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Murder

A Full-Length Mystery Novel
By ROBERT WALLACE

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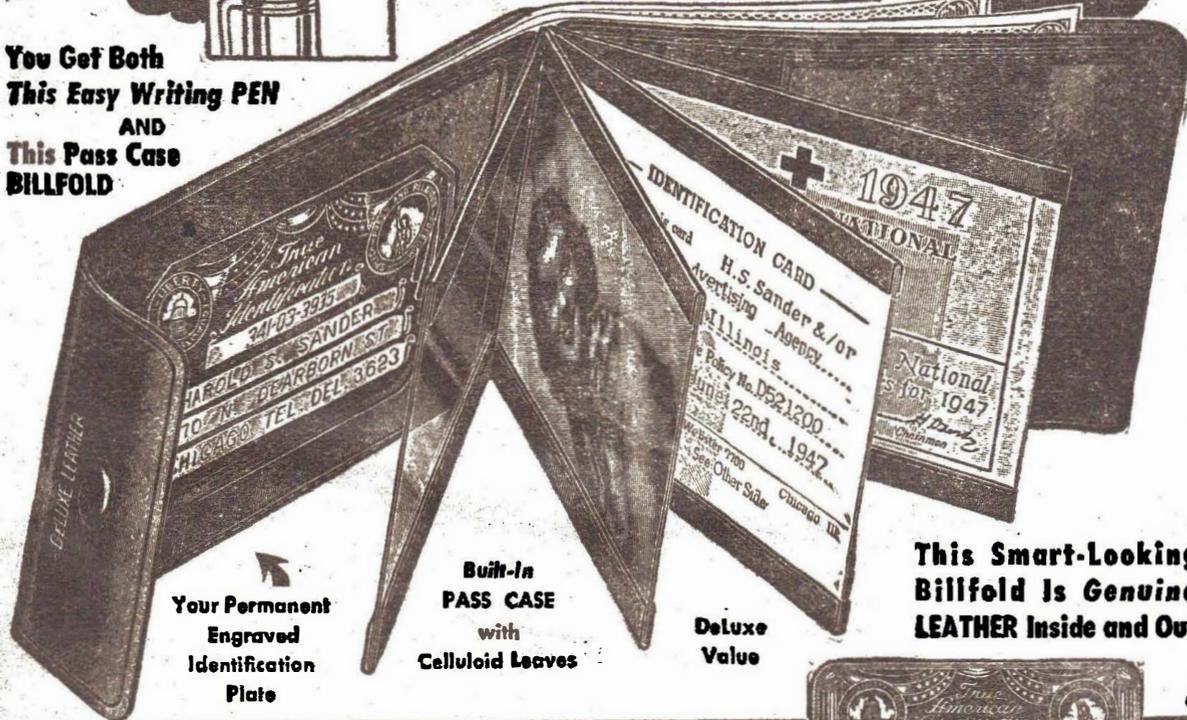
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The PHANTOM DETECTIVE

Vol. XLIX, No. 3

A THRILLING

July, 1947

A COMPLETE

MASTERPIECE OF MURDER

by Robert Wallace



When sinister menace stalks the survivors of the Mattling steamship family and their enterprises, the Phantom Detective goes on the difficult trail of an overlord of crime whose methods defy justice! Van Loan pits himself against the minions of grim terror! 11

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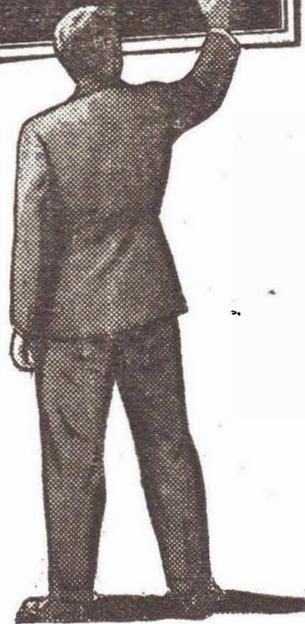
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THE PHANTOM SPEAKS.....The Phantom
Announcements of coming features, club news and letters from readers

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THE American Indians have long been of particular interest to me, not only because I feel that they have contributed to the traditions and background of our country, but because I am one of those people who believe that they are entitled to every consideration from our Government. That was one of the factors that first brought me into the Choctaw Oil investigation. You may have read about it in the daily newspapers not so long ago.

