out when Wisner left the building and whether he was alone when he went out."

Larson sent them in one at a time, put-

CHAPTER XVI

FOOTSTEPS

ting a relief man on each cage while its regular operator was being interviewed by the Phantom. The third one who came in had the information Van wanted and needed.

"I took Wisner down," he said. He was a small youth, sharp-eyed and intelligent. "He wasn't alone. He had two guys with him. One was a little party and the other the same character I took up and down a lot of times during the two months Wisner's been here."

HE FOLLOWED that with a word sequence of what the two who had been with Wisner looked like. Listening, Steve Huston, his heart sinking, realized the first description was that of Chip. And the Phantom, for the second time that day, was given a summary of the man with the sideburns and the black hair.

"The dame who worked here left about half an hour later," the elevator operator added. "She had a valise with her. Looked to me like she was going on a vacation or something."

"That's all, thanks," Van said in grim tones.

"I hope everything is all right," Larson said, a bit nervously, when the Phantom was out in the public corridor with Steve Huston.

Van exchanged a glance with the little reporter. The worry that had first come to him at The Green Spot weighed him down.

He had tried to reassure Huston on the point of Dorlan's safety, but there was a large question mark looming in his mind. He had seen some samples of Ravac's lethal work.

He knew what his mysterious adversary was capable of.

"Everything," the Phantom said, grimly, "is going to be made all right!"



EMERGING on Madison Avenue, and careful that they weren't being followed, the Phantom walked north with Huston. He said little as they went along, his mind grappling with the problems confronting him. The answer to it seemed to lie in the rough map of the buildings adjoining the empty house on Thirty-ninth Street.

One of them, the Phantom was certain, was Ravac's nest. The fact his man used the empty house as a means of entrance was significant. It told Van that the brains of the plot was taking no chances on having his whereabouts discovered. Behind the brown stone front of respectability, Ravac had concealed himself.

Yet, the Phantom saw, the unoccupied address on Thirty-ninth Street offered possibilities. In his welter of worry concerning the fate of Dorlan, the empty house represented the only definite lead he had.

As a lead, he knew, it could be made to supply a way to unearth the master-killer.

How? In what way, Van pondered, could he utilize the place. One thing was definitely in his favor. Ravac's man didn't know he had been followed there. The place was still clean and unspoiled for Ravac's use.

Another block and the Phantom's brooding glance cleared. "How would you like to play watchdog?" he asked Steve.

"Watchdog?"

"In an empty house." The Phantom explained rapidly. "Ravac is using this building as a private means of entrance and exit for his men. He isn't taking any

[Turn page]

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chances. His assistants can come and go freely even if Ravac's house is being watched. Not a bad idea."

He added more particulars. The red-headed reporter registered quick interest. Huston thrived on excitement and danger. He liked to take chances and this might be the means of helping Chip, if Dorlan were still alive and able to be helped.

"I'm all for it!"

"Good!"

"When do I go to work?" Steve asked.

"Not until after dark. That's another thing. Ravac doesn't send his emissaries in or out through the house by daylight. Listen carefully and I'll tell you exactly what I want you to do."

When they parted, Steve went directly back to the *Clarion*. He had a lot of work to clean up and got busy on it when he was at his desk. Usually the afternoon hours slipped past so fast that quitting time often left him with uncompleted chores. But to-day, with his mind on the Phantom's night assignment, time dragged leadenly.

Finished, finally, he stopped for a word or two with the night editor at the city desk, washed up and took an elevator to the street. Twilight was deepening in the canyons of Manhattan. The lights were coming on, golden stars in the dusk. Steve's pulses began to drum with anticipation. It wouldn't be long now!

To fortify himself for the job ahead, he dropped in at the cafeteria on the corner. He existed on a reporter's uncertain schedule for meals. The need for nourishment never bothered him. He fitted his dining hours into whatever time was left over from his newspaper work.

Twenty minutes in the cafeteria was enough. Steve paid his check and went out into the street. The veil of darkness had replaced the blue of the previous twilight. Steve turned left and walked along slowly.

The Phantom had cautioned him to make sure he wasn't being followed. He had stressed that point and Steve knew how important it was that he get to his destination without being shagged. As a test he idled along for two streets, waiting and watching to see some shadowy figure ambling after him.

When he was certain there was no tail, he stopped a cab and rode it to Fortieth Street. There he paid off, checked again on being followed and covered the block separating him from the sixth house in

from the avenue on Thirty-ninth Street.

STEVE walked past the house, on the opposite pavement. No lights showed in any of the windows. As the Phantom said, its three stories loomed up, a monument of darkness and desertion.

Retracing his steps, Huston cut across the street. Fortunately, the house had no street light in front of it. Its front steps were shrouded in gloom. Ravac had evidently found it a natural for his purpose, enough night darkness to conceal the entrance and exit of his operators.

From what the Phantom had said, Steve had an idea Ravac had forced an entry into the house through its rear. He must have had an impression taken of the front door lock, keys made to fit. Huston, as unobtrusively as possible, went up the front steps. He had the feeling a thousand eyes were watching him. He was glad when he reached the vestibule, was in the deeper gloom there.

The Phantom had supplied him with one of his master-keys and had taught Steve how to use it. Huston slipped it into the lock and, making the proper adjustments, marveled at the ease with which the key snapped the lock back and opened the door for him.

He moved into blackness that was absolute and complete. It was so dark it beat against his eyes. So silent he could hear the thump of his heart. He shut the door soundlessly and groped a way toward the stairs. The Phantom had given him an accurate description of the layout of the house, Steve had memorized it carefully and knew almost how many forward strides were necessary to take him to the newel post of the staircase.

His outstretched hand collided with it. He gripped the bannister and started up, stopping to listen whenever a tread creaked under his weight. No sound except the faraway rumble of the city came to him. He continued on until he reached the landing above.

He stopped, getting a grip on his nerves. His imagination was working overtime, conjuring up a crouching menace he knew wasn't there—yet.

With a breath he went on noiselessly into what had once been a rear bedroom, above the kitchen, and overlooking the backyard.

This room, according to the Phantom's instructions, was to be his observation post. Steve approached its window. A

cracked green shade was three quarters down. Below its edge he had a glimpse through the glass of the yard below, the other yards on either side and those of the houses on the next street. Lights, warm and cheerful, yellowed the panes at their windows. Somehow, the reporter felt better when he saw them. At least, he told himself, he wasn't entirely alone in a black ocean of peril.

Steve used the floor as a seat. That gave him an eye-level view of the yard downstairs. It wasn't the most comfortable spot in the world, but he wasn't thinking of comfort. He was there for a purpose that would either pay off or wind up in blank failure. Mentally he kept his fingers crossed while he composed himself for his vigil.

The Phantom had said he was not to smoke, but there was nothing against chewing. Steve wedged a stick of gum between his teeth and went to work on it. The Phantom had told him he might be there for minutes or hours before he got any action. Or, Van had pointed out, it was entirely possible the house might not be used at all that night.

Either way, the redheaded reporter knew his cue was patience. He relaxed, his jaws busy, while his eyes became more accustomed to the velvety dark around him. His mind went back over the case. He traced its course from the time he had gone up to Crooked Mile River, had listened to Frank Havens answer the Washington call and, with the Phantom, had investigated the murdered Danny Brayden's shack.

Step by step, Steve realized how relentlessly the Phantom had closed in on the fat Lambert. But with the doctor's arrest, Huston understood, only half the case had been completed and closed. The most important portion still faced the great detective.

Waiting in the dark, Huston puzzled over the Swiss watch. What was the secret of it? Why did Ravac bend every effort to get it? And now that he had it—if the watch had been found in the flour container in Schiller's kitchen—why hadn't Ravac disappeared from the Manhattan scene? Steve shook his head. The questions were unanswerable to anyone, he was certain, except the Phantom.

HIS own watch in his pocket ticked loudly. The gum had lost its flavor and time dragged by. One by one the

lights in the windows across the backyards went out. A frail moon came up in the east, like a silver scimitar. Steve looked at his timepiece, holding it to the gray light at the window, saw that nearly two hours had elapsed since he had entered the house.

He was changing his position on the floor when, suddenly, he heard a car slowing in the street. It accelerated after a brief delay, the whine of its motor fading down the block. Huston stiffened, every nerve alert, when another round of seconds passed and brought a new sound to his listening ears.

Down below he heard the rasp of a key being pushed into the front door's lock, the snap of a latch and then the door opening and closing!

His heart seemed to stand still. Loud in the quiet, footsteps beat out a tattoo on the uncarpeted floor as they went down the foyer toward the rear of the house. Huston felt a dryness in the back of his throat. Suppose the one who had entered was suspicious? Suppose he decided to make a quick tour of the premises? Suppose he came up the stairs and into the room?

But he didn't.

To Steve's relief the footsteps died away below. There was a pause and then another door opened and closed distantly. His gaze stayed glued to the backyard. The one who had come in was evidently on his way to the basement and the door that opened out to the yard.

This minute, the reporter realized, was the climax of his night's work. He had been planted there to find out where the man went when he left the empty house. Steve's heart began to beat fast again. Tense and rigid he watched and waited, just able to see the faint outline of the one who was cutting down the backyard.

A six foot fence was a barricade at the yard's end. The man reached it and hesitated a moment. There must have been a door or a sliding panel in it. Because, as Huston watched, the shadowy figure went through the fence.

Steve leaned forward, his breath in his throat. Straining his eyes, he saw the man hurry down the yard of the house directly in back of the one in which Steve was planted. A door opened, emitting a sudden gush of light. The man went in and the door closed after him.

Steve left. Out in the street, he went east toward Lexington Avenue. The Phantom had given him a telephone num-

ber along with his instructions. He had even mentioned the drug store with three empty telephone booths near the prescription counter.

Steve stepped into the end booth, kneed the door shut, dropped a nickel into the slot and whirled the dial with a finger that wasn't entirely steady.

CHAPTER XVII

TURNABOUT



EARLY thirty minutes later the Phantom Detective, a shape of shadow in the gloom, let himself out of the empty house on Thirty-ninth Street, followed the course of the one Steve had watched and paused beside the six foot fence the man had gone through.

There was a narrow door in the center of it. A newly made door, Van saw, from the unrusted hinges and hasp on it. He opened it, went through it and penetrated the murk of the yard backing up behind the house on Thirty-eighth Street.

Now he was in enemy territory. According to Chip Dorlan's map, the building looming before him, was the one occupied by people named Johnson. After he had gotten Huston's call he had checked that name and number in the telephone directory. But no Johnson was listed at any Thirty-eighth Street address. It was probably a private telephone, Van decided.

As he closed in on the house, he ran a quick gaze over its brick rear. On the second floor he spotted a faint smear of illumination. Light held in check by heavy draperies. The Phantom's gaze switched to the window on the yard level. That was dark behind the iron grille decorating it.

A conventional basement door opened on the yard. The Phantom explored its frame with sensitive fingertips, making sure there was no alarm wiring there. His master-key slipped into the lock. He clicked it open and felt warm air swim past his face.

Inside the house, the Phantom's smallest flashlight snapped on. It was the size and shape of an ordinary lead pencil, but it had a special lens that widened its narrow beam at the touch of a button. He let it roam around, showing him he was in a short, wainscoted passage that led to a

series of steps at its end.

The Phantom's face was like stone. The chances were about even that Chip was in this house. After Dorlan had been eased out of the Willard Building, and into a waiting car, with a gun jammed against him, he could have been taken anywhere. But Van had a hunch that he had been brought here.

This place, undoubtedly, was Ravac's base of operations. If it weren't, he wouldn't have gone to the trouble of using the empty house to get his aides in and out. That in itself was significant. It had been from the minute he had seen Schiller's killer enter it.

Quickly, noiselessly, the Phantom investigated his surroundings. A layout similar to that in the other house and a dry, warm cellar with no secret rooms rewarded his search. He used the stairs, switched his torch off and entered what served as a butler's pantry between the kitchen and the dining room on the floor above.

Thirty minutes ago a man had come into the house. But no sounds filtered down the stairs when Van reached a front entrance hall where a mica shaded lamp made a subdued light on a table under a long Florentine mirror. He stood there, head averted, determining his next move.

Abruptly, on the floor above, a telephone shrilled. There came the click of heels along the landing. The phone kept ringing for another minute. Then it stopped and a woman's voice spoke.

The closing of a door cut off what she was saying. The Phantom's gun slipped out of its holster and into his hand. He started up the carpeted stairs. A tang of cigarette smoke grew stronger as he reached the landing. He stopped there, drawing in behind the jut of a corridor wall.

To the left of him he saw an open door, a warm haze of light, tiers of books, a brown leather sofa and a wingchair close to the heavily draped windows.

As he looked in, a door on the left side of the room opened and a woman came through it. She was dressed in black, which accented the creamy whiteness of her skin, the crimson splash of her full-lipped mouth, the gold-strapped, stilt-heeled slippers on her small, arched feet.

Her hair was a rich brown with titian highlights. A cigarette in a green jade holder was balanced between slender, ruby-tipped fingers. There was something

both languidly graceful and imperious about her bearing, the flowing lines of her flawless figure.

She had a husky voice, flavored with a French accent. "That was your friend Mayhew," she said, and shrugged. "He wanted to know if there was anything for him to do tonight."

A man answered from the other side of the room, the side the Phantom couldn't see from his wall position.

"What did you tell him, Simone?" he said.

"To call in an hour."

"I'll be glad when he's paid off and let go. He's stupid. The other night—did Louis tell you?"

"About what?"

"He had him watching that newspaperman's house. The one we're interested in left it. Mayhew followed him into a tavern, then lost his nerve. Instead of staying close, he came back here to ask what to do. Stupid fool!"

The woman laughed. "We can't all be clever and intelligent like Louis, you and me, Peter. After all, he is an American."

The Phantom's eyes narrowed at the crack. He hoped, before much more time elapsed, to demonstrate the fact that all Americans were not in Mayhew's class.

Peter yawned. "I'll be glad when we finish this business and clear out of here. I've never been to Rio. I understand it's quite a place."

"Meaning," the woman asked, "the *senovitas* and gambling?"

"Exactly. With my share of the payoff I can be a big man down there."

"You can never be a big man anywhere, Peter," she told him sardonically. "Without Louis you are a nonentity."

"What?"

"Don't let's argue the point." Her voice lowered. "Rio—I think I shall like it. Music, stars and all the warmth of the tropics. I am like a cat, Peter. I love heat, the blaze of the noonday sun, nights filled with the breath of summer."

PETER'S voice had grown impatient. "When do we start? It seems to take years to get anything settled here. Why doesn't Jarman show up? What's keeping him? If he's got the money, and Louis says he has, why doesn't he come?"

The jade holder moved languidly to the crimson lips. A whiff of pearly smoke escaped them. The sardonic smile deepened.

"He will be here tonight—later."

"Tonight?" The man's exclamation was full of surprise. "You mean that? It is not one of your—what is it they say here—gags?"

"He will be in New York before midnight. Louis will meet him at Edouard's and the deal will be completed there. Tomorrow we will pack and before evening we will be on our way!"

The Phantom, crossing the corridor in four long strides, loomed up in the doorway.

"That remains to be seen!" he said quietly.

The gun in his hand moved in a slow arc from Simone to the man who sat slouched in a deep cushioned chair that matched the leather sofa. As he suspected, Van found himself looking into the lazy black eyes of the stockily built man with the sideburns, the lacquered hair and the Slavic caste of countenance.

At the sight of him, Peter's face went blank with astonishment. Quickly, a new expression came into it. Staring fear, open and undisguised, made his lower jaw sag and his cheek muscles twitch.

He kept his hands on the arms of the chair. The quiver of his fingers made the Phantom remember the fat Dr. Lambert when the chips were down and his game up. But the woman was a different proposition.

She stood in the same graceful position, the cigarette holder steady. The lids dropped a little over the deep green eyes but she displayed no agitation and no more concern than if the Phantom were an invited guest, expected and waited for.

"A visitor?" Her crescent-shaped brows lifted a little. "An acquaintance of yours, Peter? You look at him as if you'd seen him before, and are not very happy to see him again."

"Do you know who he is?" Peter's voice cracked.

"Someone important?" The woman scrutinized Van with a pretended new interest. "Perhaps you had better introduce me. I always like to meet celebrities."

"He's the Phantom Detective!" Peter answered in husky tones.

Van felt a flicker of admiration for the way the woman carried it off. She raised her head slowly and widened her eyes. Her smile was quick and brilliant. It was an act but a good one.

"The world famous detective? Really? How interesting. You're sure, Peter?"

"Of course I'm sure! I've seen him before—a couple of times!"

The Phantom moved in closer. He watched the woman carefully. He had more to worry about from her, he decided, than the one in the chair. The sight of him had reduced Peter to trembling terror. Ravac's wife remained ice-cold, poised and alert.

"Where's the man you eased out of the Willard Building?" The Phantom's voice was like steel.

Peter swallowed a breath and shook his head. The gun in the Phantom's hand swung around to cover him more completely. He started to say something, choked and sucked air into his lungs.

"Tell him, Peter. Be polite. When you're asked a question, answer it. Tell him the young man he looks for has been taken care of!"

There was something in Peter's eyes that gave Van a gleam of hope. The way he looked at the woman in black was enigmatic. The Phantom didn't miss his glance, the sudden expression in it.

But Peter shook his head, choking deep in his throat. There was no further time to lose or waste. The Phantom formulated a swift plan. There was a telephone in the adjoining room, the one the woman had answered when he had first come in. He had to get to it, to call Gregg at Headquarters. That done, and with the Inspector on his way up, Van knew that a clamp on Peter would shake loose all the information concerning Chip Dorlan he wanted.

But how to get to the phone?

"Stand up!" He gesutred with his gun.

SHAKILY Peter climbed out of his chair. The green eyes of the woman filled with contempt as she saw him sag at the knees.

"We're going in the other room, all three of us." Van nodded toward the door. "Mrs. Ravac will open it and turn on some lights."

"And if 'Mrs. Ravac' doesn't do as you say?"

"She will, I am sure," Van told her grimly.

She smiled. "Because in your profession the women against you are of the same equality as men. Is that what you mean?"

"They are equally guilty," the Phantom answered. "The door, if you please!"

There was a clipped-off note in his or-

der. The woman shrugged and started across the room. Van, before following, frisked Peter with his left hand. He took a Colt .45 from under the man's vest, dropped it in his pocket and pushed Peter forward.

"Walk!"

At the doorway the woman paused. One white arm curved around the frame of it as she reached in to click on a switch. She stood in silhouette against the blaze of light that gushed on, and Van saw the new smile that dawned in her coldly beautiful face.

It was a smile of triumph, so significant that the Phantom's nerves tightened while he felt a tingle run up and down his spine. For an instant he peered at Simone Ravac as she stood there, her white teeth glimmering through her parted crimson lips.

She said quietly, "*About time, Louis!* I might almost add—at the extreme, correct moment!"

The nose of a gun jammed hard into the Phantom's back. He didn't need a typed synopsis to explain what had happened. Ravac had come in. His wife had expected him. When he had entered the house he had heard their conversation, conversation probably kept going by Simone as a warning to him. He had come up the carpeted stairs on soundless feet and he had slipped into the room with the same lack of noise and at a climactic moment.

"Drop your gun—*quick!*"

Ravac's voice was velvet-smooth. For all of its softness Van caught the inflexible note coloring it. He let the automatic fall, watched Peter scramble for it and turned to look into the muzzle of the Luger that covered him.

Ravac's description had been accurate in all details. The Swede superintendent at the Willard Building hadn't missed. Glancing into Ravac's scholarly face, the Phantom realized the master-plotter was one more than worthy of his steel.

Ravac, he saw, was, as he had known from the first, gifted with extreme intelligence. His was the type of criminal brain that employed imagination, linking it in with super-reasoning powers. In all of his cases, Van was sure, he had never been face to face with a foe any more deadly than the man before him.

Peter sidled up to him. New courage had come back to the man with the lazy eyes. He dipped a hand into Van's pocket

THE CROOKED MILE RIVER MURDERS

and yanked out the gun he had lost. With that in hand he stepped back, a crooked, twisted leer on his dark-skinned face.

"I haven't too much time." Ravac's mild tone didn't match the glint in his gaze. "I heard from Jarman ten minutes ago. You'd better get me the watch, Simone. I can't keep him waiting."

"What about this man?" Peter asked.

"I'll take care of him! The main thing is haste. If he is here, others are likely to follow immediately! You see? Get the watch and we'll clear out!"

The woman in black nodded and hurried into the other room, the room where the telephone that had been the Phantom's objective stood blandly on a mahogany table, tantalizing in its nearness.