The situation was one in which a tricky oil-producing company managed to buy up leases in Oklahoma for a mere pittance, because fraudulent surveys had convinced both Indian leaders and Government officials that there was little or no chance of bringing in oil.

As soon as the oil company had possession, they immediately went to work and struck gusher after gusher, with the result that the Indians were deprived of royalties that properly belonged to them. Federal authorities immediately took an interest in the case and the United States Senate ordered an investigation. Subpoenas were issued for important witnesses and one of these was served upon Ernest Shaler, president of the Choctaw Oil Company of Wellington, Oklahoma.

But Ernest Shaler never showed up at the Senate hearing in Washington!

The Mysterious Corpse

Steve Huston stumbled upon the first lead in this baffling mystery of the disappearance of the Government witness when he found himself stranded with a flat tire in one of the remote sections of Bronx County in New York.

It was the body of a murdered man, his face obliterated with acid, hidden in the bushes of this part of upper New York City.

Frank Havens called me into the case and indicated that the F.B.I. in Washington had

followed Shaler as far as Philadelphia, then lost track of him. Whether or not the mysterious corpse in the Bronx was the Oklahoma oil man was the first problem I was expected to unravel.

Tell-Tale Clues

Clues at the scene of the cadaver included a key from a New York hotel room and a broken piece of a cufflink, as well as a hat purchased from a New York haberdashery, which was padded with a piece of newspaper. On the basis of these meager findings, I was able to reconstruct a course of movement for the dead man that carried from the Oklahoma oil country to the Atlantic commercial metropolis!

The broken cufflink was evidently the handicraft of an Indian silversmith who was more than proud of his work, and took pains to identify his products with a curious marking. I found this Indian workman on a reservation close to the Choctaw Oil Company's workings and another interesting leasehold known as the Black Eagle Tract.

The newspaper stuffed in the hat, apparently to shape it to the size of the wearer's head, was also a clue that pointed to the small town of Wellington in Oklahoma. You'll be surprised at the leads that these two apparently unrelated factors brought to me in this murder case!

A Baffling Key

The key to the New York hotel room was puzzling. At first I was inclined to feel that I was up against a dead-end, for not only had the person responsible for renting the room disappeared from his room on the night of the murder, but someone had come to the hotel and removed his baggage as well.

At this hotel, however, I managed to come up with a strange identification, and at the

(Continued on page 8)

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THE PHANTOM SPEAKS

(Continued from page 6)

same time I received the curious information that not one person, but two, had disappeared from the hotel on the night of the murder. Was one the killer, the other the victim?

Pattern of Crime

From these starting points, I was launched into the middle of one of the most complicated crime patterns that I've ever found confronting me. It was a case of proving the crime and revealing the criminals before English capital came into the picture and took over the oil fields for a profit of something like one million dollars.

The criminals felt that they had covered their trail well, and they might have succeeded with their scheme, were it not for the fact that I had such capable assistants working with me as Steve Huston of the *Clarion* and Inspector Gregg of the New York Police Department.

Just how we worked together to bring the killer to justice is the dramatic story told in "The Case of the Murdered Witness," by Robert Wallace, the novel featured in the next issue of THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE.

It's a story that has all the glamour of the First Americans, all the sordidness of New York's underworld, and all the trickery of the criminal czars who are ready and willing to take advantage of anything that offers them a crooked dollar, thousand dollars—or, yes—million dollars!

"The Case of the Murdered Witness" is packed with interesting angles, amazing revelations and startling surprises! Several of the factors injected into the crime scheme by the killers were new to me, and I was forced to use equally novel methods in

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counteracting them. Just how this exciting investigation worked out will be shown to you in an entertaining manner in the coming issue of THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE. I'm sure you'll like "The Case of the Murdered Witness." Look forward to it for a feast of thrills!