Van's mind seethed with thoughts. Another murder wouldn't mean too much to Ravac's score. He knew his life was dangling on a slender thread. A squeeze of the trigger in the man's hand and—doom!

The Phantom's side lunge was swift and unexpected. Ravac's shot whizzed by his head and puffed plaster from an opposite wall. Van grabbed him before he could fire again. He wound an arm around Ravac's neck and used all of his strength to haul the man around in front of him.

THAT gave him a momentary cover that kept him safe from Peter's big .45. But it was only for a second. The woman, hearing Peter's shrill exclamation, darted back into the room.

One glance put sparks into her green eyes. She caught up a heavy brass bookend from the table as she slithered past it. Ravac was struggling in the Phantom's strangling grip. Their close-locked tangle carried them across the room and up to the open door leading to the corridor. Through sweat-stung eyes Van had a brief glimpse of the stairs.

He made a desperate effort to reach them, dragging Ravac with him. If he could get to the top step, he had a flash idea he could roll down them, still hanging onto Ravac, and make a getaway.

Peter, circling in on one side, ended that hope.

The .45 came up and banged away. Three shots whistled around Van. Through their echoes he heard Simone's scream:

"Don't shoot, you idiot! Do you want to kill Louis! Do you want to bring the police in!"

Peter jammed his hot gun in his pocket and threw himself on Van's back. He weighed plenty. His onslaught pitched Van up against a square, waist-high opening in the hall wall, the sliding door of which was all the way up.

It yawned open, a black expanse. Ravac's knee dug into the Phantom's stomach and Peter, jamming hard, slammed him up against the opening. The woman in black had crowded in for the kill, the brass bookend uplifted in her slender hand.

Sliding off Van's back, Peter gripped his knees. Ravac, breaking the hold on his neck, stepped nimbly aside. The Phantom saw the bookend descending. He threw up his arm to ward it off as the man with the lazy eyes lifted him and heaved.

For one dizzy instant he knew he was going to plunge down the shaft of the opening he teetered across.

Then the bookend landed. Colored lights danced before the Phantom's eyes. As if from a great distance, he heard Simone Ravac's exultant cry:

"That takes care of *him*! Now let's get out of here before we're trapped!"

The Phantom dropped into a feathery well of oblivion.

To make it complete, Peter shoved an arm over the sill of the opening through which Van had been forced, emptying the remaining shots in his gun down the black shaft!

CHAPTER XVIII

HUNDRED-TO-ONE SHOT



MINUTES or hours passed.

The Phantom's mind began to crawl back out of its painful coma. He was still in darkness when his eyes opened to view the constricted well of blackness where he had been dropped by Ravac and the man called Peter.

His first thought was of the shots that had followed his downward plunge. Had he been hit? He moved, feeling something soft and smooth beneath him. He paid no attention to that while he felt around for the blood ooze from a gunshot wound.

Van's exploring fingers came away free from any sticky blood. His head ached dully from the brass bookend Simone had

THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE

wielded. But even that weapon hadn't made a square hit.

A bruise and lump on the side of his head showed the Phantom where it had glanced off his skull. He began to breathe easier. Peter's slugs had missed and there hadn't been a head fracture. Some lucky star had been shining over him.

The pencil torch was in working condition. Van switched it on, understanding what had broken his fall and what felt soft and yielding beneath him. The narrow shaft he had fallen down was a laundry chute. He had landed on a heap of linen collected there. The flashlight, probing further, focused on its door. It was locked on the other side, with some kind of snap catch.

Van listened.

Tomb-like quiet closed over the house. His mind went back to what the woman had cried out just before oblivion had come to him. She, Ravac and Peter had left. Nothing broke the extreme quiet.

The Phantom turned the torch on his watch. It had stopped, its crystal shattered. He figured quickly. He hadn't been in the chute for any length of time, he was sure. No more than five or ten minutes.

His foot lashed out against the plywood door and his heel shattered its panel. Another kick and he had an opening large enough to slide a hand through. The snap-lock was only a few inches away. He turned it back, pushed it over and dropped down on the wooden floor of a laundry.

Tubs were set across on the other side of the room. An electric ironer was opposite a gas stove on which a copper boiler gleamed. Clotheslines were overhead and a large calendar issued by some soap manufacturer showed a pretty blond girl whose smile was coy as she seemed to look at Van.

Water dripped from a leaky faucet. But the Phantom hardly heard it. Suddenly he went tense. From a point close at hand he caught the sound of breathing, of movement.

Someone else was in the room!

The beam of his light danced from corner to corner. It stopped some little distance beyond a wooden table where a wicker clothes basket was propped. In the glow of his torch Van saw the outstretched figure of a man. The discovery sent a thrill sweeping through him.

Chip Dorlan!

He dropped to a knee beside his wiry

little assistant, a relief greater than any he had ever known, warming him. Dorlan was bound securely with a length of clothesline. A clumsy gag was fastened over his jaws and mouth, but he was alive and breathing!

It was the work of a minute to get the line off him, the wad of cloth away from his face. Chip sat up, moving his arms and wincing as the blood started circulating again.

"Phantom!" he whispered in a tight, dry voice.

"All right?" Van's tone was tense with anxiety.

"Okay. What happened? I heard shots, then the sound of a flop in the chute. I figured they must have bumped somebody and dropped him down into the dirty clothes."

He got up unsteadily and went to the wash tub. There was a tin cup on a shelf over it. The Phantom turned on the cold water and Chip filled and drained the cup three times before he put it back.

"I'll hear your story presently." The Phantom went to the laundry door. "We've got to get out of here—fast! Ravac and the others have gone. I haven't any time to lose."

CHIP kept flexing his arms while the Phantom tried the laundry door. It was heavy and evidently bolted on the outside. The laundry's single window had the iron grille over it. The room made a perfect lock-up for Ravac's purpose.

Van shook his head impatiently. The element of time was important. He wasn't too worried about eventually getting out of the house. Steve Huston knew that he had entered it. Steve, when a reasonable interval elapsed, would notify the police. But by that time, the Phantom realized, Ravac's meeting and deal with the Jarman mentioned, would be over, completed, and Ravac on his way south.

Van turned back to the laundry chute. He hauled out the linen that had saved him broken bones. He climbed into the aperture, letting his torch run up its smooth sides. Six feet overhead he spotted another opening into it, probably from the kitchen.

He was back on the floor swiftly. "Feel up to some acrobatics, Chip? There's a way out. You can use my shoulders and reach the chute door on the floor above. It slides up and there's no lock on it."

"I'm okay now," Dorlan said. "You

boost and I'll get through."

It was a tight fit in the chute until Chip, his shoes off, got both feet on the Phantom's broad shoulders. Van began to straighten. Dorlan was no lightweight despite his stature, but the Phantom's superb strength jacked him into position with smooth ease.

Chip's hands slid over the panel. He used his palms to push it up. It went open with a clicking sound, like that of a window being raised. He got a leg over the sill and a moment later scrambled out and into the kitchen.

Sixty more seconds ticked away before he had found the stairs and was at the laundry door. Its bolt grated back, a key turned and the door opened. Van joined him in the warm, dry cellar.

Shoving his feet into his shoes, Dorlan followed the Phantom upstairs. He had an idea they were leaving immediately. Instead, Van made for the second floor. Dorlan hurried after him, through opaque gloom.

The Phantom led the way to the room with the heavily draped windows and the book tiers. The lights were off. He switched them on, breathing in the aroma of stale cigarette smoke. It seemed impossible that only minutes previous he had been there, in command of a situation ruined by Ravac's unexpected return.

A ruined situation but, the Phantom vowed, one that would be repaired. One that must be repaired if the case of the Crooked Mile River murders was to be added to the record of his brilliant successes!

He marveled that those in the adjoining houses, or someone in the street, had not investigated the shots Peter had let loose at him. Probably the walls of the building had muffled them. Or, if they were heard, they had been set down as backfire from a passing car.

With Chip close behind, Van clicked on the same switch the woman in black had used to light the adjoining room. He crossed its threshold, his narrowed gaze taking in the details of its furnishings. It was a small study or office. Beside the mahogany writing table on which the telephone stood, there were upholstered easy chairs, a two-seated sofa and framed sporting prints on the walls. Two card tables, their legs folded, were in a corner. The Phantom hurried over to the mahogany table.

His first thought was to call Headquar-

ters. To get Inspector Gregg on the wire and to order a police guard at every city exit to watch for a dark blue coupe. Van's fingers were taking the telephone off its stand when he stopped. He pronged it and Chip saw his gaze move across several books and magazines on the table to a small bronze pedestal on which a gilt-chained pencil lay beside a memo pad.

To all appearances the top sheet on the pad was blank. But when Van pulled it quickly to him Chip, over his shoulder, saw that indentations made by the pencil on a removed sheet of its paper remained faintly on the next piece, the one that had been under it.

There was a glint in the Phantom's keen eyes as they fastened on the marks.

He remembered the telephone call Simone had answered when he had first entered the house. Sharp in mind was what she had told Peter about "Jarman" and his arrival in town, his meeting with Ravac at "Edouard's." The way the woman had spoken then seemed to tie her information in with the telephone call she had answered.

THE Phantom, though it was a hundred-to-one shot, believed the memo sheet torn from the pad had contained valuable information. That there was more than an even chance she had jotted down a notation as to the place of the meeting. He drew the pad out from its bronze clip, put it in his pocket and made a quick search of the room.

There was nothing of further interest. The other room, also, offered nothing in the way of information or any clue as to whom Jarman might be, why he was arriving in town. But the Phantom didn't need any printed explanation of that. He had a good idea of whom Jarman was and why he was in Manhattan.

"That's all," he told Chip.

They went down the stairs together. Ravac, the woman in black and Peter had used the empty house as a means of escape. Proof of that was in the ornate brass chain across the golden oak front door. The chain was still in position, securely protecting the main entrance.

The frail moon had swung higher into the night sky when they were out in the street. Without difficulty, Van found an empty taxi and climbed into it after Dorlan. He gave the hackie the Clarion Building as his first destination and turned to Chip.

THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE

"Now I'll hear your story. You can skip what happened in Room Seven-Eleven at the Willard Building."

"You know about that?" Chip's tone was surprised.

"I have a good idea of what happened. Ravac, or Wisner as he calls himself, tricked you. The one they call Peter must have walked in and recognized you. Take it from there."

Dorlan drew a breath. "Peter stuck a gun in my side and told me if I wanted to live I'd better keep quiet and do what they said. Wisner called in the girl working for him and talked to her in French. I guess he didn't think I understood. He told her they'd have to get out in a hurry if they didn't want to be picked up. He said she was to clean out all the stuff in his desk and hers, put it in a suitcase and that he'd get in touch with her later."

"What else?" Van listened intently to every word.

"I didn't try to make a break. I knew I was in a spot, but I thought I might learn something important if I played along. If they were going to blast me, the longer I stuck around, the better my chances seemed to be—to make a quick fadeout. I mean, I didn't have a ghost of a show to duck out while I was in the car with them."

"Where did they take you?"

"They rode me around Westchester for awhile. I played dumb. Wisner wanted information about you. He made all kinds of propositions. He said he'd turn me loose if I spilled. When I stalled he got mad. We did some more touring until it got dark. Then we stopped in front of the empty house on Thirty-ninth Street. Peter took me through it to the other house. Wisner was there when we arrived. So was another guy. A party with a long, horse face. They tied me up and gagged me. Wisner said that later on he'd take care of me. They took me down and dumped me in the laundry."

"You didn't pick up any conversation?"

"Not a word." Chip shook his head. "Wisner's smart. Once, during the tour, Peter was about to say nothing, but got shut off before he could deliver."

The taxi was stopping before the newspaper building.

"Steve's supposed to be inside," Van said. "Stay with him and be ready for a call from me."

"Right." Dorlan twisted around. "Thanks, Phantom."

The taxi went on. A few more minutes and Van alighted a street away from his Park Avenue address.

In his sky-high suite, he had three things to attend to. First, a call to Frank Havens. He completed that guardedly so no listening ears could understand its exact meaning. Next, he needed a gun to replace the one he had lost in the house on 38th Street. In the windowless lab behind the bedroom, the Phantom selected a weapon from his arsenal, made sure it was ready for use and slid it into his shoulder holster.

The third and last thing took him to his Greenough microscope. In a round of seconds he would know whether or not the hundred-to-one shot was to pay off. If it did there would be no need to communicate with Gregg, to put the forces of the law to work. Van took the pad he had removed from the bronze pedestal out of his pocket.

HE STUDIED its blank top sheet. There were two ways of bringing out what had been written on the paper over it. One, by the powerful lens of the microscope. The other, by chemicals, certain wash acids that he could concoct and make a bath of.

He tried the Greenough, making delicate adjustments before turning on its base light. This precision instrument, the invention of a famous English scientist, was like an eye from which nothing was hidden. Countless times the Phantom had used it to unravel clues that had seemed almost too vague to follow. It hadn't failed him in the past, but, as the redheaded Steve often said, there was always a first time.

The microscope brought the indentations on the paper into sharp relief, but failed to clarify or make them understandable or readable.

The chemical bath then. Van helped himself to a porcelain dish. From a cabinet he took two jars and a bottle. He reached for a test tube, measuring out a certain amount of a flaky, crystal powder. Several drops of colorless acid, a quarter ounce of the gray substance in the second jar and a pint of distilled water.

He added one to the other and the entire fluid to the porcelain dish. Anticipation gripped him. A hundred-to-one shot! The next few beats of his heart and he would know whether or not the hours ahead of him were to be crowned with

success or steeped in dismal failure.

The two names, Jarman and Edouard, meant little without an investigation that would take valuable time. The Phantom tore the top piece of paper from the pad. Had Simone made a notation that would reveal what he had to know? Or was what she had written the result of some earlier call, inconsequential, useless to him. Van determined to find out.

He immersed the sheet of paper in the chemical bath. As he dropped it in, the telephone rang. Van smiled thinly as he turned to answer it. When he went back to the table and the dish his answer would be there—blank or written out for him to read.

"Dick?" Frank Havens' voice came over the wire. "Another cable from Paris. A short one—in code. Do you want to take it down as I give it to you or shall I hold it?"

The rest of the pad was convenient. The Phantom picked up a pencil.

"Let's have it."

He decoded it almost as quickly as Havens read and spelled out the words. Then he rang off with a murmur of thanks, glanced at the message and went back to the table.

Van bent over the porcelain dish.

What the coldly beautiful Simone had jotted down met his gaze as clearly as if she had made the notation a minute previous!

CHAPTER XIX

FILLED WITH FLAME



QUICKLY the Phantom's black sedan purred down Fifth Avenue.

The illuminated clock on its severely plain dash showed him the time lacked fifteen minutes of midnight. The glittering avenue, paradise of shoppers, might have been the main thoroughfare in any small town for all of its activity. Shops and stores had dark show windows. Few pedestrians were on its pavements. At the principal intersections, patrolmen on the dawn beat watched the black car drift past.

In its rear, Steve and Chip Dorlan were his silent companions in what Van hoped would be the final scene of the murder drama.

The uncompleted half of the case stood

ahead of him. The answer to the puzzling question of a Swiss watch that had brought death to three men was about to be known. The last cable from the Embassy had confirmed many things that the Phantom had already surmised. But now, confronting him, was the task of weaving the threads of Ravac's plot together and cracking down on the master-killer and those in his employ.

The streets went by in orderly parade as the black car continued on down the avenue.

A few more minutes and it had reached Washington Square. Van went right past a row of time-touched dignified houses and into a street less prepossessing. It was narrow and filled with places of business, restaurants, darkened stores. Near Sixth Avenue the Phantom found a space to park.

He blacked out the lights and when Chip and Steve were on the sidewalk, locked the car.

"Three streets down, one across," Huston said.

Still silent, they cut through an alley and followed Steve's directions. That brought them into a place whose lamp post sign said, ESSEX MEWS. It backed up behind a brick wall, a square where remodeled tenements had been made into studios for the district's artists and those who found the neighborhood to their liking.

A short distance up the street from an arched entrance through the brick wall, the Phantom caught a glimpse of a parked car. Steve saw it at the same moment. The redheaded reporter instinctively stiffened.

It was a dark blue coupe with a long hood.

"That's the heap I rode around in today!" Dorlan said, in a low voice.

The Phantom's gaze went to the car's rear window. Through it he was able to see the hat of a man who was sitting motionless in the driver's seat.

Satisfaction rippled through the Phantom. The presence of the blue coupe meant that Ravac *hadn't* finished his negotiations with Jarman. He wasn't too late! The car planted there was for the getaway. He still had time!

The Phantom thought fast.

"We've got to take the driver! It's got to be done quickly and quietly. This way!"

He rapped out a few instructions. Steve Huston nodded and started across the

street. Dorlan, glad of a chance to do anything that might even up for the bad hours he had spent in the laundry of the house on 38th Street, idled along the pavement, Van some short distance behind him.

When he was abreast of the car on the other side of the street, the little reporter put a cigarette between his lips and went through his pockets in a search for matches. He apparently found none, saw the car and started across the street. It was dark enough to conceal his face, but to make doubly sure he wasn't recognized he pulled the brim of his felt hat lower.

"Sorry to bother you. Got a match?"

He looked into the eyes of the man with the long, horselike face and the beaky nose. The man yawned and began to fumble in his pockets. Finally he produced a paper of matches and handed them out through the open window.

Steve, cupping his hands, struck one. As it flared up, Chip Dorlan on the sidewalk side of the car pulled open the front door. The Phantom went through it, into the car and over its seat. The gun in his hand dug into the lanky man's ribs!

"Open your mouth," Van warned, "and you're finished!"

Steve threw his cigarette away and turned the knob of the door he stood beside. Huston did a quick frisk job and came up with a Smith and Wesson .38.

"Nothing else."

DORLAN had gone on, further down the block. Two men stepped out of a dim doorway, joining him. All three hurried back to the car where the Phantom had his prisoner ready for delivery.

The two men were part of Gregg's Homicide detail.

"All right, take him away," the Phantom ordered.

Mayhew, his long face ashen, was hauled out of the car. Handcuffs jingled and snapped. The Phantom eyed the entrance to Essex Mews warily. But luck held. Neither Ravac, Peter nor the woman in black were visible.

"Hop in under the wheel," Van told Chip. "Sit there, just in case someone glances out of the window to make sure Mayhew's still around."

Van turned to Steve. The *Clarion's* reporter was now keyed up to a fine edge. Steve's eyes glowed with excitement. This was even better than he had hoped for. To be in on the curtain as it fell—to have the wind-up of his murder story literally

handed to him on a silver plate was a break greater than any he had ever gotten before.

"Ready, Steve?"

"Ready!"

The Phantom swung around. Through the entrance to the Mews and down its flagged walk. Flower beds were on either side. A few stunted maple trees, heavy with the city's dust, grew along the way. Van looked at the numbers painted conveniently on the top step of each house.

There were eight in all, four on either side. They formed a sort of cul-de-sac. To the Phantom the set-up was perfect for his purpose. The courtyard represented a trap, with only one way for the rats to get out—through the arched entrance.

At the end house, cloaked in gray shadow, Van went up the five wide steps. The remodeled entrance was in the form of a little lobby with the tenants' names over bells. He found the name Edouard in the dim shine of a night light burning in a wall sconce. There were no stairs to climb, his destination was an apartment in the rear of the first floor.

The gun he had subdued Mayhew with came back into his hand. He exchanged a glance with Huston and, passing doors, continued on to where the little lobby branched off into a wide, short hallway.

There was only one door there. From behind it came voices, the clink of glasses, the sound of activity.

The Phantom stopped. Steve took a gun passed to him and moved a step or two away. Van's left hand came up, his fingers folded over. His knuckles knocked softly on the upper panel of the door.

A minute passed. Then someone came up to the door and spoke through it:

"Who is it?"

"Mayhew." The Phantom had never heard Mayhew's voice. He blurred the word, keeping it in a low pitch.

The knob began to turn. Peter's face appeared as the door opened to a crack. Brusquely, he began, "What do you want—" breaking off with a gasp when he looked into the Phantom's gun.

"Who is it?" Ravac's quiet, silky voice came from a room behind double green portieres.

The Phantom stepped past Peter. Steve took his place, covering the man with the extra gun the Phantom had given him. Behind the portieres the conversation began again—to end abruptly as the Phantom, like a figure on a lighted stage,

moved between them and faced an audience of three.

They were seated around a table on which were two bottles of champagne in an ice-filled bucket, glasses, ashtrays. On the left was the brown haired woman with the crimson mouth. She sat motionless, looking at the Phantom, her green eyes dark with sudden apprehension.