Be a Friend of the Phantom

MONTH after month we receive interesting letters, postal cards and an occasional telegram from enthusiastic readers throughout the country. Some of them are from mothers and fathers who realize that their youngsters have grown away from them during the trying war years.

They are all interested in learning my opinion as to the publicized increase in crime and juvenile delinquency throughout the country. I like to be as encouraging as possible about this, but I must point out that a reconversion in human values is now just as necessary as a reconversion in industrial and economic values. I think that progress is being made through the capable efforts of our police departments.

Over the past fifteen years, the staff of this magazine has been doing its part to aid these organized law-enforcement bodies in their work. Our readers have welcomed this opportunity to express themselves as a united moral force behind our uniformed police. There are now thousands of readers throughout the country and the world who are proud of their association with our organization, FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM.

If you are not already a member, this is your chance to become acquainted with us and to send along your letter of application. In your letter be sure you state your name, address, age and sex. Enclose with the application a self-addressed, stamped envelope for

(Continued on page 111)

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WHEW! THAT'S "PLATINUM ROW". I'D BETTER CLEAN UP FIRST

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THIN GILLETTES ARE ALWAYS LIKE THAT... PLENTY KEEN AND LONG-LASTING

...AND TODAY, AT LONG LAST, WE FOUND THE MISSING HEIR. HIS NAME... LARRY RICHMOND!

GREAT STORY ... WHY, THAT'S ME!

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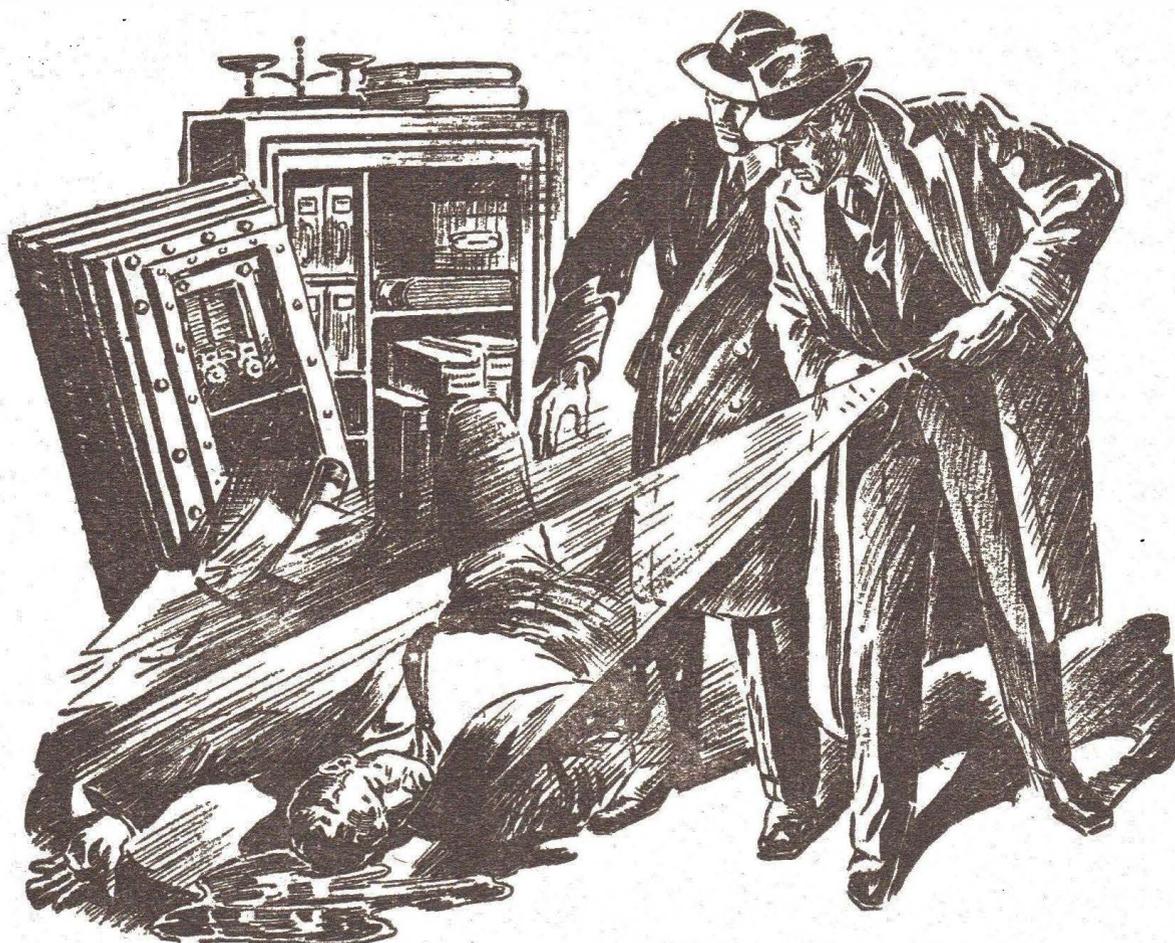
THIS ALL SEEMS LIKE A WONDERFUL DREAM, MISS MORRIS