Across from her, Ravac, an arm on top of his chair, twisted around, uncrossing his legs. The third person at the table was one Van had never seen before.

He looked at Jarman while the man, both hands on the edge of the table, peered blankly at him. Ravac's business acquaintance was tall and large. Not as stout as the gross Lambert, he carried his weight with a trim, streamlined grace expressed in the set of his shoulders, the tilt of his head. He had grayish-blond hair, a sharp-featured face in which Van saw the hallmarks of crime. His eyes were a strange pale blue, almost colorless in the light that came from the three lamps placed around the room. His nose was thin, with a slight flare to the nostrils, his mouth small and shapeless.

NO ONE spoke. It was as if the Phantom's appearance had struck them all dumb. Jarman recovered first. He began to smile, a twisted grimace as if he understood.

"I get it." His tone was belligerent. "A heist! You sell me the stuff and then one of your pals drops in and takes it back! If you think—"

"Shut up, you fool!" The woman interrupted, without turning her head. "You're in the presence of the world's greatest detective. Or so," she sneered, "I've been told."

"*Detec*—" Jarman began, his mouth opening.

"The Phantom Detective!" Ravac furnished the identification quietly. To Van he said, "So Peter missed with all his shots? Stupid Peter—with no more chance to practise."

Jarman's pale eyes retreated behind hooded lids. Van, the portieres behind him, said:

"First, I want an antique Swiss watch. A bloodstained watch. Put it on the table. But don't," he warned, "make the mistake of reaching for a gun!"

He waited for Jarman to produce, but it was Ravac who took the Professor's timepiece from his pocket, shrugged and

laid it in the exact center of the table.

The lights glimmered on it. It was a large watch, open faced, of the key-winding variety. An Alpine scene was etched on its face. Its hands were ornate.

"Turn it over!"

The Phantom gestured with his gun. Ravac stretched out a hand and fulfilled the order. Reversed, the back cover of the watch was engraved with a coat of arms and the initials *PF*.

"Open it!"

The woman's red lips parted. Van saw the lids come further down over Jarman's colorless eyes. Ravac, with another shrug, reached for the watch. His fingers pressed against its rear case. He began to unscrew it slowly, his head lowered, his face turned in his wife's direction.

A minute passed—another. The warmth of the room closed in around Van. Melting ice in the champagne bucket made a gurgling sound. Out in the courtyard of the Mews came the faint echoes made by footsteps on the flagging.

In the room, the Phantom watched the cover of the watch turn in Ravac's fingers. Ravac lifted it away and held the watch up. There were no works in it.

Nothing, the Phantom saw, except emptiness!

He had time for a single glimpse before he heard Simone's deep-throated exclamation. At the same moment the three lamps in the room went out.

Van knew what had happened. The woman's foot had made contact with the base-plug and the wires there supplying current to the lamps. When Ravac had looked at her he must have transmitted some soundless message. She had waited a few more seconds. Then, with a swift movement of her slipped foot, she had pulled the plug out.

But that explanation, whirling through the Phantom's mind, was blotted out by a sudden stab of blue-white flame. A lead slug burrowed into the portieres close to where Van had been standing. His swift, sidewise lunge had saved him.

He held his own fire. The shot was enough of a signal to put the machinery of his plans into immediate operation. Out in the hall a police whistle shrilled. The footsteps he had heard in the courtyard broke out again, louder and closer at hand. Inspector Gregg's voice, barking quick orders, came through the pounding echoes of the shot.

The Phantom dropped to his knees. He

had reached the floor plug and was pressing it back into its socket when, from behind the green curtains, the flurry of scuffling ended almost as abruptly as it had begun.

The three lamps blazed with electricity again. The Phantom had straightened up and was sheathing his gun when Gregg and his men herded their three prisoners back into the room. A trickle of blood was on Jarman's clean shaven, sharp-featured face. Ravac's carefully brushed hair was disheveled. Simone's eyes darted green sparks at the man whose big hand was clamped around her arm.

IN THE background, as someone pulled the portieres aside, the Phantom had the impression of Frank Havens chaperoning his daughter Muriel and Adele Selgard, both wide-eyed with excitement. Closer, Steve Huston was watching one of the plain-clothes men iron the lacquer-haired Peter. All of the cringing terror he had displayed in the upstairs room of the 38th Street house was in the lazy eyes again.

Gregg bustled forward.

"On time, Phantom! Everything's going according to schedule?"

"Not entirely." The Phantom smiled grimly. "Search these two men—Jarman, first."

"Jarman?" Gregg laughed. "So that's what he's calling himself these days? Do you know him, Phantom?"

"Not intimately—fortunately. But I have an idea he's the head man for some Chicago brokerage firm that deals in stolen gems. It's a new order that replaces the old fashioned fence."

"His name is Miller, Clyde Miller. We took him a few years ago after a stone robbery in a fashionable hotel. General Sessions, Part Two, gave him four to six. I haven't seen him since."

The trained, professional fingers of the law were working over Jarman and Ravac. They transferred the contents of the pockets of both men to the table top. A little heap of their belongings grew as they continued their search.

"I guess that's all," one of the detectives said, finishing with Ravac.

The Phantom stepped forward. He picked up the watch, put the back cover in place and beckoned to Adele Selgard.

"You recognize this?" he asked, when she came forward.

"Yes, that was the watch my grand-

father had me deliver to Conrad Schiller."

Van held the timepiece in his hand while he continued:

"From the beginning," he said, looking at Havens, "I was convinced this watch in itself was not the medium of murder. It was simply a means to an end. I was sure that it was what was in the watch that Ravac had to have. What he wanted so badly that he killed to get it—using Lambert as one of his instruments, Peter as the other. Lambert to kill the Professor and Peter to take care of Schiller."

"And Brayden," Huston put in, from the background.

"Danny Brayden's death wasn't premeditated. It had no part of the plot. To continue: The watch, with its valuable contents, was hidden by Schiller. The old man knew, from Selgard, that Ravac was after it. He secreted it in a flour jar in his kitchen. Peter tortured the information out of him before he shot him, and left a message for me in the jar. Ravac, in possession of the watch, waited for Jarman to come on so they could dicker for its secret cargo. The deal has been made, as this proves."

Van removed the back cover of the watch's case and displayed its workless interior.

"Empty!" Gregg said heavily. "Where's the stuff?"

"In there." The Phantom indicated the belongings of the two men piled on the table. "Somewhere in that heap of things is what was in the watch up to a short time ago. We'll rummage through them and see what we find."

Those in the room pressed in a little closer while the Phantom began to sift through the objects on the table. Wallets, Ravac's bulging with money, handkerchiefs, Jarman's silver cigarette lighter, keys, money, a cigarette case, an address book and an alligator card container.

Inspector Gregg's forehead wrinkled. He grunted, "I don't know what it is, but I don't see anything extra valuable there, Phantom."

"I think I do."

Casually, Van took a cigarette from his pocket. He put it in his mouth and helped himself to the silver cigarette lighter. He fingered its little wheel, trying to make it spark. But there was no spark and, when he held it up, no wick.

Smiling at Muriel's open-mouthed wonder, Van rapidly unscrewed the cap of the lighter's reservoir. He lifted it to his nose

for an instant, shook his head and reached for one of the white handkerchiefs on the table.

He spread that open and looked at those around him.

"Before the first world war, the Faubrys of Paris were a family of great wealth," he explained. "Their vineyards in the Champagne district of France had netted them a fortune. World War One pretty well wiped them out. The second war finished them. Yet, out of the wreckage of his family's wealth, Pierre Faubry, son of the founder of the fortune, retained five gems. Five things which, if sold in America, would provide him with enough to live on for the remainder of his life. For that reason, when his old friend Professor Selgard was in Paris, he gave him the watch—with the five things in it—to bring over here to dispose of."

Havens said, "What were the five things?"

The Phantom made a gesture.

"Five steps to murder! *These!*"

He turned the cigarette lighter over, tapping it. Five round, small black objects rolled out on the handkerchief. The lamplight gave them a nacreous iridescence that made them glow as if filled with an inner flame.

"Pearls!" Gregg exclaimed. "*Black pearls!*"

"From India originally, part of a Rajah's collection, worth a small fortune," Van explained. "And, I've learned, their Custom duty was paid by the Professor. Pearls," he added, "which I entrust to you for safe keeping until they're sold, Inspector!"

CHAPTER XX

TOMORROW



BEYING a nod from Van, Havens, Steve, Chip Dorlan, Muriel and Adele lingered in the neighborhood after the Inspector, his men and prisoners had left the Mews.

A street away Steve remembered an all-night chop house where the coffee was good and the doughnuts digestible. They sat there, at two tables pulled together, Huston scribbling rapid shorthand notes for his first edition *Clarion* story, while the Phantom put the finishing touches to the case.

"Like magic!" Muriel cried softly.

"Not entirely." Van smiled. "A lot of it was done with the aid of our Embassy in Paris. Their last message, for instance. They had located old Faubry and had learned about the black pearls in the watch. That was a big help—"

"Though," Frank Havens interrupted, "you must have had a pretty good idea they were there."

"You're thinking of what I heard Schiller say just before he died." Van shook his head. "*Black.*" That was a puzzler. For a time I thought it might mean black diamonds. '*Back. In the back.*' That wasn't easy, either. It might have meant the back of the shop or the back of something else. Now that we know, it all seems very simple, but I'll admit it gave me a few bad minutes."

"I guess that's all," Steve said, closing his notebook.

He was starting to get up when the Phantom stopped him.

"One minute. You're forgetting the most important thing of all, Steve."

"What's that?"

"You don't know?" Van looked inquiringly at the faces at the drawn together tables.

"I do." Chip Dorlan spoke laconically. "If Professor Selgard got the Swiss watch direct from Faubry, how was it that Ravac knew it had the pearls in it?"

"Yeah, that's right!" Steve's tone was so naive it brought a laugh from those around him. "*How, Phantom?*"

"My Embassy message again. The question was one I asked when I sent my cable. In the second response from them, it came back. Faubry's daughter was a friend of Simone Ravac in Paris. She knew about the pearls being in the watch. She told her friend Simone about her father's plan, never dreaming she was talking to the wife of one of the cleverest jewel thieves on the Continent. All Ravac needed was that information to take him across the Atlantic to New York and up to Crooked Mile River."

"The moral of which," Muriel said, "is never tell your friends any of your family's secrets."

"Not if you don't want to lose your life," Chip chimed in.

A few minutes more and Steve bowed out. Then Dorlan said good night and Van walked with Havens and the girls to the publisher's Cadillac. Hat in hand he lingered for an instant, looking deep into Muriel's dark eyes.

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For his ears alone, she said, "This isn't good-by?"

"For a little while," Van answered. "We'll make it *au revoir*. For crime," he added, "has a way of striking again—and again."

"And the Phantom Detective must be there to cope with it!" Muriel whispered. "Tomorrow I have a lunch date with Dick Van Loan. Wait until I tell him how this ended. He was in at the beginning, up at the lodge. He'll certainly want to hear all about it."

A touch of her soft, white hand and the Phantom headed back toward where he had left his car parked.

As he melted into the shadows of the Greenwich Village street another page in the book of his cases turned. A case, which, like the others, had ended in triumph. And to Inspector Gregg and the Department would go the entire credit.

But that didn't matter to the Phantom. Tomorrow he would be Richard Curtis Van Loan again. And at one o'clock he was lunching with Muriel!



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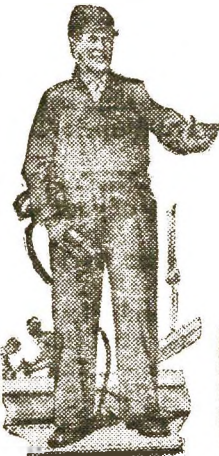
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Ted got there first, and put his hand firmly on the instrument

KILLER INSTINCT

By C. K. M. SCANLON

Ted Tyler was as easy-going as anyone, but he discovered that some things bring out the primal urge for violence!

LIEUTENANT SHEP TYLER smiled at his brother. "All I can say," he remarked, "is to take my advice and don't defend him. This one I've got cold."

Ted Tyler, three years younger but otherwise very much like his brother, closed his desk drawers and locked them. He looked up.

"There's one thing I learned long ago, Shep. That's when you arrest a man, I stay out of the case because you don't pounce until you're certain. They ought to give you captain's bars for breaking up this gang."

Lieutenant Tyler leaned back luxuriously. "Yes, I've been with it a long time.

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Know how much those birds got, Ted? Nearly two million in loot. Funny—you take a bank stickup that nets ten or fifteen grand and it's smeared on every front page, but a gang of truck hijackers go their merry way. They run the loot into the millions, and you hardly ever hear about it."

"Two million," Ted whistled as he walked toward the hat rack for his hat. "Maybe, speaking as a lawyer, I'd better look them up and take the case. They're really loaded with dough."

"But dumb," Shep sighed. "They spend days finding their victims, risk their necks and liberty in the hijack process and then sell the loot to some fence who really makes all the money, without taking any risks himself. I've been on it day and night for months. I've got the ringleader, and he doesn't even know it. Not more than an hour ago I actually had dinner with him. Well, it's eight o'clock. I'm going home."

They walked out together. Shep had been a policeman for twelve years and part of his earnings had helped to put Ted through law school. They were both just short of six feet in height with the same lean, craggy kind of face, the same blue eyes and light brown hair. They didn't resemble one another as twins might, but they did bear the same family characteristics.

On the street in front of the big downtown office building, they headed toward Ted's coupe parked down the street a bit. Shep was talking about the hijack case. He'd lived with it so long that little else interested him.

IT CAME with the suddenness of a pistol shot. Shep saw the car first. It was a cheap sedan that turned in toward the curb. Shep took one look, suddenly whirled and gave his brother a terrific shove. It carried Ted across the sidewalk and pitched him over a low railing into the basement entrance of a small building.

About the time he landed on the hard cement, the shooting started. Ted scrambled to his feet and was in time to look out over the sidewalk and see Shep staggering blindly. He held his service pistol, but it sagged and he couldn't seem to lift it. From the rolled down window of the cheap car came two more flashes of flame. Shep's knees buckled and he went down slowly, clinging to an ebbing life with all his strength. Then he rolled forward and

over on his side.

The cheap sedan cut away from the curb, picked up speed and took the next corner. Ted was already running toward his brother. He knelt beside him and raised his head, paying no attention to the blood that seeped out over him. It was no use. Shep had been hit at least four times with all slugs smashing through his chest. He was dead.

A crowd collected, patrolmen appeared as if by magic, radio cars came to a siren-whining stop, but Ted saw or heard none of this. Someone seized his elbow and raised him up. He looked dully at a familiar face.

"Hello, Eric," he said. "Eric, Shep is dead. They shot him. They would have killed me too if Shep hadn't thrown me into that cellarway."

Eric Barton was forty odd, gray at the temples, very well dressed, a well-to-do exporter. He and Ted and Shep had known each other for years.

Eric said, "It's tough, Ted. But you can't do him any good standing here. My car is in the middle of the street. Let me take you there, and we'll wait until the big boys from Headquarters get here. Then you can tell them what happened."

"Why should I tell them?" Ted asked dully. "Why? This is my affair, not the business of a police force. Shep was my brother and it's my job to get the man who did this to him. Cut him down, gave him no chance to fight back. Eric, I saw Shep dying on his feet and yet that murderer calmly pumped two additional slugs into him. I—I'm a bit wobbly. Maybe we'd better go to your car."

Eric told a uniformed sergeant where they'd be, and then led Ted toward the big shiny limousine. He helped Ted into it, got behind the wheel and pulled into the curb half a block down the street. Eric handed Ted a cigarette, took one himself and held a match for both.

Ted said, "I know who killed him, of course. I knew all about the case Shep was handling. It was Dubin. Mack Dubin! He's head of a gang of hijackers. Shep was closing in on him and would have arrested him soon. Poor Shep, he must have fumbled somewhere. He didn't think Dubin was wise."

"Cops are like soldiers," Eric said softly. "They fight battles too, and sometimes they lose. I'm glad you're getting a grip on yourself, Ted. For a little while I thought you were going to pieces."

Ted inhaled deeply. "Me—go to pieces? Eric, I've got to get Mack Dubin—for Shep! Only Shep would have brought Dubin in, and I'm not doing it that way. I'm going to kill him."

"Sure, sure," Eric soothed him. "I know just how you feel. But kill him? No, Ted, leave those things to policemen. They'll avenge Shep's death."

TED managed a cold smile. "They'll have to beat me to Dubin, Eric. They'd better get there first because if I find him, he isn't going to face any trial. I'll judge him on the spot, and be jury and executioner. Mack Dubin may not know it, but he hasn't very long to live. I'll kill him like he killed Shep. I'll pump more slugs into him as he is dying."

A police inspector, gray and wise, came over to the car. Ted said, "Eric, if you tell the police anything about my plans, I won't forgive you."

The Inspector clambered into the back seat. "I'm sorry, Ted," he said earnestly, "though that's little consolation. Who shot him?"

"I don't know. I couldn't see who was in the car. It was a Chevvie sedan, about eight or nine years old. The first three numbers were 3Y9—that's as much as I could get."

"Shep didn't talk? Either before or after he was shot? He didn't mention anyone's name?"

"No," Ted said quietly. "No, sir, he did not."

The Inspector shook his head sadly. "Shep was working on an important job, but he liked to handle them solo. I think we know the ringleader, but it would be better for us if Shep had spoken. Be sure of one thing, we'll get the man who killed him."

"Yes," Ted said. "I'm sure you will. Can I go home now? I'm rather shaky."

"Of course. We'll give you a ring if there is anything we need." The Inspector got out of the car.

Eric Barton said, "Oh, Inspector."

The police officer turned. "Yes? You wanted something?"

Ted's fingers clamped around Eric Barton's arm and squeezed very hard. Barton wetted his lips. "It's nothing, Inspector. I was going to offer my help, but I can see how worthless that is. I'm no policeman. Good night."

Ted relaxed. "Thanks, Eric. I was afraid you'd tell him what I intended to

do. To stop me, they'd have locked me up."

Barton pulled away from the curb. "You're an idiot, Ted, but a glorious one in some ways. I wish there was something I could do."

"Stay out of it," Ted warned. "Pleasant things aren't going to happen to me. If Mack Dubin doesn't get me first, the police will after I kill him. Funny, isn't it? I've never even thought about killing a man before, but now I've got to do it."

Ted went about his campaign in a calm manner. He realized that losing his head would mean he'd also lose his life. Dubin was a big time crook, an ex-racketeer with blood on his hands from other murders. Besides, he was shrewd and crafty. Not the type to present himself as a target for the vengeance bent brother of his most recent victim.

It took Ted three days to get set. Right after the funeral, he began work. Shep's records left very little to go on or offer any help. With Eric Barton's unselfish aid, he went over all of Shep's papers and notebooks. At the end of their search they realized that Shep relied to some extent upon stool pigeons and he had one very capable man named Tano. Ted's first step was to contact him.

HE VISITED a cheap bar and grill, first putting on some old clothes so he wouldn't seem conspicuous. In a hip pocket was one of Shep's guns, a .38 automatic fully loaded and ready for action. Ted stepped up to the bar and ordered beer. At an auspicious moment he slid a five dollar bill across the moist mahogany and motioned the bartender to lean closer. Ted wanted to contact Tano and it was worth five dollars.

"Come back in an hour," the barkeep said. "He'll be here."

Tano was. A small, wizened man, he looked like some cartoonist's version of a cheap crook. But he had tiny, very bright eyes and an insatiable yen for money. Ted led him to a booth.

"You're the Lieutenant's brother, ain't you?" Tano asked cagily. "Yeah, he used to tell me about you. Too bad, what happened to him. You got any ideas who did it?"

"Ideas? I know who did it. Shep told me," Ted said. "I'm looking for Mack Dubin."

Tano drew back and his eyes shifted to dart around the barroom. He spoke in a

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softer voice. "Pal, Dubin is deadly poison. He's a big shot. Me, I don't reach that high."

"Not for a hundred dollars right now and another hundred when you tell me where Dubin might be hiding or whom he might visit?"

Tano shrugged. "I guess a hundred now sounds good enough. What are you going to do when you meet him?"

"Fill him full of holes," Ted said pleasantly.

Tano rubbed his chin. "Revenge. huh? I can't say I blame you, pal. But Dubin knows how to shoot too. Besides, he has about twenty torpedoes working for him and every one is dynamite. Maybe it'll be you who gets full of holes. That's your business though. Give me twenty-four hours. Write down a phone number where I can reach you, and I'll try to find out where Dubin might be. If he knocked off your brother, it ain't going to be easy on account of Dubin always did hole up after he pulled a job."

Ted passed over the hundred dollars, bought Tano a couple of more drinks, and then drifted out of the place. He was alert, ready for trouble, and that undoubtedly saved his life. There was no car to swing into the curb this time. Just a tough looking man who stepped out of a doorway as Ted walked by, and fell into step behind him.

Ted sensed, rather than knew he was being trailed. Quite deliberately he turned down a narrow and very dark street which was deserted. If Dubin guessed what he was up to, and had sent one of his gorillas to take care of this slight matter, Ted wanted to know it.

He started walking faster. So did the man behind him. Then, very unexpectedly, Ted stopped in his tracks and spun around. The man following him was taken by surprise, but as he skidded to a halt, his hand darted toward a shoulder clip.

Ted hit him low, in a tackle which had gained him considerable fame during his college years. He brought the burly man down with a thump that shook the wind out of him. Ted's gun was jammed under the gorilla's chin while he removed the revolver from beneath the man's coat.

"Get up." Ted ordered crisply. "Move into that doorway. Come on—start moving or I'll shove you along with a bullet."

The man obeyed, keeping his hands well away from his body and watching Ted intently through beady little eyes

that were filled with hate. In the doorway Ted searched him further, but found nothing which might indicate where Dubin was hidden.

The gorilla said. "Friend, it would be easier to swallow some cyanide. I'm telling you."

"You're telling me," Ted decided. "You're in no position to say a word. Where is Dubin?"

"Never heard of him," the man said promptly. Much too promptly.

Ted sighed. "Under the right conditions I might be able to make you talk. However, right here you'd squeal too loudly and bring down the police whom I don't want to see any more than you do. So I'm letting you go. Tell Dubin he hasn't very long to live. Now beat it before I change my mind."

The thug growled something and hurried away. Ted followed him, staying as far back as possible. Using all the tricks he'd ever heard his brother describe. The thug seemed to be wary but not too suspicious that he was being tailed. Once he switched subway trains, almost getting away. Finally he entered a cheap hotel, asked for a key and went to his room. Ted gave up. It would probably be a waste of time to spend hours watching this man. Tano, the stool pigeon, was a far better bet.

BY SENDING the thug though, Dubin had given his hand away. Someone had tipped him that Ted was looking for Tano and would meet him at that bar. In all probability it was the barkeep who was responsible, but here also Ted felt he'd be dealing with too small a man to bother with.

Ted went home and slept very well. He stayed around his apartment trying to make plans, to figure out a trap in which Dubin might fall, but none came to him. He didn't know enough about the man.

At ten that night Tano phoned. "If you bring that hundred fish around to the corner of Elm and Whitney Streets, pal, you might learn something."

Ted was there half an hour before the time Tano stated. He studied the cheap, dismal neighborhood, made certain no trap had been set for him and then faded into the darkness until Tano appeared, moving down the street like an undernourished shadow.

Ted brought him into a doorway. He handed over another hundred dollars

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which promptly disappeared into Tano's pocket. The informer spoke in a whisper.

"Things ain't so hot. You mention Dubin's name and everybody clams up nice and pretty. He's wise, or maybe you know that. Anyhow I found out he's got a red-headed girl friend he's nuts about. She lives in Apartment 4D at 2135 Waverly Place. If Dubin ain't hiding there, he'll contact her sooner or later on account of the redhead will ditch him if he don't show up often."

"Contact me after midnight," Ted said. "I should be home by then. If this tip holds, there is more money for you. If it falls through, we'll have to plan something else."

Tano faded away into the gloom. Ted transferred his gun to coat pocket, snicked off the safety and set out for Waverly Place, not more than a fifteen minute walk.

He tried a few tricks to determine whether or not he was being watched. He trusted Tano up to a certain point, but realized the man would sell out to the highest bidder. That was why Ted had promised him more money.

The address of Dubin's red-headed lady friend was a rather nice place. Ted rang a couple of bells at random and muttered something about a telegram over the phone system. The door buzzer sounded and the lock clicked back. He went inside and stayed downstairs until the people he had aroused went back to their apartments.

He found 4D easily and listened outside the door. There wasn't a sound. He pulled the gun free, scratched on the door panels and heard high heels click toward him. A voice wanted to know who it was.

"Open up quick, Red," he whispered hoarsely. "I'm being trailed."

He heard her gasp in alarm, a burglar chain rattled and the door opened a crack. Ted was ready and went through with a lunge that sent the red-head flying back against the wall. Ted pointed the gun at her as he closed the door.

"Easy does it," he said. "I don't want to hurt you."

She was young, hard-looking and dressed in a blood-red dressing gown and slippers to match. Her face, pale under the threat of the gun, looked ashen contrasted to the color scheme of her outfit. She moved with her back flat against the wall. Then she made a wild dive through a door to reach the phone. Ted got there

first, and put his hand firmly upon the instrument.

"Thanks," he said, "for telling me you know where Dubin can be reached."

"I was going to call the cops," she snapped. "I think you're crazy, mister."

"Maybe I am. It's an insanity that will clear up the moment I see Mack Dubin. Do you wish to tell me where he is now, or would you rather I stayed here until he contacts you? Which he is bound to do sooner or later."

"Stick around." She sat down with a plump. "I can't kick out a guy who has a gun in his fist, but you'll stay here until you fuse with the furniture. Mack knows you're after him. He's not scared, mind you. Nothing scares Mack, but he can't afford to meet you quite yet on account of the cops. So make yourself at home. I'll even give you a drink."

"No thanks," Ted smiled. "And don't go after one yourself. Don't leave this room, or try to, because I don't want to get tough. We're just going to sit around and wait. That's all."

IT WAS a long wait. The redhead turned sullen and refused to talk. But Ted noticed that every time she moved, it placed her a bit closer to the phone. When the instrument rang, both were startled. The redhead swept the phone off its cradle and Ted started toward her, the gun level.

She shrieked, "Mack—he's here with a gun."

Ted yanked the phone from her hand and put it to his ear. All he heard was the sound of the caller hanging up. He put the phone back and stuffed the gun into his pocket.

"You've got more nerve than I gave you credit for," he acknowledged. "Or maybe you actually are in love with that punk."

She gave him a sunny smile though it was a trifle ragged around the edges. "You're not so bad yourself, mister. Let's sit down and talk it over."

"Uh-uh." Ted laughed. "By this time Dubin is turning the wheels to close a trap around me. So long, Red, and find yourself another boy friend because your present one won't be much good to you any longer."

Ted stepped out, closed the door and stood there listening. Nothing happened. He had the latch off and he opened the door softly. The redhead might phone Dubin and say something to give away his address. Suddenly she appeared in the

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small foyer. There was a vase in her hand and she hurled it at him. Ted ducked, slammed the door and ran noisily down the hall.

He came back much more quietly and took up a position behind the fire exit doorway. He waited there for almost an hour and then he saw the same thug who'd followed him the night before, step from the elevator. The gorilla drew a gun as he approached the girl's apartment. The moment he disappeared inside, Ted crept to the self-service elevator, got in and left the door open a crack so there'd be no connection and the car couldn't be taken from that floor.

In five minutes the thug came out. Ted slipped the door shut. He was smiling as it slid back and the thug stared into the wrong end of Ted's gun.

Ted said, "We meet again. This time we won't part. Not until you take me to wherever Dubin is hiding. He sent you to investigate the redhead's warning over the phone. You must have come from him and so—you'll go back with me beside you."

The thug scowled as the car dropped. Ted searched him and took away another gun. He put his own automatic in his coat pocket and jabbed the thug's ribs with the muzzle.

"We'll travel together," he said pleasantly. "You'll take me to one place, and it better be the spot where I'll find Dubin. Because if it isn't, I'm going to shoot. Remember that."

"Okay, okay," the thug said wearily. "Don't you think I know when I'm licked?"

Ted should have realized it was all part of a trap, but his know-how concerned law, not how crooks would react. Shep could have handled it better, he knew later on. When the elevator door slid back, three hoodums stood before it with drawn guns.

Ted fired through his pocket. He reacted very fast and took them by surprise, but the thug he'd captured slid through the door quickly and got clear. Ted slammed the door and pushed the down button. The car started for the basement as bullets ripped holes through the door. That had been close. Very, very close and he'd played right into their hands. Of course Dubin had realized Ted would wait around the redhead's place to see if he'd come over. Or to trail anyone Dubin sent to investigate.

Ted escaped through the basement door which took him into a rear court. He scaled a fence and hurried away, feeling very low, thoroughly checkmated and fully aware that the man he was battling was no ordinary, thick-skulled mug. He could think as fast as Ted—maybe faster.

Ted locked himself in his apartment, and waited by the phone. Tano phoned at one-thirty. "Things are hot," he whispered. "I'm getting scared. Guys are beginning to look funny at me. I think Dubin is wise I'm helping you. Look—I'm switching my address to the Delmar Hotel. Room 235. Don't call me, just show up with more dough. Plenty this time. Tomorrow night, huh?"

"I'll be there. Your tip almost worked. It wasn't your fault it didn't. Expect me about ten o'clock tomorrow night. This time try to find out where Dubin is."

Ted half expected repercussions that night, but nothing happened beyond a call from Eric Barton who sounded extremely worried. They made a date to meet at Ted's office the following afternoon.

TED'S nerves were on edge the next day. He hadn't slept well. Knowing that Dubin was on the offensive, made him leery of sleep. He worried for fear he was being followed; every car that slid to the curb as he walked along, had a sinister look. Even his clients could be dangerous. Work and clear thinking became almost impossible. Ted was fretting when Eric Barton arrived at five-thirty.

"You've dug yourself a hole," Barton said after Ted had explained the events so far. "I only hope it doesn't close in on you. Ted, why not abandon this whole idea. Tell the police what you know and let them handle it. This Dubin is a dangerous man."

"You can talk until doomsday and I won't change my mind," Ted said in a flat voice. "I'll keep going until I get him—or he gets me. And don't ask me again to let you help. I won't have it."

"All right, Ted. You're on edge. Look, let's the two of us have dinner and a couple of drinks. If you do meet Dubin, you've got to be calmer than he."

"The dinner and drinks are an excellent idea," Ted agreed.

His phone rang before they left. It was the desk clerk at Ted's apartment-hotel who had promised to relay any calls, anonymous or otherwise. The clerk said, "Five minutes ago a man phoned, and left

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a message. He refused to give his name, but said you'd know who it was. He expects to contact you by phone again at exactly ten o'clock tonight."

"Thanks." Ted hung up and his eyes glowed. "Eric, this may be it. At ten a friend of mine may have the right tip. The food and drinks are going to taste better than ever."

In the lobby, Ted drew Eric to a halt. "I'm a marked man," he explained. "There's no use taking any chances. At any moment a man might step up behind me and start shooting, or a car might slow up and guns start to pop. I can't let you risk being by my side, so you just trail well behind. I'll meet you wherever we are to eat."

Eric nodded. "There is no sense arguing with you, Ted. Make it Leon's, around the corner five blocks north."

Ted had a three or four minute wait after he sat down in the restaurant. Eric came in, puffing. "I was slowed by traffic lights." He beckoned to a waiter and ordered martinis. They drank them in silence and had two more. Then the waiter placed a plate of steaming food before Ted.

The waiter chuckled. "I did as you told me, sir. I brought the sauerbraten and potato pancakes like you told me last week. The best you ever tasted, you said, and I was to bring nothing else when you came in again."

Ted frowned and Eric laughed at him. "It's perfectly obvious, Ted. The waiter has mistaken you for Shep. He ate here now and then."

The waiter lost his smile. "He is not the same gentleman, Mr. Barton? I have made a mistake? But he looks so much like him."

"Never mind," Ted chuckled. "I like this too. Forget it, I'm quite satisfied."

It was so good that Ted ordered a second helping while the waiter beamed. "We have this once a week, every Wednesday," he explained. "I am very glad you like it. Many people come here just for the sauerbraten."

Ted felt much better after this meal and the drinks. He and Eric rode home in a cab. They sat around Ted's apartment talking it over. Eric tried again to dissuade him, but Ted was just as stubborn. Just before ten o'clock they became silent, each man waiting for the phone to ring.

At one minute of, a bell jangled and Ted automatically grabbed for the phone.

The bell sounded again, and he realized it was the door. He hurried out of the room, slowed a bit, and drew the gun from his hip pocket. He lined himself up beside the door, flung it wide and got set.

Nothing happened. He heard the phone ring and ring again, until Eric answered it. Ted gave a quick look into the corridor. It was empty. He closed the door and went back to the living room. Eric was just hanging up.

Eric said, "That was your man. He didn't even realize it wasn't you he talked to. Ted—I don't know if I should tell you what he said."

"If you don't," Ted said, "I'll merely find Tano."

"I suppose so," Eric sighed. "Dubin is living in the office of a warehouse which he has acquired. A place where he keeps the trucks and merchandise he steals. It's near the river. On Markham Street, and the name on the building is the West Side Storage Warehouse. Ted, I wish you wouldn't do this."

TED put on his hat very carefully. "And I," he said, "wish I knew why somebody played Hallowe'en with my doorbell. There wasn't anybody in the hall when I got there and I wasted no time. Eric, wish me luck and then get out of here. When I finish this—or get finished—I'll call the police. I'll be arrested and I don't want you mixed up. Your knowledge of the fact that I intend to kill Dubin could make you liable to arrest. So be a good fellow and make some sort of an alibi for yourself."

"I'm going home," Eric shook his head sorrowfully, "and sit by the radio. I'll get the news faster that way. Good luck, Ted. I never thought I'd wish a killer good luck, but you have mine."

At eleven Ted lurked outside the small door on the loading platform of the warehouse. With him he had a kit of tools which his brother had owned and used at times, to burglarize places he wanted to visit for evidence or prisoners. Ted knew little about them, but they included a diamond glass cutter and he found it easy to cut away enough window glass to reach the latch inside.

He raised the window, crawled through and made his way carefully across a very large room, stacked high with merchandise. There were two big trucks on the floor too, in the process of being dismantled so that they could be gotten rid

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of without being spotted.

There was a weak light in a rear corner. Ted stole in that direction, gun ready. It was very easy. Dubin was in the little office, tilted back in a swivel chair with his feet on the desk and dozing. Ted leveled his gun.

"Dubin," he called.

The crook opened his eyes, gasped and his feet hit the floor. He sat very rigid, eyeing the gun in open apprehension. Ted squinted behind the sights. This was the moment he'd lived for. This was when Shep would be avenged. That killer instinct, lurking within him, rose and burst its bounds. He wanted to kill Dubin. He wanted to see him collapse in agony just as Shep had fallen. He wanted to stand over him and send in a couple of slugs to finish the man, but let him know they were coming.

"No," Dubin hissed. "No—don't do it. Don't shoot!"

"I wonder what you'd have done if my brother ever had a chance to plead for his life. Just what I'm going to do, Dubin. Shoot!"

"I didn't kill Lieutenant Tyler. I tell you I didn't kill him."

Ted grinned. This was better than he expected. The man wasn't just begging for his life, but denying he was the man Ted wanted.

"I suppose," Ted said, "you were dining at the Ritz with the Governor and the Mayor at the time Shep was gunned down."

"I wasn't even in town," Dubin pleaded. "See them trucks out there? I was hijacking 'em near Poughkeepsie. How could I go to the cops, and say I didn't kill your brother? I'd have to tell them where I was and—and we had to plug one driver. He may die. That's a murder rap too. No matter which way I turned, it was the chair. You got to believe me."

"Why should I?" Ted asked quietly. "My own brother told me you were the man he was after. He told me he had dinner—" Ted hesitated. "Dubin—one week ago tonight my brother was shot. At eight o'clock in the evening. In front of my office building. And you were near Poughkeepsie stealing a couple of trucks. Did anyone see you there?"

"The guy I plugged. Listen, he had a good look. I thought he was unconscious. If they showed him my pictures, he's identified me by now."

Ted came closer to the desk and picked

up the phone. He called the Poughkeepsie police and said he was Inspector Farrow. He asked if there had been an identification and was told, somewhat curtly, that he'd already been informed that Dubin was one of the hijackers.

Ted hung up, checked the phone book and called the restaurant where he'd dined. He asked for Waiter 9. The man came on the wire. Ted said, "I'm the fellow you mistook for my brother. The sauerbraten and potato pancakes, remember? Good. Now listen carefully. You served that dish to my brother one week ago tonight. You serve it only once a week."

"Yes, your brother who looks so much like you. My mistake was very natural. You look so much like your brother and then—the other gentleman was there too."

TED hung up slowly and laid his gun down on the desk. He could feel the blood draining out of his face. He said, "Dubin, I almost made a ghastly error. I was set to kill you in cold blood and you aren't the man who killed my brother. I've been a fool not to realize that before. My brother wouldn't have been caught dead in your presence, and yet he told me he'd dined with the crook he wanted. You're a crook, maybe a killer too, but that's for the police to decide. They want you and they're going to get you, but not for the murder of my brother."

Dubin made a pass at the gun. Ted snaked it away from the crook's descending hand, stood up and slugged Dubin on the skull. Then he tied him and stowed him in a small supply closet, securely gagged.

Ted left the warehouse by the front door, returned to where his car was parked and drove it to the address which Tano had given him as his new residence. He found the room Tano had rented, found the door closed but not locked and Tano was half under the bed. He'd been strangled to death and the body was very cold. He'd been dead for four or five hours, at the least.

Ted drove to the suburban home where Eric Barton lived, parked right in front of it and walked resolutely up the path. The gun was in his pocket, not in his fist. Barton let him in.

"Ted," he gasped. "Ted—what happened? How did it turn out?"

"That I was a fool. That Dubin never killed Shep—and you knew it!"

Eric backed up, turned suddenly and got a desk drawer opened before he saw Ted's gun. Eric raised his hands quickly. "Ted, don't do it. Ted, you can't—"

"You killed Shep, drove away and then turned the car over to someone. You doubled back. It was you Shep meant, when he said he'd dined with the big shot crook—the man who really made all the money out of this hijack racket. He wasn't too explicit. He should have told me that you are the fence to whom Dubin sold his stolen goods. It has to be that. You're in the exporting business, and can get rid of the stuff easily.

"The waiter gave it away. He thought I was Shep and served me that dish without waiting for an order. But it wasn't simply my resemblance to Shep that misled him. You were with Shep that night and with me tonight. No wonder the waiter made a mistake."

"Ted, you can't do this. You're all wrong."

"I'm perfectly right, and you know it. Tonight you learned that Tano had a tip. It might bring me to Dubin or it might reveal that Dubin happened to be far away from town when Shep was shot down. I gave you a chance, quite innocently, by letting you follow me from the office to the restaurant, and you phoned some pals on the way. They paid Tano a visit and killed him. He's been dead for hours, so how could he have phoned at ten o'clock?"

Eric was beginning to tremble. "Ted, will you give me a chance?"

"Did you give Shep a chance? All this planning and scheming. Like tipping off

Dubin that I was gunning for him. Like having one of your stooges ring my doorbell at ten so you'd have to answer the phone when another stooge called and pretended to be Tano.

"You sent me to Dubin, and I almost killed him—which would have been fine. You probably owed him a healthy sum for the stuff you bought. Besides, Dubin was red hot after having shot a man upstate. He was better off dead, so far as you were concerned, and if I killed him, I'd be out of the picture too. That was the way you wanted it."

"Ted, I've got a lot of cash on hand. I'll give it all to you as atonement."

"Then you did kill Shep. Eric—this is it."

Eric let out an unearthly scream, but he was frozen to his chair. Ted went around the desk, opened the drawer and took out the gun lying there. He searched Eric, stepped back and put the gun in his pocket.

"What are you shivering for, Eric?" he asked. "I'm not going to kill you. If I did, I'd be in your class—a murderer. The state can take care of the matter very nicely and with much more finesse. And I'll know there has been no mistake. Pick up the phone, Eric, and call Inspector Farrow. Tell him I've got my brother's murderer here, and he'll be nice and healthy when he comes for him."

Eric couldn't pick up the phone. There was no more strength left in the man. Ted called Farrow and then sat down, smiling a little. He knew now that Shep would rather have it this way.



Simon Templar—Twentieth Century Buccaneer—Mixes with Sudden Doom in the Prize Ring When a Boxer Dies Under Strange Circumstances in THE MASKED ANGEL, a Brand-New Saint Novel by LESLIE CHARTERIS featured in the gala 196-page Winter Issue of MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE—Now on Sale, 25c at All Stands!

As Osborne brought up his pistol, Crane threw the bottle with terrific force



Quiet Christmas Morning

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

Patrolman Jake Osborne might have pounded pavements the rest of his life if Santa hadn't delivered a corpse to his beat!