GWEN TO YOU ... AFTER ALL, WE'RE FOSTER-COUSINS

HE'S SO HANDSOME

EXTRA! THIN GILLETTE SHAVE SCORES AGAIN!

THIN GILLETTES ALWAYS GIVE YOU SMOOTH, REFRESHING SHAVES THAT MAKE YOU LOOK IN THE PINK AND FEEL THAT WAY, TOO. THEY'RE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR TO A T ... PROTECT YOU FROM THE SCRAPE AND IRRITATION OF MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES



The Phantom's light stabbed down at a man whose head had been battered in (CHAPTER IV)

MASTERPIECE OF MURDER

By ROBERT WALLACE

When sinister menace stalks the survivors of the Matting steamship family and their enterprises, the Phantom takes the trail of a crime overlord whose methods defy justice!

CHAPTER I

MELODY OF DEATH

THE old-fashioned clock on the wall of the dusty steamship office said it was ten minutes to five. At the big flat-top desk near the win-

dow overlooking the long shed of the pier outside and the busy Hudson River beyond, blond young John Matting was just completing his day's work. Stacking the mass of papers before him he pushed back in his swivel chair.

His eyes were tired and strained. He rubbed his hands over them. For three

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hours he had been deep in work that was the culmination of more than a month's effort. Now, as soon as the freighter, *Star of Brazil*, reached the pier outside, the last thing he needed to complete his long task would be available.

Young Mattling relaxed in his chair. He thought about his father, Martin Mattling, and drew a deep, quick breath. John and his father operated the Coastwise Line of freighters, which had been founded by his great-grandfather, Cyrus Mattling, a famous pioneer in the shipping industry. But today's ships with the famous blue-banded stacks—the trade-mark of Coastwise—were a far cry from the windjammer. *Mary Mattling*, which old Cyrus had skippered around the Seven Seas. That had been in an era more colorful, but much less complicated—at least, in some respects—than that in which his great-grandson labored.

Mementoes of those early days were all about the dusty office. The binnacle light from the *Mary Mattling*. The log of an early sailing ship under glass, its pages yellowed by time. On the wall opposite young Mattling's desk hung one of the ancient trade route charts, facing the map of today, red-lined to mark the courses and ports now traveled by coastwise freighters.

The ports indicated were all South American. Coastwise was the recognized leader in Pan-American shipping, and business since the end of the war had been steadily increasing. But with mounting prosperity, something else had come to the Line—something that was responsible for Martin Mattling's worry and apprehension, and also for the papers heaped on the desk in front of his son John.

Grimly, John Mattling's eyes went back to them. It seemed unbelievable, too fantastic to be credited, but he knew that evil forces were at work in an attempt to tear down all that it had taken generations to build. Secret, sinister forces moving with stealthy threat under the dark cover of mystery.

An invisible enemy waging criminal warfare against Coastwise and the last two members of the Mattling family!

YOUNG Mattling started to gather the papers together, his eyes on a radio flash which was propped up against his desk calendar. That flash was from Captain Olaf Swenson, master of the *Star of Brazil*, now on the high seas. The freighter was off Hatteras. It was a matter of hours before she would dock. Then Swenson would give him the vital information needed to complete the documentary facts in the typewritten pages before him.