AS HE turned off the broad avenue and went into the narrow side street, Patrolman Jake Osborne was yawning. Not because he was in need of sleep, but because the atmosphere of the district at the moment was conducive to yawns.

It was about ten in the morning on Christmas Day. Usually at this hour the avenue and side streets were teeming with

feverish activity. But today it was different. The streets were almost deserted.

A few cars were drifting along at speeds that would give traffic officers no trouble. A few pedestrians trod the walks as if half asleep. Shops were closed, and most of them had shuttered windows.

Christmas Eve celebrations were over, the wild rush of buying last-minute gifts and presenting them was at an end for

this year. People were indulging in the luxury of getting up late and relaxing while they contemplated the Christmas dinners most of them would enjoy later in the day.

Patrolman Jake Osborne, a middle-aged officer who had been on the Force since the age of twenty-two, was known to his superiors as an efficient policeman who took his duties seriously. His record was clean. But there was no brilliance in him. Whenever it came time to make promotions, he was never considered. He was like a piece of familiar furniture, useful and taken for granted.

Long ago, he had given up hope of being elevated in rank, unless when he grew older he was given a soft desk job at the precinct station. But he was satisfied with life.

He liked the Force. He had a wife who was a good housekeeper and an excellent cook. He had a daughter of fifteen and a namesake son of thirteen, and they were splendid kids—healthy, wholesome, polite, doing well in school. Life could be a lot worse, he thought.

His professional career had been uneventful. He cautioned roisterers at times, called an ambulance if anybody got hurt or became ill on the street, now and then arrested a quarrelsome drunk, and when he was on the night shift tried doors and at times found one unlocked and telephoned some shop owner to come down and lock up.

He had pulled gun from holster only once during all the years, and that had been to control three men he had arrested for fighting while he waited for the wagon. But he was always ready for an emergency. Religiously, he practiced at the police pistol range, and made good scores. And he worked out in the police gymnasium with as much enthusiasm as the youngsters.

WALKING slowly along the side street, Osborne came to Tony's Delicatessen, and found it open. Tony and his family lived in the rear, and Tony would open his door at any time day or night to make a sale. Several small bambinos who kicked out shoes with great regularity had something to do with that.

"Good mornin', Officer!" Tony greeted, cordially. "Merry Christmas!"

"'Morning', Tony! Merry Christmas to you," Osborne said, as he came to a stop. "Did you have good Christmast trade?"

"Sell very much fancy grocery and wine and many turkey leg and wing. People spend this year."

"That's good! Your wife and kids well?" Osborne asked.

"All very well," Tony replied, his white teeth flashing in a smile. "Wife fat and healthy. Kids all right. I gotta present for you."

Tony stepped back into his shop and returned immediately with a package, which he handed to Osborne. The patrolman thanked him.

"Is bottle fine olives import from Italy," Tony explained. "Is also spiced orange peel and bottle good wine."

"Thanks, Tony. Let me leave the package with you until I go off duty, huh?"

"Sure!" Tony took the package back. "Will keep shop open and maybe somebody come buy. Quiet Christmas mornin'. Everybody sleep late except Officer Osborne and Tony."

"Quiet Christmas mornin' is right," Osborne agreed. "It's almost a dead morning."

That was when they heard the shots.

There were two shots ringing out on the crisp air and coming close together. The shooting seemed to have occurred near the corner, where there were some old two and three story buildings with shops on the ground floor and cheap lodgings above.

"Somebody shoot," Tony said.

Osborne already was on his way, feeling for his whistle with one hand and reaching for his holster with the other. Near the corner, there was nobody on the street. No heads popped out of windows and there were no shrill screams. The affair did not follow the usual pattern.

But Patrolman Jake Osborne knew gunfire when he heard it, and he knew there had been two shots somewhere near. One had sounded sharp and clear as if fired in the open air, and the other slightly muffled as if fired inside a building from a room where a window was partially open.

Osborne sprinted to the corner and gave a swift look around. Halfway down the block a couple of men were looking back, as if they had heard the shots. Osborne started toward them.

In one of the old buildings a door was pulled open at the top of a flight of steps leading up to the entrance. In the doorway appeared a man whose face was white. He started down the steps, clutching at his left breast, and Osborne could

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see blood dripping from his fingers.

Halfway down the steps, as Osborne started hurrying toward him, the man sagged and fell, to roll to the bottom and come to rest on the snow-covered walk. Osborne blew his whistle as he ran on. He knelt quickly beside the fallen man.

Then, Jake Osborne got the shock of his official life. The man dying on the walk was John Wenceley, an assistant district attorney.

Osborne knew him by sight, and his picture had been in the papers scores of times. He was known as a shrewd investigator, particularly in political matters and cases dealing with crooked corporations. His personal crusade against big-time crime had attracted nationwide attention.

John Wenceley's lips were moving, and Osborne bent and tried to catch the words. But the assistant district attorney was beyond coherent speech. His head rolled to one side, his eyes opened and became fixed. The public crusader was dead, murdered on Christmas morning, and the event would make the big headlines in the day's newspapers throughout the country.

Osborne's whistle had brought results. Windows were thrown open and heads popped out. Shrill voices asked questions. From down the street another policeman, a rookie assigned to Christmast Day duty to relieve some regular officer, came sprinting.

Some men came from across the street. Osborne looked at one he took to be calm and responsible.

"Phone Headquarters," Osborne directed. "Give the address and say Patrolman Osborne wants the homicide squad."

The man turned and crossed the street to hurry to a telephone. The rookie from the next beat ran up almost breathless.

"Take charge here," Osborne directed. "Keep everybody back until the squad arrives."

OSBORNE'S manner was calm, without the least trace of excitement. This was simply the work for which he had been trained. He could have remained beside the body of the assistant district attorney and waited and turned the case over to Homicide. But he had been taught to follow a hot trail whenever it was possible.

He got out his police Special and ran up the steps to the open door. Entering a

dingy hallway, he came to an abrupt stop. A slattern of a landlady came from a room to face him. She was a fat woman who wore a dirty dress and had unkempt hair, and from her manner had celebrated Christmas Eve too well.

"What's wrong, Copper?" she asked in a hoarse voice.

"That's what I want to know. A man came out of here and dropped on the walk and died. He'd been shot. Didn't you hear any shooting in your place?"

"Heard somethin', but thought it was an auto backfirin'."

"Who occupies your rooms?"

"Riff-raff, mostly," the woman replied. "I don't know who goes or comes, and don't care as long as I get my rent."

"Hear any trouble—loud voices or quarreling or anything like that, a few minutes ago?"

"Them kind of sounds are regular around here," she replied. "It'd be funny to go through a day without hearin' loud voices and quarrelin'."

"I'll see you again later," Osborne hinted.

He had been glancing around the hallway and at the stairs leading to the floor above. The carpeting on the hall and the runner on the stairs were ragged and unbelievably dirty. But Osborne saw something that interested him—drops of blood on the stairs, showing where the dying assistant district attorney had come down from the floor above.

Osborne hurried up the stairs. Before he reached the top, a woman's shrill scream rang through the house. When he was in the upper hall, he saw doors opening and people emerging. They were in various stages of undress, most of them with bleary eyes and other evidences of a carouse.

"Where did that scream come from?" Osborne demanded.

Some of them, not relishing close association with any of the police force, darted back into their rooms and slammed their doors. One man pointed to a door on the opposite side of the hall. Osborne was looking at that door already. The blood-drop trail ran directly to it.

Gun held ready, he pounded on the door with his left fist, standing to one side so a stream of bullets fired through the thin door panel would not strike him.

"Open up!" he shouted. "This is the police!"

He got no answer. He turned the knob

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with his left hand and kicked the door open. No volley came. Peering into the dingy room, he saw a man stretched face downward on the floor, a pool of blood around him, and a young woman crumpled in a corner of the room as if she had fainted there.

He heard a gasp behind him, and turned to find the landlady had followed him up the stairs.

"Tell your tenants to stay in their rooms," Osborne told her, "then come in here with me."

The landlady began shouting in a shrill voice. She followed Osborne into the room and closed the door. Osborne gripped the man on the floor by the shoulder and turned him halfway over to get a look at his face.

The landlady gave an exclamation of surprise. "Why, I know him, Copper," she said. "He's Flash Conroy, the big gambler."

Osborne knew him, too, and his history. Flash Conroy, as a young man, had been mixed in the rackets prevailing at the time. He had made and saved money, and now owned a couple of luxurious hide-away gambling houses where the take ran into thousands a night. And what was he doing here, dead on the floor of a dingy room in a cheap lodging house?

"He's dead," Osborne told the landlady. "Don't faint."

"It'd take more than one dead man to make me faint. How about the dame?"

Beckoning the landlady to follow, Osborne hurried to the young woman in the corner. He glanced at her face, felt of her pulse, raised the lid of one eye.

"Water," he told the landlady, nodding toward the old-fashioned bowl and pitcher on the wash stand in another corner of the room.

The landlady got the pitcher, waved Osborne away, and dashed water into the girl's face. The girl moaned and acted as if trying to lift her head.

"I know her," the landlady told Osborne. "Sure, I know that one! She's Smiley Crane's girl. Smiley is a small-time crook tryin' to be a big one."

"What's the girl doing here?" Osborne asked. "Whose room is this?"

"Why, it's Smiley Crane's."

The girl moaned again, and opened her eyes. Osborne nodded to the landlady, and they lifted her off the floor and propped her up in an easy chair.

"Oh . . . oh . . . !" she was moaning.

"Snap out of it!" Osborne barked at her. "I've no time to lose. What happened here?"

"I—I came up to get Smiley Crane and go to breakfast with him. When I opened the door I saw . . . that man dead on the floor. I guess . . . I fainted."

Osborne looked straight at her. "What's your name?"

"Estelle Rampart. Everybody who knows Smiley knows me, too."

"Know the dead man on the floor?"

"I couldn't see his face."

"You just walked in, saw him like that, and fainted, huh?"

"That's right," she admitted. "It was terrible. It made me sick."

OSBORNE went to the door and opened it and looked out into the hall. A uniformed policeman was striding toward him.

"Homicide squad's come," he reported. "Inspector Benland was at Headquarters and came along. They're starting work in the street, where Wenceley died."

"You watch the hall," Osborne instructed. "I've got some work in here. Send the Inspector here when he comes up."

He closed the door and went back to Estelle Rampart.

"Now, young woman," he said, sternly, "you'll forget the fairy story you just told me, and tell me the truth, or I'll send you in and let you talk at Headquarters."

"What do you mean?" she demanded, with some show of indignation.

"You tried to pull a fake faint. Why?"

"What are you saying? A fake faint?"

"That's what I said. Knew it the moment I looked at you. When a person faints, the face turns almost pasty white. Your face was flushed. Your pulse was normal when I tried it. Your eye told me you hadn't fainted. You tell me the truth, and be quick about it, or in you go. How long have you been in this room?"

"Only a few minutes. I came in and saw the dead man—"

"Come in the front way?"

"Certainly."

"See a wounded man going out as you came in?"

"Why—why, no!"

"Then you didn't come in the front way a few minutes ago. I warned you not to lie to me. You stay right there a moment."

Osborne crossed to the window, which

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was raised a few inches from the bottom. He tried it. It stuck a little and then could be opened. Osborne glanced at the window sill, at the roof of the adjoining building not more than six feet below the window ledge. He turned back to the girl.

"When did you see Smiley Crane last?" he demanded.

"Last night. We prowled around some, celebrating, then I went home. We had a breakfast date for this morning."

"Wasn't Crane in this room when you got here this morning?"

"No. I haven't seen him."

"Then who was it left this room through that window after you came in?"

"You're crazy!"

"Hand prints in the thick grimy dust on that window sill," Osborne pointed out. "Hand prints and footprints on the roof of the building below the window, showing where a man had jumped and lit on all fours. And he couldn't have reached up more than six feet and pulled the window down after he jumped. You tried to pull the window down all the way and it stuck. Right?"

"Why, you—you—"

"Did Smiley Crane go through that window after he'd done a little shooting around here?"

"I'm not talkin'," she said, her eyes narrowing.

"You know the dead man on the floor?"

"Everybody around here knows Flash Conroy, the big shot gambler."

"Oh, yes? A few minutes ago you told me you didn't know the dead man because you couldn't see his face. So how do you know he's Flash Conroy? You're a poor liar."

Osborne went to the door and pulled it open and called the policeman on guard there. He pointed at Estelle Rampart.

"Put the nippers on her, take her into the hall and turn her over to Homicide when they come upstairs," Osborne directed. "Tell Inspector Benland I'll explain later. Close the door after you take her out."

Osborne holstered his gun for the time being, went to the window and dropped to the roof of the adjoining building, landing on all fours as the man who had gone before him had done. He got up, drew his gun again, and followed a line of footprints in the thick greasy dust on the roof. They led around a chimney and to a trap door that stood open.

Osborne listened a moment, heard nothing,

and went down a ladder to the hallway of the top floor of the building. All the doors were closed, and not a sound came from behind any of them. Greasy footprints were on the floor, and Osborne followed the trail.

DOWN the stairs to the second floor he went, and there stopped to listen again. Not a sound reached him. The light was dim in the hallway, but Osborne could see the footprints in the dust. They led to a closet, probably one that had been used for storage in better days.

Cautiously, Osborne opened the door with his left hand while his right held his pistol ready to fire. The closet was empty. But on the floor was an automatic, and a streak in the dust revealed that it had been thrown into the closet recently and had skidded halfway across to the wall.

Osborne took out a handkerchief, picked up the automatic carefully with it, wrapped the handkerchief around it to preserve fingerprints if any, and put the weapon into a pocket of his overcoat. Then he went on.

The trail led to a side stairway in the building, and down this Osborne followed it to a rear door of the next building. He knew that door. It was the rear exit of Tony's delicatessen store. On night duty, Osborne had tried that door hundreds of times to be sure it was securely locked.

It was not locked now. Possibly Tony had left it unlocked that morning when he had put out garbage for the collector. And Tony's wife and family, Osborne knew, would be at mass this Christmas morning.

Osborne opened the door cautiously and slipped inside, blinking to accustom his eyes to the semi-gloom. He could hear Tony talking and laughing with some customer in the front storeroom. He glanced around the room he had entered, a back room. And suddenly he froze. A voice had come from a corner:

"Stand still, Copper, or I'll let you have it!"

Osborne stood still, trying to judge from what spot that voice had come.

"Don't turn around! Don't move! I'm goin' out the door you just came in by, and I'll lock it on the outside. Make a bad move, and I'll shoot."

Osborne spoke. "You'll shoot with what? You left your automatic in the closet upstairs, didn't you?"

"Maybe I've got another, Copper. You

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know how to find out. Just move, that's all. Only you won't live more'n a minute after findin' out."

Osborne felt the perspiration starting out on his face. He had no way of knowing whether the man behind him had another gun. He heard a move, and suddenly he dropped flat to the floor, turning his body as he did so, and brought up his police pistol.

Smiley Crane was standing against the wall near the door. He had no gun. In one hand he had an empty wine bottle, and in the other a short iron bar he had picked up somewhere in the room. Undoubtedly, he had been waiting for the customer in front to leave the shop, with the intention of slipping in, smashing Tony on the head, walking calmly out into the street and going away from the vicinity, to return later with some trumped-up alibi.

As Osborne brought up his pistol to cover him, Crane threw the bottle with terrific force. It ricocheted from Osborne's left shoulder, struck the wall and crashed, showering Osborne with broken glass. He fired, but too late. Smiley Crane had dashed past him and into the store.

Osborne got upon his feet and charged after the fleeing man.

"Stop him, Tony!" he yelled.

The customer had left the shop. Osborne rushed through the curtained doorway in time to see Smiley Crane rush upon the surprised Tony and smash him on the head with the iron bar. Then he dropped the bar, dashed through the door and into the street, and ran.

Tony was falling to the floor as Osborne ran past him.

When he rushed into the street, Crane was a quarter of a block away, running toward the avenue.

"Halt, or I'll fire!" Osborne shouted.

Smiley Crane bent forward and ran on. Osborne stopped, took careful aim, fired. Smiley Crane came to an abrupt stop, reeled, and fell back against the wall of a building, clutching his left shoulder with his right hand.

FEET pounded the frosty walk as Osborne, his breathing labored, charged down upon his man. Crane's face was white from the force of the bullet's blow. The wound was high in the left shoulder, as Osborne had wished it to be.

He pressed Crane against the wall, and handcuffs snapped.

"Come on, you rat!" Osborne growled at him. "You've done enough killin' for one day."

"I never killed anybody, I—"

"Shut up! You're under arrest and anything you say may be used against you—"

"I never killed—"

"I've got the gun you discarded, and your prints are probably on it. Ballistics will tell us whether the bullets in Flash Conroy or John Wenceley came from that automatic. We've got the nippers on that Estelle Rampport girl, too."

"She just happened to be in the room," Crane said.

"That's right interestin'," Osborne observed. "She told me she walked in and saw Flash Conroy dead, and didn't see you at all. We can make her sing."

Osborne was urging him along the street. A crowd had collected by this time, and patrolmen were busy keeping the curious ones moving.

Smiley Crane's shoulder was commencing to cause him agony. He bent his head and shuffled when he walked. Osborne gripped his right arm and made him quicken his stride.

"I tell you I didn't shoot anybody," Crane said, in low, tense tones, stopping frequently as he spoke to bite his lip because of the burning, shooting pains commencing to work in his wounded shoulder.

"Sing if you feel like it," Osborne told him. "I'll tell the Inspector what you said, and he can compare it with Estelle Rampport's story and others."

Smiley Crane decided to talk. "That assistant D. A., Wenceley," he said, "contacted Flash Conroy. Wenceley was after the higher-ups in a big combine that's controllin' all the fancy gamblin' places in town—and some other towns. Flash let him know he'd talk if Wenceley would lay off him in return. Fact is, Flash wanted to get rid of the big shot and take over the job himself."

"I can understand that," Osborne said.

"They wanted to meet in secret. They picked Christmas mornin' because that'd be a good time, when people weren't stirrin' around much. They wanted a place to meet. Flash got hold of me and asked to use my room. Nobody would expect either Wenceley or Flash to be seen in a dump like that."

"Sounds reasonable," Osborne declared.

"Then Flash, who never played square in his life, got what he thought was a

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bright idea. He'd have Estelle there, and he'd make it look like Wenceley had gone there to meet Estelle."

"One of the oldest games in the world."

"Yeah, but it generally works. Witnesses would drop in, and Flash planned to threaten Wenceley with a scandal unless he walked the way Flash wanted him to. If that'd worked, Flash could have done as he pleased in this town, and Wenceley would lay off him."

"But it didn't work?" Osborne asked.

"I didn't like to see Estelle get mixed up in a thing like that. Anyhow, we went ahead with it. Wenceley came to the room and met Flash. I walked in with Estelle. Wenceley got wise and started to leave, and Flash shot him. As he went on toward the door, Wenceley got out a gun and let Flash have it. Then he went into the hall, half dazed from his wounds I guess, and started for the stairs.

"You can guess that threw me into a panic. I had that automatic on me. Flash was dead on the door of my room. I knew the cops would be there in a few minutes, and didn't dare go out the front way. So I told Estelle to scream and pull that faintin' stunt when she knew the cops were near. And I jumped out the window and made a getaway, and she pulled the window down—"

"I know the rest, so spare your breath," Osborne said. "It can be learned easily enough if Wenceley and Flash Conroy shot each other, and your yarn and the girl's, when they wring it out of her, will explain why. And you'll go up the river, my lad, on several counts—packin' a gun for which you have no permit, helpin' work a badger game, and smashin' Tony on the head. I'm hopin' you didn't hurt him bad. If you did—!"

THEY had come to the spot where Wenceley had died. The body had been removed. Members of the homicide squad were all over the place. Osborne ushered Smiley Crane into the house, where Inspector Benland was winding up his investigation in the lower hall.

"Here's Smiley Crane, Inspector," Osborne reported. "He's told me his yarn, and it sounds good."

"Thanks, Osborne. We've made the girl sing, and we'll compare their yarns at Headquarters."

"I had to put a slug through his shoul-

der. He'll have to be patched up."

"We'll handle him," Inspector Benland said. He nodded to one of his men.

"Guess I'd better get back on my beat," Osborne said. "I want to stop and see how Tony is. Crane smashed him on the head with an iron bar. That's somethin' else for him to answer for."

"He'll answer for plenty," Benland promised. "By the way, Osborne, I happen to know your record. Men like you don't make the newspapers often, but you're the backbone of the Force, the steady pavement pounders who go on year after year and keep the peace. And when an emergency comes, like this thing today, you step in and do what a policeman is supposed to do, without making any fuss."

"Thanks, Inspector," Osborne said.

"In your case, Osborne, you've been pounding the pavement for a long time. I'm right sure a man like you can be used in the precinct station. I'll recommend you be promoted to sergeant and given a desk job. That's all. Get back on your beat."

"Yes, sir."

Osborne hurried out of the house, went around the corner, and almost ran to Tony's shop. Somebody had called a doctor, and Tony was sitting in a chair breathing heavily, a bump on his head but otherwise all right. His wife and children had returned from mass, and were putting on a scene of excitement.

"Glad that rat didn't hurt you bad, Tony," Osborne told him. "I nabbed him. I'll drop in and see you later in the day. Got to get back on my beat now. I'll get my present when I come back."

He hurried to the nearest report box and explained at length to the precinct desk sergeant, who had been worrying because Osborne had missed a couple of reports. Then he returned to the avenue.

It was as deserted as it had been earlier. A few cars, a few pedestrians, that was all. Osborne stopped to chat with the man who operated a shoe shining stand on a corner in front of a barber shop.

"How's everything, Jim?" Osborne asked, after they had wished each other a "Merry Christmas."

"It's slow today, a quiet Christmas mornin'."

"Yeah," Osborne agreed. He smiled slightly as he strolled on down the street.

CLUE AT 1200 FEET

By
RAY CUMMINGS

Jack Blake wanted money—and wanted it badly enough to be a murderer for its sweet sake!

JACK BLAKE rolled the rowels of his big spurs along the mare's flanks, urging her forward. He had ridden fast all the way from Monteca. Overhead, the Arizona night sky was a great arched vault of purple-black, dotted with the brilliant shimmering stars. The summer night was chill, despite a day of baking heat. To his left the starlight was pallid on the lower valley, where the river wound like a pale, twisted ribbon with trees beside it. Behind him the gaunt, cactus-strewn hills rose up in little broken tiers, with the naked plateau of desert behind them.

Blake had left the mining village of Monteca about ten o'clock. It was almost eleven now. He was a handsome fellow, long and lean, swarthy from the hot southern sun. He was hatless, his wavy hair tossed by the wind. His blue shirt was open at the throat, his riding trousers modish and immaculately clean, his leather puttees were polished. He rode the small sorrel mare with easy grace, slumping a little in the saddle as he puffed on his cigarette and gazed at the shining purple night with wandering thoughts.

The tired little mare was in a lather, but again he spurred her. Somehow an urgency to get home was on him. Doris had inspired it. Doris was impatient. With an oil well, that would soon gush its golden treasure, being drilled on their property, she couldn't see why Blake should have much trouble getting the ten thousand from the old man.



In the darkness Blake was only conscious that he was clutching that scrawny throat

THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE

Then Doris would quit her job of dancing and singing in the Monteca cafe, they would be married, and he would take her on the honeymoon. They would go to New York, as he had promised.

And it was Doris who had suggested, just about an hour ago, that if Blake had too much trouble—then there could be another way.

It made Blake shudder. Yet now as he spurred the mare to a loping gallop out of the hills of the ridge and down the last slope onto the river road, he knew that subconsciously his mind was toying with it.

Old Jacob Roberts would be in the ranch house alone now. The housekeeper lived a mile or so down the valley, and she had left about sundown. The night shift of drillers would be at work. But the well was being sunk a fair distance from the house, out beyond the garden and a clump of trees. The Oil Prospecting Company had built its temporary bunkhouses and tool sheds there. No one would know what went on at the ranch house now. The vague, sinister things that Blake was thinking turned him tense and cold.

Presently the river road made a bend, and as Blake rounded it he pulled the mare to a slower pace. Now the low-spreading ranch house was dimly visible there by the river among the trees, with the blobs of the workmen's buildings behind it. The outline of the big oil derrick off to one side, loomed up, a gaunt skeleton against the horizon sky. Exterior lights glared with a yellow glow around the camp. But the ranch house was lightless, silent and somber with shadows. The starlight was a pale sheen on its tin roof.

NOW IN the hush beside the slow-moving river, Blake could hear the muffled thump of the drill, the grinding clatter as it rose, and the thump when it fell. As he came closer, there were occasional distant shouts of the workmen calling to each other. The trees along here shrouded Blake as he rode around the bend. The stable-shed was a short distance from the house, on this side. Blake rode into it, unsaddled the heaving mare. He would have bedded her down for the night, but an impulse stopped him. He left her bridled in the stall, walked up the dim path under the secluding trees, and entered the side

door of the house.

The house was dark inside. Blake's dangling spurs clanked a little on the board flooring as he walked along the hall. The old man's bedroom door was partly open. He must have heard the clanking because he called,

"That you, Jack?"

"Yes," Blake said. He pushed the bedroom door open. The room was dim, with the sheen from outside coming in its two small windows. The bed over against the wall was faintly visible, with the old man lying there. Then as he saw Blake in the doorway he raised up on one elbow.

"What you want?" he said. "Blast that drill! How can anybody sleep?"

"I want to talk to you," Blake said.

"Talk to me? What about? It's so late."

"Isn't late," Blake said. "Only about eleven o'clock." He took a step into the room. He could feel his heart pounding and a tightness in his chest. The window shades were up. It would be better to have them down, if he lighted the lamp.

"That drill," the old man was saying petulantly. "I've got to have some sleep. What you want?"

But he didn't remonstrate as Blake lowered the window sashes, drew the shades down and lighted the small oil lamp on the table.

"That thumping of the drill isn't so loud with the windows closed," Blake said. "I just thought we'd have a little chat."

He sat in a chair by the table, with Roberts watching him silently. The lamp shade was tilted. It cast a yellow glow on the bed, on the thin figure of Roberts, propped up now with his pillows behind him. His scraggly white hair was rumpled and his white flannel nightshirt seemed too small even for his scrawny body. It pinched him across the shoulders, making him look grotesque, comical. Beside the bed there was a little taboret with his watch on it, his spectacles, a teaspoon and small bottle of aromatic spirits of ammonia, and a glass of clouded looking water, medicine or something. Blake's quick glance swept the rest of the room.

"Queer you don't get used to the drill, Mr. Roberts," he said in unsteady tones. It seemed now as though he wanted to have a little time to quiet himself. Then

CLUE AT 1200 FEET

he'd mention the money, have a show-down.

"If I'd known what the drill would be like, I'd never have let them come," the old man declared truculently. "That I wouldn't."

Blake managed a smile. "Oh, yes, you would. We'll strike oil. I've just got a hunch a gusher will come in, maybe any time now. We'll be rich."

"A hunch, that's what Annie's husband had about the possibility of oil around here," Roberts said. "All right. I hope so."

Roberts' sister had adopted Blake some eighteen years ago when he was a child. Then she had married, and now both she and her husband were dead. They had owned half this ranch, and since their death in an accident just a few weeks ago, Blake had been living here.

Thump! Next came a clatter of cables and pulleys and the wheezing of the little donkey engine. Another thump followed, and the mumble of the drillers' voices. In the closed room the sounds were faint, but you could still hear them.

"What I want to talk to you about," Blake said abruptly out of the silence, "I'm sure we'll strike oil. Thompson the foreman is sure too. I spoke to him when the night shift came on, just after supper."

The old man made a gesture. "Thompson was in here only half an hour ago. He's all enthused. He says tonight they're getting real evidence of the crude."

"That's what I mean," Blake said. "And I do want to get away for a while. You know, the way I explained it this afternoon, get up to New York. You're in charge of the estate, and I know you haven't had a chance to get it settled yet. Sure, it was nothing but an interest in this house, and your little ranch that never amounted to much."

"Thank you," Roberts put in ironically.

"Oh, I don't mean that, Mr. Roberts. What I mean is that with us having oil here, it's a big proposition. If we get a gusher, I'd like to see some of the other oil companies before we sign anything."

THE OLD man's look checked him. Roberts had been regarding him with a faint, expectant curiosity. Now his thin pale lips were twisted into a caustic smile.

"You just got back from Monteca, didn't you?" Roberts said.

"Why, yes."

"Been with that fool woman again?"

Blake sat up tense in his chair. So the old man knew about Doris? Foxy old buzzard, he'd never even hinted at it.

"What—what woman?" Blake murmured. "What you talking about?"

Roberts' smile broadened. "Think I'm just an old fool, don't you? People talk. And I do drive to Monteca sometimes, in spite of this rheumatism."

"I don't get you," Blake said.

"Doris Dain, in that honky tonk," Roberts said succinctly. "You're twenty-one, and how old is she, do you think? Twenty-five? Thirty?"

Blake could feel his temper rising, a rush of heat like a little jet opening inside him. He tried to retort calmly.

"Why, yes, I've met Doris," he said. "So what?"

"Nothing to me at all," Roberts said. "It just happens she's telling around town you're going to marry her. Go ahead. You're of age. But if you think you can come to me with a cock and bull story about an advance of ten thousand dollars for—"

"What I want it for is my business," Blake cut in heatedly. "I can do what I blamed please. I don't have to ask you."

The irascible old man sat up in bed as though galvanized. With a skinny hand he flung off the covers, twisting around to face Blake so that his scrawny bare legs dangled down.

"Not by a jugful can you do what you blamed please with my place here," he retorted. "You know right well why your foster-father left me in charge of his interest in this ranch. A share to you according to my judgment of what would most benefit you, was the way he put it. Well, my judgment is you get no extra money beyond the allowance. Not unless you change a lot. Not while I'm alive do you get it."

Not while he was alive! The phrase, ripped out by the angry old man, seemed to leap at Blake and grip him. Telling him that it had to be done. *Thump!* Rattle of cables . . . *Thump!* Faint voices of workmen. Skilled men working out there to make Jack Blake rich. Of course it had to be done!

It was easy to do, with Blake's desperate anger lashing him. The old man

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saw Blake jumping for the table, seizing the big clay waterbottle, and his voice rose to a shrill cry of terror.

"Why Jack! Jack—"

He was still on the edge of the bed when the clay vessel struck him. He screamed again. The scream struck terror into Blake. Then somehow old Roberts had staggered to his feet. The little taboret beside the table went over with a crash as Blake leaped toward his victim. They fell together, striking the table as they went down. The table rocked, the metal lamp slid off it to the floor, was extinguished. In the darkness Blake was only conscious that he was clutching the scrawny throat, lifting the head, pounding it down. Then at last the writhing thing under him was limp and still, and the panting Blake leaped to his feet. That scream might have been heard by the drillers! He must run, get out of here!

For a second or two in the silence of the dark bedroom, Blake stood tense, with the realization coming to him that the thumping of the drill had stopped. Then there were shouts from the men out there. They'd be here in a minute or two! Blake turned and ran from the room. The coolness of the hall seemed to steady him. The drillers were coming! He could hear their shouts and they were coming through the garden already.

Blake darted out the side door, scurried down the little path under the trees. The ranch house now was between him and the men. His instinct was to run out into the hills, come back tomorrow and claim he hadn't come home tonight at all, but he couldn't do that. The mare in the stable-shed would give him away. The men knew he had ridden the mare to Monteca after supper tonight.

He'd have to get the mare out of the stable now, and ride her away, if he could, without being seen! But he had no sooner reached the shed when he knew it was too late. One of the men had come around the front corner of the house and was shouting. And now from inside the house, others were calling with horror at what they had found.

BLAKE had flung the saddle on the mare. He stopped his frantic tightening of the cinch strap and ran to the stable door.

"Hey up there!" he called. "You fel-

lows—what's the matter? What is it?"

From inside the house they were yelling, "Roberts! He's dead! Somebody got in here and killed him!"

Then Blake was running out from the stable, up the path. He had the mare's feed bag in his hand. He called incoherently in a panic, and then he stood stricken with horror at what they were yelling at him. In a moment he had joined them. All of them were babbling with excitement, and Blake was explaining how he had just ridden in from Monteca, thought he'd heard a scream. He hadn't been sure down there with the stable door closed and the mare whinnying to be unsaddled and fed.

Outwardly, Blake seemed excited and panic-stricken like the rest of them, taking a horrified look at the mute tragic scene of the bedroom, then rushing to the telephone to call the police from Rio Seco. But inwardly he was calm, with a slow cool triumph coming to him.

Of course these drillers suspected him. They had never liked him anyway. He could see now that they were suspicious. They were big husky fellows, standing whispering, casting him hostile glances as he sat at the telephone calling the police. But they could think what they liked. So could the police, for that matter. What difference what anybody thought, when they couldn't prove anything?

"You fellows wait outside," Blake said. After all, he was in charge here. This all belonged to Jack Blake now. "Just stay outside," he reiterated. "Come on fellows, guess you better go back to your bunkhouse. Nothing to do around here till the police come."

But nobody moved. Over by the bedroom door one of them said, "Wasn't a peep out of him down there in the stable, till we got here in the house."

They were crowding around him now. "You fellows wait outside," Blake said commandingly. "The police will investigate this." He pushed at one of them, but the big driller stood like a towering wall and snarled,

"Take yer hands off me or I'll push yer pretty face in."

Then from the bedroom, where now they had lighted another lamp, one of them called, "Hey, boys, bring him in here."

It came just like that. A bombshell. They shoved Blake and he went in with

them. It was Thompson, the night-shift foreman, who had called. He was a shriveled, tough little fellow. He was bending down to the floor and pointing.

"Look," he said, "that got knocked over in the fight." He was pointing to the glass which had been standing on the taboret by the bed. Blake remembered it had been partly filled with dirty looking liquid. "Got sprayed around maybe quite a bit." He was glaring at Blake.

"Hold him, boys!" he said suddenly. "I want to take a look at that smear on those pretty riding pants of his. I wondered what it was."

What was this?

"Let go of me!" Blake said. He stood transfixed, gazing down at the little wet smear just above his knee.

And Thompson was bending down, peering. Then he roared, "I'll be blasted if that isn't it!"

"What about it?" Blake gasped. "What's the matter with you?" He tried not to let them see he was frightened. He managed to add caustically, "You going in for detective work, Thompson? You better wait. The police will be here soon."

"Detective work?" Thompson retorted. "Matter of fact, I was a detective—Williamette Homicide Squad a few years ago. I know my onions, know what to look for an' s'elp me, there it is! Evidence you can't duck!"

Blake was thinking, don't let them see you're frightened.

"Evidence?" he blustered. "You're crazy. A wet smear? That's the mare's

drinking water. I spilled it down in the stable."

"There's sand particles clinging to the wet place," Thompson said. "You can't miss it."

"Sand?" Blake echoed. "Oh, I remember. When I came out of the stable I fell over a cactus bush. I went down on that knee. Sure, maybe some sand stuck to me."

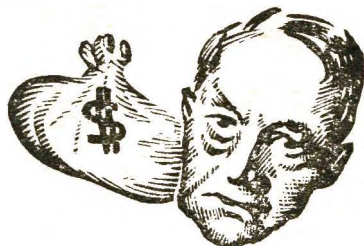
"Not that sand," Thompson retorted. "Our drill went through some nice rock strata a while ago. Could be a swell cover strata for oil. As I told you after supper we might bring in a gusher tonight."

"Sure you did. So what?"

"So 'bout an hour ago, we went into limestone sands," Thompson said. "Looks even better. Sands porous enough to hold oil. So I came over here with a sample in that glass to show Mr. Roberts. Take a look at your pants closer, Blake! Sand particles of calcium carbonate—that's carbonate of lime, if you're interested. White sand, only these are sort of dirty yellow-brown from impurities of iron oxide."

Thompson's triumphant gesture went to his men. "Take a good look boys, and remember what you're seein' so you can testify in Court! You didn't get any sand like that on you down by the stable, Blake. Nor anywhere else around here. That came from twelve hundred feet underground, and we only hauled it up an hour ago! We sure got you, you sneaking killer!"

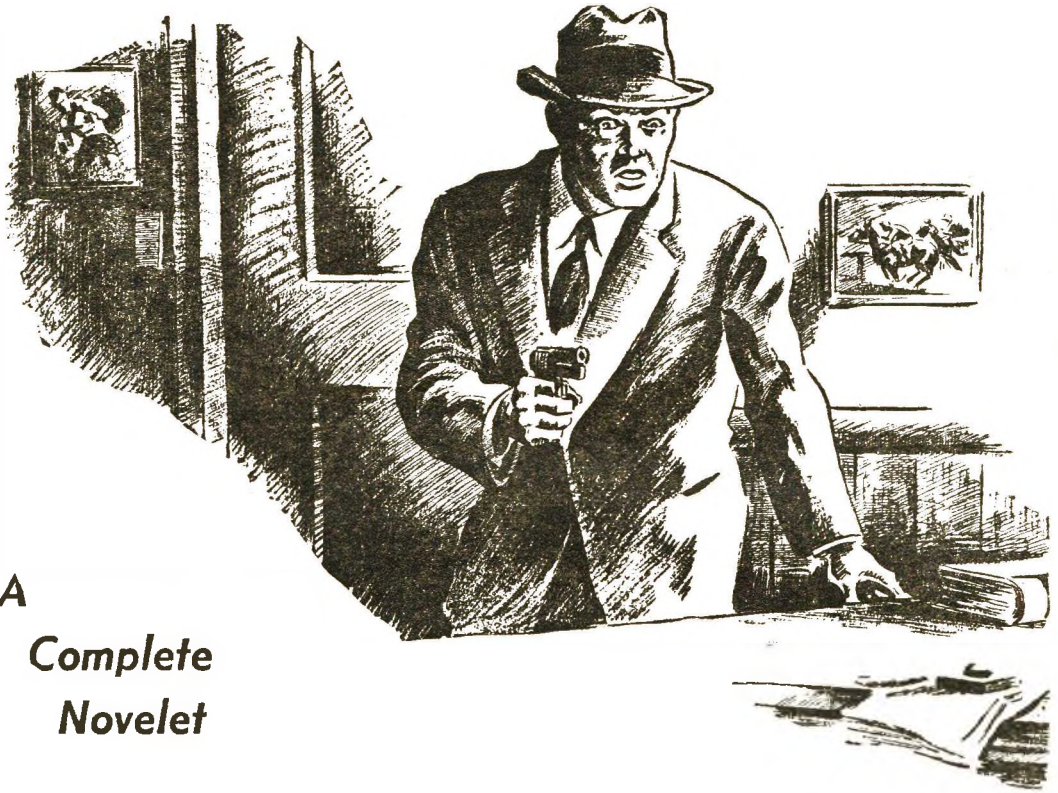
Blake stood mute. He knew they had him.



"The Killers Are Playing for High Stakes!"

THAT was the Phantom's opinion when he investigated the murders of Harley Holt and Clyde Caldwell. Holt was killed by error—but the fiendish criminals swiftly remedied their mistake by doing away with Caldwell. And it was the topcoat Holt wore, the topcoat which did not belong to him and which spelled his doom, which led the Phantom to THE CLUE OF THE SECOND MURDER in the exciting mystery novel of that name by Robert Wallace coming next issue!

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A
Complete
Novelet

PAYOFF

By DON JAMES

CHAPTER I

THE THREAT

ONLY a few customers were in the beer tavern and the bartender had the radio on. Three middle-aged men at the bar drank beer and listened with him. A fourth customer pulled back the plunger on a pinball machine.

He released the plunger as the radio newscaster said, “—was executed at nine o’clock this morning in the gas chamber at the state penitentiary—”

The ball shot up an incline, hit a spring, whipped back, and started its trip through the maze of plastic bumpers. Lights flashed behind numbers and the customer

strained his body in concentration. The ball finished its course and the customer jabbed the machine in disgust. The word “TILT” lighted up. The customer turned to the bartender.

In the background the radio voice said, “—was the seventeenth to pay the death penalty for murder in the gas chamber that was built in nineteen—”

The customer said irately, “Don’t these pinball machines ever pay off?”

The bartender looked at him and smiled thinly. “Yeah, they pay off sometimes. You just heard the radio, didn’t you? Pinball machines was the reason for that payoff this morning in the gas chamber. That whole deal started with pinball machines.”

When the pinball racketeers put the squeeze on the little druggist, they certainly stirred up the hottest hornet's nest in many a year!



"You won't use the gun, Harold. My men downstairs would nail you"

IT STARTED when "Mucky" O'Connell leaned on the counter and looked at Harold with eyes that were as insolent and mocking as they had been ten years before in the alley a block from Webster grammar school.

"Hello, Harold," he said, drawing the name out into an insult. "So you're in business now. So you're a druggist."

Harold Cosgrove nervously glanced about the small drugstore. At the counter three high school girls drank malted milks. He wished that O'Connell wouldn't talk so loudly and he felt the old fear become a warm weakness through him. He tried to smile.

"That's right, Mucky."