With Swenson's information added to what he already had, John Mattling knew he would at last be able to strike back. Already he had plans, and those plans would tear away the shroud of mystery and bring into the light the plotters who were trying to undermine the Coastwise Line.

Carefully he gathered the papers together, reached for a black cowhide briefcase and put the papers in it. His face was grimly set, for he was fully aware that certain individuals would give a lot for those papers.

He got up and went to a safe in the rear of the office. The safe door was open. John Mattling placed the brief-case deep in the steel maw, closed the heavy door and swung the dial.

Outside, the sun was well over the Palisades as he stared thoughtfully out the window. He saw an electric winch half-way down the pier, loading the hold of a vessel on whose twin stacks were the blue bands. The voices of stevedores scuttling about came to him, wind-blown.

It was a familiar scene. As long as he could remember, he had been part of it. The smell of the river, the chattering whine of the winch and the lusty voices were a part of him. But today he felt none of the usual thrill. His mind was still on the papers in the brief-case locked behind the safe's steel door!

"I'm going home, Harry," he said to the elderly man who was preparing a bill of lading at a desk near the door. "Lock up for me."

"Yes, sir. Good night, Mr. Mattling."

A short flight of stairs took John Mattling down to the runway on the north side of the pier. The watchman hadn't

Grim Terror that Strikes on Land and Sea!

come on duty yet. John went through one of the steel arches that led him out to the pier where the loading gang was at work.

The foreman, weather-beaten and leathery-skinned, touched his cap.

"Everything all right, Mac?" young Matting asked.

Mac shifted his tobacco cud and nodded.

"Yes, so far."

"Nothing suspicious in the cargo?"

"Not a thing, sir. Don't worry—I'm watching."

Matting nodded and went on down the



THE PHANTOM

pier. Out on West Street, he crossed the cobbles and walked east.

It was no more than a twenty-minute hike to the old house on Tenth Street where he had been born. As he walked along, the idea of a plot against Coastwise became more fantastic. In the slanting sunshine, with the tumult of Manhattan ringing in his ears, such a thing seemed to have no reality.

It all seemed even less probable by the time he reached his home. The old house

was in the center of the block on a quiet street, a three-story brownstone structure, no different from those on either side of it. Its windows glimmered. The steep front steps were brushed clean. The brass bell-plate shone like a mirror.

The same key he had used for years opened the inner vestibule door. An elderly, gray-haired man, stoop-shouldered and slow of movement, came out of the shadows at the rear of the foyer.

"Is that you, Mr. John, sir?" he asked respectfully.

"Yes, Thomas. Father home yet?"

"No, sir. Not yet."

John Matting hung his hat on a Victorian rack and hesitated at the foot of the stairs.

"Did Father say where he was going?" he asked the butler.

"I believe he went uptown to see a Mr. Havens, sir," old Thomas told him. "He said he wouldn't be home until after six."

John Matting nodded, and climbed the stairs to the floor above. He was thinking that old Thomas was another souvenir of a past era. A perfect servant who had been with the Mattings almost as long as John could remember.

A shower, a change of clothes, a cigarette and a drink eased some of John Matting's tension. Somewhat refreshed, he went downstairs to the music room. It adjoined the front parlor, but was shut off from the more formal room by heavy oak folding doors. The window overlooking the neat oblong of the back yard was open half-way. Heavy draperies stirred in a slight breeze.

REMINISCENTLY, young Matting flicked the ash from his cigarette. It was in this room that he had taken piano lessons for what had seemed years and years. The metronome he had used as a child still stood on top of the old-fashioned square piano. A piano with elaborate carving on its sturdy legs, on its music rack and on the name-plate board above its yellowing keys.

John pulled out the stool and sat down at the piano. He always found real relaxation there. He liked to play, for himself,

and for his friends. He liked to have friends around him, singing barbershop harmonies while he accompanied them. He smiled a little as a thought of Stephen Courtney flashed into his mind.

A man as rich as Courtney could certainly afford any variety of entertainment, but he never tired of listening to John and his friends.