O'Connell lit a cigarette and flipped the burned match to the floor. "Good location, Harold," he said. "Just a block from the high school and a good neighborhood for business."

"It's pretty good," Harold admitted. His mouth was dry and he felt the same as he had those other times when Mucky had cornered him after school.

O'Connell looked him over with deliberate eyes.

"You didn't get very big, did you," he said flatly. "What do you weigh? A hundred and fifty?"

"A hundred and sixty," Harold said automatically and then wished he hadn't said it.

He told himself that he was a fool. He wasn't a grammar school kid facing the school bully now. He was a man. An adult. That other was ten years ago. Since then he had acquired a degree at the university, had spent two years in the Army, had married a girl from upstate, and had become owner of his own business.

He tried to smile. "What are you doing, Mucky? It's been a long time since I've heard about you."

O'Connell flicked ashes to the floor and shifted his large body so that he could look at the high school girls. He studied their legs a few seconds before he looked back at Harold.

"I'm in business, too," he said. "That's why I'm here."

"Selling something?" Harold asked politely.

"Not exactly, Harold, but it's a line you'll like. You're going to be glad I came in."

"Yes?" Cosgrove's smile was gone and

the insolent assurance in O'Connell's voice filled him with wariness. "What's your line, Mucky?"

"Pinball machines. I'll put them in, keep them serviced, and split the take with you. You'll make enough on the high school kids alone to pay your rent."

Harold wet his lips and tried to smile again.

"I don't believe I'm interested," he said. "I'm catering to the neighborhood people and I'm really more interested in building up a prescription business than I am in some of the other stuff. Just the fountain and—"

O'Connell had turned away and was looking about the store.

"We can get three in that space over there," he said, pointing. "I'll have them sent out in the morning."

Cosgrove took a deep breath.

"No, Mucky. I don't want them. I don't want anything like that. Besides, it's against the law and—"

"We'll gimmick them so there won't be much payoff. I'll send some punchboards, too. You need them on that counter."

FRANTICALLY Harold tried to think of the right thing to say. His voice shook with helpless anger.

"I don't want them. Is that plain, Mucky? I don't want any of it!"

Mucky O'Connell dropped the cigarette on the floor and deliberately stepped on it in a grinding motion.

"You'll be glad to have them, Harold," he smiled. "No trouble, no bother, just take in the dough and sell them nickels when they want them. I'll treat you right."

"But I don't—"

"They'll be here in the morning, Harold."

O'Connell laughed softly, glanced again at the girls' legs, and walked out of the store.

Harold watched the empty doorway for a moment, anger blurring his eyes, his legs trembling.

The high school girls finished their malts and went out in a flurry of school-girl chatter. Cosgrove hardly saw them go. His anger was leaving him sick and worried.

In the prescription room a telephone rang. Warily he walked back and answered it.

"Harold?"

The sound of his wife's voice filled him with new dismay. How could a man tell his bride that he was afraid of a fellow who had bullied him in grammar school?

How could he explain the fear of Mucky O'Connel that had haunted him and some of the others through those years when they were kids? About the way they had dodged up alleys so that Mucky wouldn't see them? The desperate speed of fear as they ran from him? How could a man tell his wife that a childhood fear was still with him in adulthood?

"Harold, is that you?"

"Hello, Sally."

"Are you catching cold? Your voice sounds like it."

"I'm all right," he told her. "Just a frog in my throat, I guess."

She sounded reassured as she spoke again.

"I just wanted to remind you to bring home butter."

"Anything else?"

"No. You still sound strange, Harold. Are you sure you're all right?"

He tried to laugh a little.

"Of course I am, darling!"

"Did you get someone to work tomorrow night?"

"Charley Huber said he will. I think I can get him one night every week."

"That's wonderful!"

"There's a customer coming in," he told her. "I'll see you a little after nine."

"Don't forget the butter."

He told her he wouldn't and hung up. There was no customer, but somehow talking about his night off and Charley Huber was unimportant at the moment. Mucky O'Connel and tomorrow were important.

WHEN he arrived at the store the following morning he was weary from a sleepless night. Over and over as he had tossed in the bed he had worded things he could say to Mucky O'Connel; he had thought of things he could do to O'Connel; planned fantastic, impossible things that ended with O'Connel defeated and Harold Cosgrove victoriously secure.

Now as he opened the door he knew that none of those things he had thought during the night could face the reality of the day. In a short time the pinball machines would arrive and the test of what he would do would come with them.

They arrived in a small truck a half

hour after he opened. O'Connel was not with the two men who came into the store.

"You Cosgrove?" one asked.

"Yes."

"We've got three pinball machines for you. Where do they go?"

"They don't," Cosgrove said firmly.

The men looked at him queerly. "But Mucky said three for here," one insisted.

"I don't want them. Take them back and tell Mucky not to send them out again."

"Look, mister, you sure you know what you're saying?"

"Very sure."

"Mucky won't like this."

"If you bring them in I'll call the police."

Harold's legs were trembling and the conversation was beginning to be something like a nightmare to him.

The men looked doubtful. "You want us to tell Mucky that you—" one began.

"Tell him to keep out of my sight!"

Harold snapped. Nervous sweat beaded his forehead and he was breathing fast.

"Okay, buddy," the man grinned. "It's your funeral. We'll tell Mucky what you said."

Harold watched the men go out and climb into the truck. After a moment it pulled away from the curb. His head was beginning to ache. In the back room he took two aspirins and went out to wait on a woman who wanted cosmetics.

The specter of an angry Mucky O'Connel hung over him all morning. During the noon hour, when the place was filled with high school students, a car stopped in front and Mucky O'Connel got out. Cosgrove met him at the front of the store.

"What's the idea?" O'Connel asked sharply.

"I don't want those machines in here and I won't have them."

"So you're going to be tough!"

"I don't want any trouble, Mucky. But this is my business and I intend to run it as I see fit."

O'Connel stared at Harold and his lips twisted in an uneven smile.

"You'd better change your mind, Harold."

"You're not bullying a grammar school kid now," Cosgrove retorted hotly. "I won't stand for it."

"Okay, Harold. Okay. We'll see,"

THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE

O'Connell smiled.

He turned and went out to his car. Cosgrove returned to the soda fountain. Anger boiled through him.

"If I have any trouble, I'll go to the police," he told himself. "I won't take anything from him. Not a thing!"

Despite his nervous apprehension the day passed uneventfully and at six o'clock Charley Huber appeared. He worked at an uptown store and had accepted the offer to earn a little extra money by serving as relief man for Harold.

He was thin and slightly stooped and looked as if he had spent too many years waiting on an exacting public.

"You can close at nine," Cosgrove explained. "Sally and I are going to the Bijou. We haven't seen a good show for weeks."

"Have a good time," Charley smiled.

At the door, Harold hesitated and wondered if he should tell Charley about Mucky O'Connell, but decided against it. There was nothing much that Charley could do other than give advice, and he probably was as inexperienced in dealing with minor racketeers as Sally was.

"I'll just have to wait and see what happens," he thought. "Maybe nothing will happen. After all, there are laws."

CHAPTER II

GANG ACTION



HAROLD and Sally made a small celebration of his first week night way from the store. They had dinner at a hotel and then went to the Bijou.

Sitting in the darkness of the theater with Sally's hand in his and her shoulder close against him, a feeling of contentment came over him.

"A good deal," he told himself. "A good deal being married to a girl like Sally and settled down with your own business."

He let himself relax into the story on the screen and worry left him in forgetfulness.

It was toward the end of the picture that a small typed notice suddenly slid into a corner of the screen.

"Mr. Harold Gosgrove is wanted at the box office."

Seeing his name against the back-

ground of moving figures was like the shock of plunging into cold water. Beside him Sally gasped and her hand tightened in his.

"Harold, that's you!" she whispered.

Perspiration dampened the palms of his hands as he got up. Sally followed him up the aisle and through the lobby to the box office. Instinctively he looked at his wrist watch. It was 9:35.

Charley Huber met him at the exit. Excitement was stamped on his face in strained lines. His eyes looked unusually large.

"I had them page you," he explained rapidly. "Something's happened, Harold. I thought I'd better get you right away."

Cosgrove tried to keep his voice steady. "What's wrong, Charley? What happened?"

"I closed up at nine and was about a block away from the store when a car came down the street pretty fast. A few seconds later I heard a crash and looked around. The front window of the store was smashed. I ran back, but the car was gone. Some of the people who live around there came out right away and one of them is watching things while I get you."

Harold's lips tightened. "Did you call the police?"

"Right away. They said there isn't much they can do unless we can give them more information."

"I'll give them information," Harold promised angrily.

Two hours later a police sergeant listened patiently as Cosgrove explained about Mucky O'Connell and the pinball machines.

"He as much as threatened me," Harold insisted.

"He's a bad actor," the sergeant agreed, "but you haven't the slightest proof that he's responsible for breaking your store window. You could swear out a complaint, but I'm afraid it would only get you into trouble."

"Doesn't a citizen deserve protection?" Harold demanded.

"Certainly, Mr. Cosgrove, and we're doing everything we can to find whoever broke the window. But we must have evidence before we can do much about it."

Cosgrove stared at the sergeant helplessly and finally turned and walked out of the police station. The sergeant probably was right. The police couldn't make

PAYOFF

arrests simply because someone was suspicious.

SALLY and Charley Huber waited for him in the car parked at the curb. They had managed to board up the window and then they had all driven to the station.

"Are they going to arrest Mucky O'Connel?" Sally asked anxiously.

"No. We don't have enough evidence." He told them what he had learned as he started the car. "I guess there's nothing we can do."

"Maybe you could talk with the district attorney in the morning," Charley suggested. "Something ought to be done about Mucky O'Connel. I had trouble with him once, too."

"You did?"

Charley nodded. "He runs a night club. My daughter got to going there. That was when she was in high school. She and her crowd got to drinking. I tried to do something about it, but I didn't get far."

"Is it all right now?"

"Yes. She's at the university. That was year before last."

Cosgrove turned into a side street.

"You live here somewhere, don't you, Charley?"

"Second house from the corner."

"Thanks for sticking by us. I appreciate it."

"I'm glad to help out, Harold. I hope there isn't too much damage at the store."

"The window is insured, but the show case isn't. It's not too bad, though."

Huber got out of the car and Cosgrove turned in the center of the quiet street and started for home. Beside him Sally lit cigarettes for them. They smoked in silence until Sally spoke.

"You didn't get a chance to tell me much about those pinball machines and Mucky O'Connel," she suggested.

"There's not much to it. He told me to put the machines in, or else. Maybe I should have put them in."

"No. You're getting a good reputation in the neighborhood. We won't do it."

"But I can't afford to pay for show cases indefinitely, Sally."

"We'll find a way out."

"Mucky O'Connel is awfully tough."

She glanced at him. "There's more to this Mucky O'Connel thing than you're telling me, Harold. What is it? You sound terribly afraid of him."

He felt a blush creep hotly over his face.

"I've known him a long time. He used to be the school bully." He laughed nervously. "I guess he had us all scared in those days."

"Didn't anyone ever call his bluff?"

"No one was big enough—and it wasn't bluff. He could fight and he loved nothing better than to beat up a smaller kid."

"And he hasn't changed a bit," Sally said thoughtfully. "But I still think it's bluff, Harold."

Cosgrove shook his head thoughtfully. "When I was in high school someone beat up old man Hargraves at his house on the edge of town. Hargraves died. He was supposed to have quite a bit of money at his house, but they didn't find the money. The police blamed it on tramps, but a lot of us thought that Mucky did it. When we were younger he used to go out there and devil the old man—throw rocks through his windows; stuff like that. Maybe a lot of Mucky is bluff, but he's dangerous."

"But we can't let him do this to our business," she protested. "We'll find a way out. I know we will, Harold."

He felt her hand on his arm and he tried to smile reassuringly.

"Even if I have to take a baseball bat to him," he said, but the words weren't as lightly spoken as he intended them to be.

MUCKY O'CONNEL offered him a way out the next morning while glaziers put in a new store window.

For a moment O'Connel sat in his car at the curb and watched the men at work and then he got out and strolled into the store. Cosgrove saw him and his face blanched.

"What do you want, O'Connel?"

"I just thought maybe you'd changed your mind about machines."

"No."

O'Connel surveyed the damage that had been done.

"Looks like someone sort of wrecked your place last night," he said. "Lots of hoodlums running around these days. Funny thing, though. Things like this happen pretty often, but they never seem to happen where I have pinball machines. Some of my customers say it's sort of a protection to have my machines in their places."

THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE

"I don't want that kind of protection."

O'Connel continued to smile, but it was without humor.

"Maybe you do, Harold," he said softly. "Maybe you need a lot of protection. For instance, I wouldn't like to see a nice guy like you beaten up so he had to go to a hospital. Those hoodlums are bad stuff. I hear you got a nice looking wife, Harold. Sometimes those hoodlums think nothing of slugging a goodlooking dame on a dark street and—" He shrugged expressively.

Anger became a deadly, cold thing in Cosgrove that froze him into tenseness and put brittleness into his voice.

"Listen, Mucky," he said, "at home I have a .44 automatic with plenty of shells for it. If anyone ever lays a hand on my wife, I'll know who is to blame. I'll empty slugs from that gun into that man until he looks like a sieve. Is that clear?"

Something about Cosgrove's voice, wiped the smile from O'Connel's lips and his eyes narrowed.

"Someday someone is going to slap you down, Harold. You talk too big. What was the idea of going to the cops last night and saying I wrecked your joint?"

Harold bit his lips. So Mucky knew about that. There probably was a political tie-in that kept him well informed about what was happening. As far as that went, O'Connel must have some kind of political protection to keep his pinball machines in operation. They were un-luful.

"Weren't you responsible for it?" Cosgrove asked calmly.

"What do you think?"

"Just this, Mucky; you lay off me and my store or I'm going to make it tough."

Anger had calmed down into a steady heat of courage in Harold. He didn't know where the words were coming from, but he did know that O'Connel's mention of Sally had changed everything for him.

"You'll do what?" O'Connel said.

"I'll take this to every civic club in town, to the veterans' organizations, to everyone and every organization that can bring pressure on the city administration. I'll get you if it's the last thing I do."

For the first time doubt came into O'Connel's eyes. His mouth set in a straight line and his fists clenched at his sides.

"Don't make a mistake, Harold," he said. "People who make mistakes some-

times go out of business."

"Anything else you want to say, Mucky?"

"Not now."

"Then get out of this store."

O'Connel put the twisted smile back on his lips and shrugged his heavy shoulders. He looked at the new window glass going into place.

"I hear insurance companies cancel policies when windows get broken too often," he said and walked out.

After he had gone Cosgrove felt the anger drain from him. He wondered why he had said the things he had. Maybe he would have been smarter to take the pinball games into the store. Maybe he would have been much smarter not to antagonize Mucky O'Connel, because now he knew that it was more than whether or not Mucky's gambling devices were to go into the store. Harold Cosgrove had virtually declared war on Mucky O'Connel. Fighting a racketeer was a long ways from putting up prescriptions.

THAT night the window was smashed again and the next day the insurance company politely but firmly cancelled the policy by application of a certain clause in it.

Cosgrove left the insurance company office and sought his parked car where Sally waited for him. Briefly he told her what they had said. When he finished he saw the despair in her face.

"We just can't go on buying windows and the police don't seem to be able to stop it," she said.

"They said they'd keep watch on the place, but that won't help much. Mucky will just wait until they relax, and I can't afford to keep a night watchman."

"Isn't there some way—?"

"Yes," he interrupted and excitement came to his eyes. "There is a way!"

He stepped on the starter and pulled away from the curb. In the next hour he stopped at a lumber yard and at a sign painter. By noon carpenters had neatly boarded the store window and a large sign on the fresh lumber read:

THIS STORE WINDOW HAS BEEN BROKEN TWICE BY RACKETEERS ENDEAVORING TO FORCE US TO PUT PINBALL MACHINES IN THE STORE. WE ARE OPEN FOR BUSINESS AND WILL CONTINUE TO BE OPEN AS LONG AS HONEST CITIZENS SUPPORT US.

The boarded window, the sign, and a

PAYOFF

scorching interview with Cosgrove made the front page of the afternoon newspaper. The lead editorial was devoted to Harold Cosgrove and his courage.

That evening telephone calls poured into Harold's home and store. Evidently he had not been the only one victimized by Mucky O'Connel. Business men, merchants, civic leaders congratulated him and offered their support. He was asked to talk at the Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary Club, the City Club.

Just before he closed a large city police car stopped in front of the store and four men came in. The leader, a tall, heavy-set man with a cold expression, introduced himself.

"I'm Police Chief Hughes. I want to talk with you about what's been going on here."

"I've already asked your department for help," Cosgrove said.

"I've assigned several men to the case. I want more details about your claim that racketeers are at the bottom of it."

Harold explained again about Mucky O'Connel. When he finished, Hughes looked at him coldly.

"You have absolutely no evidence that O'Connel is responsible for this."

"Nothing but what I've told you."

"We keep this city reasonably clean, Cosgrove. You infer in your sign and newspaper interview that citizens need more protection than they get."

Cosgrove saw the antagonism in the men's faces.

"I've had two store windows smashed in as many days," he said quietly.

"I suggest that you let us handle it from here," Hughes said.

"I suggest that you clean the rackets out of this city," Cosgrove said levelly.

Hughes' face clouded with anger. Suddenly he turned and walked out. The three men followed him. A small, mouse-like man who had just bought aspirin and had heard the conversation extended his hand to Harold. "I'm glad you said that, Mr. Cosgrove. It's time someone did something about the situation!"

Harold thanked him and a feeling of confidence became strong in him. With the backing of citizens like the little man he had a chance of beating Mucky O'Connel.

come in while he was at the store. Her eyes gleamed with excitement and her cheeks were flushed.

"And I'm going to make a speech!" she announced.

"You are?"

"A Mrs. Whetstone of the Women's Better City Club called. They are having a special meeting tomorrow afternoon and they want me to tell them about our fight."

Suddenly Cosgrove was tired. He sat in his easy chair and held out his arms to her. She slipped into his lap and kissed him on the chin.

"I'm proud of you, Harold," she whispered.

He grinned. "I don't know what I've started, but I'm going to see it through. At least, I think Mucky will leave us alone for a while. He wouldn't dare bother us while this is going on."

They were quiet a moment and then he added, "You don't have to make speeches to women's clubs, though. Not unless you want to make them."

"I do want to make speeches. I want to help all I can!"

"Did you accept that invitation for tomorrow?"

She nodded emphatically. "Mrs. Whetstone is going to pick me up here and drive me to the meeting. And that's only the first, if I have anything to say about it!"

He tipped her head back and kissed her on the lips.

"You're not very big," he smiled, "but for anyone so small, there's a terrific amount of loyalty wrapped up in you."

"Isn't that as it should be?"

"Yes," Harold said softly. "It's wonderful!"

CHAPTER III

BODY BLOW



THE next day, Saturday, was a holiday for the school kids, but not for the buyers in the neighborhood. By noon Cosgrove's receipts had equalled any full day's receipts he'd ever had.

Harold ate a quick lunch at the fountain and it wasn't until late afternoon that he remembered Sally's speech to the Women's Better City Club. He

WHEN he arrived home Sally had a long list of telephone calls that had

wondered now the speech was going and what the reaction would be.

Before they had gone to sleep the previous night they had talked over what she should say, remembering that much of it would be used by Cosgrove when he talked to the Chamber of Commerce and other clubs that had invited him as a public spirited guest speaker.

At six o'clock Cosgrove called home. The telephone ringing signal sputtered in his ear without an answer.

"Late meeting," he thought.

At six-thirty he tried again without success, and again at seven o'clock.

Uneasiness began to hang over him when there was no answer at seven-thirty. Surely Sally would have called if she were delayed.

When his home telephone remained unanswered at eight o'clock he made a sudden decision. He was tired and he might as well close up and go home. Perhaps Sally was ill and couldn't answer the telephone.

When he arrived at the small house he found it empty. Hurriedly he searched the rooms. Everything was in its place, the dishes were stacked in the kitchen cupboards, the stove was cold. There was no indication that Sally had returned after her meeting.

He found the morning newspaper and searched for a notice of the meeting. There was none. If he could find out where the Women's Better City Club met, he might call to learn if Sally was still there.

The newspaper gave him an idea. He looked up the editorial office number and called. He asked for the society editor and in a moment a woman's voice answered him.

"Can you tell me where the Women's Better City Club held its meeting today?" he asked.

"What club?"

"The Women's Better City Club."

There was a slight pause and then the woman's voice, "I'm sorry, but I've never heard of the club. Is it a local one?"

"I'm sure it is. There's a Mrs. Whetstone connected with it."