Mattling flexed his fingers and ran them over the keys. But the relaxation he expected didn't come. Instead, the tight, pent-up feeling that had been with him all day seemed to increase in intensity until it became grave apprehension. A tense of foreboding and imminent disaster gripped him.

He tried to shake it off, but it welled up in a spreading cold wave.

He looked down at his hands and saw that they were damp. He shook his head, as if to brush away the black wings of an uncanny fear. He strained his ears and listened.

He could hear Thomas talking to the cook, downstairs in the kitchen. Over the wilderness of back yards came the distant echoes of a radio. The growl of the city was like a muted voice. Everything was as it always had been.

Nothing was different, yet everything seemed changed.

PERHAPS music would help. Young Mattling began to improvise, weaving together fragments of Debussy and Ravel. His friends had told him that if continued with his studies he might have made the concert stage. But he'd had no such ambition. Music, to him, was only a pleasure.

He was a seafaring man, the Coastwise Line was his life. He left the concert stage to others

Usually, the melodies he achieved were as soothing as lullabies. Now, as he accelerated the tempo, he only found his nervousness increasing. That strange premonition of impending danger fastened on him more securely. A hollow emptiness caught hold of him, a chill crept through him clammily.

He stopped playing and listened again. He had left the door to the music half ajar. He thought he heard a step out in the hall. Quickly he swung around on the stool and went out to look. Both

and foyer were empty. The fading sun, coming through the colored panes around the front door, made rainbows on the faded wall-paper.

There was no one in sight. No crouching figure in the shadows.

John Mattling laughed at himself. Just nerves. The result, he was sure, of the events of the past weeks.

He went back to the piano and sat down to play again.

One of his favorite melodies was the Spanish air called "*Querido Mio*." In musical value it was lacking, but it had a lilt he loved. He liked the bass fingering, the difficult chords in the minor key. He began to play it, his eyes on the open window, on the backs of the houses which faced the next street.

THEN, with a jarring suddenness, the music stopped!

With a choked gasp John Mattling clutched at his heart. Abruptly, like a dim curtain being swiftly drawn, the sunshine, the rear of the houses—everything—was blotted out!

Downstairs in the kitchen, Thomas jerked his head up.

"Didn't that sound like a shot?" he asked Flora, the cook.

She was a stout, apple-cheeked woman with twinkling blue eyes. Old Thomas amused her with his observations and his forgetfulness.

She put down the spoon she had been stirring with and shrugged her plump shoulders.

"Probably a car back firing," she said nonchalantly.

"Mr. John isn't playing the piano now," Thomas said, and started toward the kitchen door. "I think I'd better go up and see if anything's wrong.

The cook went on with her work, and had forgotten what she was sure was old Thomas' needless alarm when she heard the rapid beat of feet coming down the stairs.

That was quite unusual. So unusual that she turned around inquiringly as the door opened.

Thomas, white, wide-eyed, and shaking, stumbled in.

"Quick, Flora!" he choked in a thin, hysterical voice. "Get the police! Mr. John's been shot!"

CHAPTER II

DINNER DATE

RICHARD CURTIS VAN LOAN racked his cue. He dusted his fingers lightly on the monogrammed handkerchief folded carefully into the upper pocket of his faultlessly tailored jacket and glanced across at Lynton Garner, his

companion.

For the past two hours Van had used all of his skill to beat Garner at billiards. Now, Van Loan saw, as he slid the handkerchief back in his pocket, it was exactly five-thirty.

Time to be getting home and dressing for the dinner engagement he had with Frank Havens, owner and publisher of the *Clarion*, one of New York's most powerful and important newspapers.

Lynton Garner shook his head. He had imagined that the bored and nonchalant Dick Van Loan would prove an easy touch. Garner rather fancied his ability at billiards. To be beaten by one he had underestimated was a little humiliating. Even yet he didn't understand how it had happened.

"I don't know how you did it, Van," he said. "Sure you're not Willie Hoppe in disguise? How much do I owe you?"

Van Loan used a gold pencil to figure briefly on the back of an envelope.

"Thirty dollars ought to take care of it."