"Whetstone? I don't recall her name."

"Are you sure the club didn't send in a notice of a meeting?"

"I've just checked my list of women's clubs and their meeting days. The Women's Better City Club isn't listed. I'm sure

I'd know about it if it existed. Perhaps someone is playing a practical joke on you.'

"No—no, I'm afraid not. Thanks."

Cosgrove hung up slowly, and stared at the instrument. The tight feeling came again and with it the fear he had experienced too often during the last few days.

With trembling fingers he thumbed the telephone directory. There was no "Whetstone" listing. There was a P. C. Wetstone, though. He dialed the number and a woman's voice answered.

"Is this Mrs. Wetstone?"

"Yes."

"Are you a member of the Women's Better City Club?"

"I'm afraid you have the wrong person."

"Do you know anything about the club?"

"No, I don't. You might try Mrs. Watstone. Sometimes I get calls for her."

The telephone clicked in his ear. He looked up the Watstone number and repeated his questions.

"The Women's Better City Club?" a woman said. "No. I don't belong to it. I've never heard of it."

"Well—thank you, Mrs. Wetstone."

"Not at all."

Mucky O'Connell's veiled threat against Sally was echoing in his mind in a deadly, monotonous beat. Was O'Connell behind Sally's disappearance? Was this some sort of plot?

The telephone rang. Excitement raced through him as he reached for it. It must be Sally. She had been delayed somewhere and—

"Hello—hello—Sally?"

"Is this Harold Cosgrove?" a man's heavy voice asked.

"Yes."

"This is police headquarters. Your wife is here on a drunk and disorderly charge."

"What!"

"We picked her up a half hour ago out at the White Pheasant. She smashed a window there. She's allowed one telephone call and asked us to call you."

"I'll be there at once."

Slowly Cosgrove replaced the telephone and stared blankly at the wall. Sally drunk and disorderly! She didn't like liquor. She would sip an occasional high-

ball, but that was all. Drunk and disorderly and smashing a window. It didn't add up. He'd heard of the White Pheasant. It was—

Abruptly he looked up another number and dialed with fumbling fingers. Charley Huber answered.

"Charley, this is Harold. What was the name of O'Connell's place where your daughter was hanging out?"

"The White Pheasant. Is something wrong, Harold?"

"I'll call you later. I'm in a hurry, Charley. Thanks."

THE smell of disinfectant spread through the building like the sultriness of a summer afternoon. Harold had put up bail and now he waited for them to bring Sally.

A door opened and she came into the room. Her face was ghastly white and her eyes were large. The neat summer dress she had pressed for the meeting was dirty and ripped a little at one shoulder. Her hair was tumbled.

She looked at Harold and her lips twisted into a sob. Then she was in his arms.

Afterwards when they were in the car the sobs stopped and she wiped the tears from her eyes with the handkerchief he gave her.

"What happened?" he asked quietly.

"The woman—Mrs. Wetstone—called for me and said we had time for a cocktail at her apartment before the meeting. She wanted to talk with me before I spoke. She said she was president of the club and that she wanted them to take definite action about conditions in the city."

"You went to the apartment?"

"Yes. It's in a nice building on the west side. I don't know the city well enough to tell you where it is. We were talking as she drove. I didn't pay attention to the streets."

"Then what happened?"

"We had a cocktail and I began to feel drowsy. That's all I remember. The next thing I was on a sidewalk and people were standing around me and I was sick and—drunk, I guess. I don't know. I remember someone took pictures and peo—

[Turn page]

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ple laughed. Someone said something about newspapers."

"Are you sick now?"

"Yes. My head is clearing, though. It's aching."

Cosgrove slowed the car as he thought.

"I'm going to take you to a hospital," he decided. "It's not going to be nice, but you'll have to go through with it. You were drugged. I'm sure of it and we've got to have proof."

"But I'm not that sick, Harold!"

"I want them to make tests of your blood—maybe of what's in your stomach. It doesn't sound pleasant and it isn't, but I'm sure they'll find traces of chloral hydrate or some drug. It's the only way we can prove that you were *not* drunk."

"But why would anyone drug me? What—?"

"Someone has framed you, darling. There is no Women's Better City Club. Someone must have tipped off the newspapers and they have pictures and a story for tomorrow. Mrs. Harold Cosgrove gets drunk and smashes a window in Mucky O'Connell's night club to revenge her husband. They'll crucify us, Sally."

He pulled to the curb in front of a hospital.

"We're going to fight, Sally. Really fight this time!"

She tried to smile, but her pale lips trembled.

An hour later she looked up at him from a hospital bed.

"Rough?" he smiled gently.

"Not pleasant." She shuddered and held out a hand to him. "Do I have to stay here? I'd be just as well off at home."

"It was chloral hydrate—knockout drops," he said. "Some alcohol, too. Not much, though."

"You didn't answer me. Why can't I go home?"

"Because I want you here while I attend to a few things."

Her eyes widened in alarm.

"Harold! What are you planning?"

"I'm going to find out who did this to you."

"Maybe the police—"

"So far, all the police have wanted has been evidence. This time I intend to give it to them."

"But you might—"

"Don't worry about me. I won't take chances."

HHE HAD stopped at the house on the way, and now the weight of the gun was heavy in his pocket as he walked into the White Pheasant.

The place was packed and music of a small band mingled with the noise of people at the bar and on the small dance floor.

Cosgrove stood by the entrance for a few moments searching for Mucky O'Connell. He wasn't sure that he would find him here, but he thought it was a good place to start.

He elbowed his way to the bar and ordered beer. As the bartender put it before him, Harold asked for O'Connell.

"Mucky?" the bartender asked.

"That's right."

"He's in his office. Go out to the stairs by the hatcheck counter and it's the only door at the top."

As simple as that! Cosgrove had expected some questioning and difficulty in finding O'Connell.

He followed the bartender's instructions and found the door at the top of the stairs. He knocked sharply.

"Come in!" The voice sounded like O'Connell's.

Cosgrove opened the door and walked into the small office. He closed the door behind him and faced Mucky O'Connell, who sat at a battered desk.

"I thought you'd be around, Harold," O'Connell smiled.

Cosgrove nodded and pulled the gun from his pocket. Mucky O'Connell's eyes widened and his smile slipped away.

"I told you I'd be around if anyone laid a hand on Sally," Harold said softly. "I said some other things. Remember?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't give me that, Mucky. You had Sally doped and framed for drunkenness and smashing your window."

"You're crazy. Put away that gun."

"I'm not crazy and the gun is here for a purpose. Mucky, you're going to police headquarters and tell them exactly what happened."

"If I don't?"

"I'm going to use the gun on you."

"Why don't you get wise, Harold? You can't go around doing things like this."

Cosgrove laughed sardonically. "Aren't you getting it backwards, Mucky? You started this. I'm just finishing it."

O'Connel's eyes narrowed and the smile of self-confidence came back to his lips.

"You never were very tough, Harold," he said.

Deliberately he shoved his chair back and stood. He started toward Harold.

"You won't use the gun, Harold. I've got a dozen men downstairs who would nail you."

Cosgrove's mouth tightened. Maybe Mucky O'Connel was largely bluff, but he had nerve, too. He hadn't expected O'Connel to do this. In fact, he wasn't sure what he had expected. All he had known was his intense anger.

O'Connel was within a few feet of him and he saw the large man's fist clench and O'Connel's weight shift forward on his toes. O'Connel was right. Harold knew that he couldn't shoot. That had been talk. It had been anger and fright and desperation talking.

He saw O'Connel's arm tense. He'd

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either grab for the gun or simply knock him out.

For an instant the fear he had known years ago was all with him again and he had the frantic desire to run. But it was too late for that. Cosgrove's arm whipped out in a swift downward slash. The gun barrel raked across O'Connell's face. The large man staggered back. Cosgrove felt sudden exultation.

He lashed again and again. This was what Mucky O'Connell had needed for years. This was for every grammar school kid he had ever bullied and beaten. This was the payoff.

The gun thudded and raked and jarred. Blindly Harold remembered there was a name for it. "Pistol-whipping." His breath became short and panting and sweat made the gun slippery in his grip, but his arm kept up the whipping and now Mucky O'Connell was on his knees, his arms wrapped around his head to ward off the blows.

Suddenly Cosgrove felt a deep urge to finish it with his bare fists. The way he had imagined when he was a kid. He laughed softly and tossed the gun to a couch across the room. He jerked Mucky O'Connell upright and threw all of his weight into his fists.

It jarred his body and sharp pain ripped along his arms. Blood from O'Connell's battered face painted the fist. He hit again and now O'Connell was swinging wildly.

Abruptly things went wrong. O'Connell's fist caught Harold's jaw. The fist ripped into his face. Desperately the smaller man hurled himself forward.

Then O'Connell's hand were at Cosgrove's throat and Harold was fighting for breath. He gasped and clutched at the

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hands and felt darkness coming over him. O'Connel's fist cracked sharply against Cosgrove's jaw. The great darkness came.

CHAPTER IV

MURDER WILL OUT



LOOKING at his wrist watch Harold saw that it was still fairly early. It was only eleven o'clock and it seemed weeks ago that he had felt O'Connel's hands at his throat.

He looked about at the faces. They were in a room at police headquarters. Hughes, the chief of police, was there and a man who had been introduced briefly as Ralston Lyman, the district attorney. O'Connel was there, the cuts on his face neatly taped. One eye was almost shut.

"I don't know why you insisted that I come down, Hughes," Lyman said. "It's

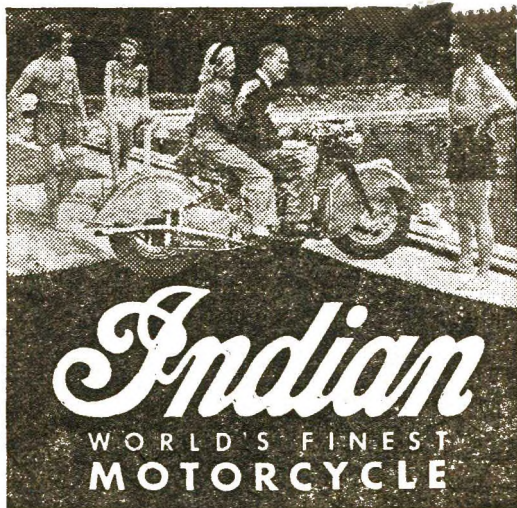
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a simple case of assault with a deadly weapon with intent to kill."

"This thing has been hot," Hughes said frankly. "Cosgrove was supposed to talk to the Chamber of Commerce and some other clubs about law enforcement and the rackets in this city. I'm playing it safe."

Lyman looked thoughtful. "I don't know what you want me to do. O'Connel has lodged a complaint and you have Cosgrove in custody."

Hughes said uneasily, "Cosgrove claims he can prove the business about his wife was a frameup. The papers are going to blast things wide open. If Congrove can prove she was framed, it won't look good for us."

"She wasn't framed," O'Connel said sharply. "What's wrong with you people? First this guy's wife tries to wreck my place and then he tries to kill me. They're crazy."

Lyman looked at O'Connel with distaste. "Have you talked this over with the mayor, yet?"

O'Connel's swollen lips had a flicker of a disdainful smile.

"I might," he said. "I could get some action then."

Hughes blushed angrily. "Listen, you two-bit . . ."

"Skip it, Hughes," Lyman said quietly. "Election's coming in a few months. I think we'll have a change of mayors."

Cosgrove listened intently. Evidently O'Connel's political tie-in was with the mayor. Harold had heard a good many rumors that the mayor was in disrepute. There even had been a little talk about a recall.

Lyman turned to Cosgrove.

"There's a wash basin in that closet over there," he said. "You'd better clean up a little."

Cosgrove nodded and went to the closet. He snapped on an overhead light and looked at the reflection of his face in a mirror. His jaw was swollen and blood oozed from a cut across the bridge of his nose. His necktie was ripped and there was a neat set of bloody fingerprints on his white collar where O'Connel's hand had choked him.

He washed his face and straightened his collar and tie. Behind him he heard the

low undertone of voices. When he returned Lyman nodded to a chair.

"Sit down. I want to ask some questions."

Cosgrove sat down. He wondered if the morning newspaper had gone to press. They'd have a good front page story and after it was printed he and Sally might as well move to another town.

"You've made a mess of it," he thought. "You're a fool! You should have—"

"What makes you think your wife was framed?" Lyman asked.

"Because I took her to a hospital after I got her out of here and had some tests made."

"What kind of tests?"

"To learn if she had been doped. The hospital laboratory will give you a report."

Lyman's eyebrows went up and his eyes kindled with quick interest.

"What do they show?"

"That she had been doped with chloral hydrate."

O'Connel snorted and lit a cigarette.

"I also had them take a blood test for alcohol," Harold added.

"With what results?"

"Just a trace. They'll give you the percentage. About one-twentieth of one per cent. She'd have to have over one-tenth of one to be as drunk as they accused her of being."

LYMAN reached for a telephone.

"What hospital?" he asked. Cosgrove told him and the district attorney asked for the laboratory at the hospital and talked several moments. He hung up and glanced at Hughes.

"On the nose," he said. "Chloral hydrate and not enough alcohol to cause even moderate drunkenness."

He paused and lit a cigar. When he looked up again it was at Mucky O'Connel.

"Well?" he asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Ask him about a 'Mrs. Whetstone,'" Harold said. "She was the woman who picked up my wife and fed her a doped cocktail in a west side apartment."

"We might have your wife take a look

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at some of the women who work for O'Connel," Lyman said thoughtfully. "There's Mae Summers, who runs his apartment house on the west side."

O'Connel nervously smashed out his cigarette.

"Listen," he erupted angrily. "This is wasting my time. I want this guy charged with assault and trying to kill me. I don't know anything about any frame and I don't—"

"Mucky," Lyman said softly. "you've a bad reputation. Even the truant officers in grammar schools told me once that you had a name for yourself when you were in school. The only trouble has been that no one could get anything on you that really was serious. You've never faced any kind of a rap, but I think we may have something this time. We should have had years ago."

Cosgrove listened and his mind flashed back through the years. Mucky had been smart, all right. They had never been able to arrest him for anything, although the kids could have told plenty if they had dared. Only they never had dared. Even when old man Hargraves had been killed. The police had searched for tramps rumored to have been in the locality. Nothing was ever mentioned about Mucky O'Connel, yet most of the kids believed that Mucky was involved.

Cold, intense excitement swept through him and he caught his breath.

"Wait a second," he said huskily. He looked at Hughes. "Do you remember old man Hargraves' murder about seven or eight years ago?"

Hughes scowled. "The old man who lived at the edge of town? We never caught up with the guys who did it—"

"Were you taking fingerprints at murder scenes then?" Harold asked breathlessly. "Like they do now?"

Hughes nodded. "They got plenty of prints, but no one to match them with. They're still on file."

Cosgrove stood and jerked off his coat and shirt.

"Try matching them with these on my collar!"

Hughes stared at him. Harold glanced at Mucky O'Connel. The big man was sitting straight and looked very alert. His mouth worked nervously.

"Go ahead, Hughes," Lyman said. "Call

in someone to take the shirt and make the comparison."

Doubtfully Hughes reached for a telephone and gave orders. A uniformed cop came in and took the shirt away. No one spoke and the moments dragged slowly. O'Connel lit cigarettes and put them out half smoked.

The door opened and the uniformed cop returned, accompanied by a man in shirt sleeves who looked like an office employee.

"Whoever left these fingerprints on the collar also left them on the tin money box old man Hargraves had," the man in the shirt sleeves said. "We found these prints all over the place out there."

O'Connel was on his feet.

"The heck with this. I'm going."

Hughes signaled to the uniformed cop.

"No, Mucky. You're not going," Lyman said.

"You can't dig up a murder eight years old and pin it on me."

"There's no statute of limitations on murder," Lyman said softly. "We can always try a man for murder, no matter how long ago it happened."

Harold said excitedly, "Those fingerprints on my collar are his—where he choked me!"

"That's what I thought," Lyman said grimly. "O'Connel, you're under arrest for—"

Mucky O'Connel swung at the cop by the door. The cop moved his head to one side and his fist crashed into O'Connel's jaw. Mucky O'Connel thudded to the floor.

They looked at him in silence for a few

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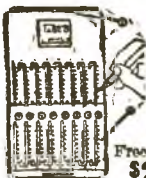


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seconds and then Cosgrove spoke hurriedly.

"Mr. Lyman, would you call the newspaper and tell them about Sally and everything? They have a picture and are going to say she was drunk. If that gets out—"

Lyman picked up the telephone again and asked for the city desk at the newspaper.

"Of course!" he smiled at Cosgrove. "Happy to."

IN THE beer tavern the newscast ended and the customer spoke.

"So they executed that guy O'Connel. But what do you mean about pinball machines? I was in his town a couple of days ago. There weren't any pinball games there. City law or something."

"That's right," the bartender smiled grimly. "I guess you ain't been following that case." He picked up the dollar bill the customer had laid on the bar. "Nickels?" he asked.

"Yeah. I still think I can beat this machine."

The bartender gave him the twenty coins.

"The only guy who ever beat 'em in Mucky O'Connel's town is a guy named Harold Cosgrove," he grinned.

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(Continued from page 10)

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a fine magazine, I would like to become a member of THE FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM.—James Palmatter, 1013 Broadway, Rensselaer, N. Y.

Thanks James, and we're glad to have you as a member. Here's another young fellow who was away in the war, and wants to catch up on his reading.

Dear Phantom: I would like to procure the back issues of THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE from January, 1942 to June, 1947, if possible. Since the war, circumstances prevented my being able to get the magazine as I used to. I've been reading your magazines since I was 14 years old.

I remember such beautiful novels as "Spawn of Death," and "The Black Doll Murders." It would certainly be good to read more stories styled like these. Boy, Robert Wallace certainly handled his pen on them.—Dominick Testaguzza, 920 West Lackawanna Avenue, Scranton, 4, Penn.

I wish we might be able to help you directly through our office, Dominick, but as we have often stated previously, we cannot undertake to supply back numbers. It is possible, however, that some reader may be able to help you secure the magazines you want.

Our next letter comes from a loyal reader in Merrie England.

Dear Phantom: Thank you very much for enrolling me as a member of FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM, and I must say it is a good organization, and I promise to abide by all the rules of law you have sent to me. Tell me please, are there any more FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM here in the British Isles? If you could let me know, maybe I can get in touch with them.

Your magazine, THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE, is the best detective book I have read. The first story was "The Tidewater Murders," and everybody in the story was described so clearly you might have been standing next to them. My only regret is that I cannot get more of these magazines. The few I have read have somehow or other reached the British Isles, but I am keeping my eyes peeled in case I come across any more. Good luck to you.—Ronald Barnes, 150 Elliott Street, Preston, Lancs., England.

Thanks for your fine letter, Ronald. There are a number of FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM in England. Perhaps if some of them see your letter here with your address, they'll be glad to get in touch with you. You ought to be seeing more copies of THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE, too.

And now, to round out this selection of reader comments we have one here from the Rocky Mountains.

Dear Phantom: I have been reading your stories for four years now, and I still haven't found any others to compare with yours. I read just about all fiction detective stories on the market, but the moment I see a new Phantom Detective book I buy it and start reading it as soon as I can.

I enjoy The Phantom stories because the stories are good and it doesn't take too much imagination to see just how the crimes are committed because of the excellent explanations. Another reason I like the Phantom is because he doesn't have to get drunk in order to solve the mystery he is working on, like all

the rest of the detectives do, and when he gets into a tight spot, he gets out of it in a reasonably sensible way, with explanations as to how he accomplished this.

The Phantom Detective is about the most human fictional detective in all fiction detective magazines on the market today. Just one more thing. How often is The Phantom Detective published? As long as I have been reading the book, I haven't yet figured that out.

Please enroll me as a member of your FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM club.—Harold Leon Wood, 1755 Larimer Street, Denver, 2, Colorado.

Thanks for your long letter, Harold. THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE magazine is published every other month at the present time. When originally published it came out each month, but during the war, when it was necessary to curtail production, the bi-monthly frequency was established, and will be maintained until further notice. We're glad to welcome you as a member of our club.

We're certainly delighted to hear from all you readers, and we welcome both compliments and criticisms. They may come in a letter or on a penny postal card. Send them along, and let us know what you think of the stories we've been presenting in your magazine. Kindly address all mail to The Editor, THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. And let's get together here again next issue.

—THE PHANTOM.

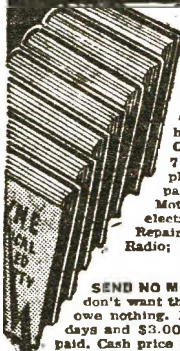


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