Garner thumbed money out of an ostrich leather wallet. Van didn't feel any compunction about taking it. So far as he knew Lynton Garner was well supplied with worldly possessions. Van didn't know the man well, but he had heard that Garner was a capitalist with a finger in a dozen financial pies.

Lynton Garner was a tall, impressive man. Well-built, with a shock of gray-black hair, a lean, aquiline face and sharp blue-gray eyes, he gave the impression of restless energy, of always being on the move, never completely relaxing. He belonged to several exclusive Manhattan



As something sailed through the air, hurled by the man in the doorway, the Phantom dodged swiftly (CHAPTER V)

clubs. He was not exactly a friendly person, but he did play sharp billiards, and had proved a worthy opponent.

"Thanks." Van took the money handed him. "This goes into what I call my Charity Box. Twice a year I empty it and send the contents to one of my favorite projects."

"Let's have a drink." Garner returned the wallet to his hip pocket.

The bar of the Patrons Club was deserted. Van Loan ordered his usual innocuous lime and seltzer. Lynton Garner ordered a double Scotch. Over the bar and a painting of Joshua Conklin's "Happy Cavalier" the hands of an electric clock moved slowly toward the hour of six.

"Toss you for the check," Garner said, and balanced a coin on his thumb.

Van shook his sleek, well-brushed head. "Not today. The winner always pays."

He laid a bill on the polished mahogany, told the bartender to keep the change, said goodnight to Garner and let the club's doorman get him a

Dick Van Loan lived on Park Avenue. His luxurious suite of rooms was atop one of the tall apartment buildings. Queerly enough, Van had his own private entrance, his own private elevator. For these conveniences he paid well. But then he could afford

The town knew him as a wealthy young socialite who lived on the more than substantial income from his father's estate. He was known to be a collector of rare *objets d'art*, a club man and dilettante. Society matrons looked on him as the most eligible bachelor in New York. Van Loan spent considerable time dodging the marriageable daughters tossed at his heart and bank account.

Reaching home, the elevator took him to his penthouse. He opened the door to his suite with a silver key and turned on lights. People thought it another of his peculiarities that he lived alone, without a valet or other servants. They just put that down as an eccentricity, not realizing that a lack of domestic help dovetailed with the private elevator and the private entrance.

Van stopped for a minute at the double terrace doors in his charmingly furnished lounge room. Twilight blued the city. Street lights were giving the town a story-book aspect.

Appreciatively he stared at the golden

squares that were thousands of lighted windows, at the slender threads of illumination marking the checkerboard design of streets and avenues. Then he turned away and snapped on the lights in his bedroom.

IT DIDN'T take him long to change.

While he dressed Van wondered what Frank Havens wanted to see him about. When the publisher had made the dinner date that morning he had mentioned that it was important. And when Havens used the word "important," Van knew it was not employed lightly.

He knotted a new silk tie, shouldered on another of his perfectly tailored coats and glanced at his watch.

It was early enough for him to walk to Baptiste's, the rendezvous his old friend had mentioned. It was a small French restaurant in the lower Forties. It boasted no noisy dance band, floor show or crowds.

Baptiste specialized in his native cuisine. He accepted his customers as gourmets, those with a discriminating, fastidious taste for the culinary art.

Some twenty minutes after he left his sky-high Park Avenue address, Van Loan was in the lobby of Baptiste's. A glance at the pegs in the coat-check room showed him Haven's gray Homburg hat. Van smiled faintly. The publisher was never on time. Frank Havens was always a few minutes early!

He sat at a table near a fireplace at the end of the raftered room. A table, Dick Van Loan saw, far enough away from the others to make conversation private. He shook hands with Havens and let a waiter pull out a chair for him.

When Havens had ordered and the waiter had hurried away, Van asked:

"What is 'important'?"

Frank Havens shook out a napkin. "You don't waste time, Dick," he remarked. "It's about that South American trip you plan for next month. Remember?"

"Dreamy Brazil. Coffee. The samba and glamorous *senoritas*. Of course I remember. Of course I remember. What about it?"

"You said you wanted to travel on a freighter. I told you I'd arrange accommodations on one of the Coastwise Line ships."

"That's right." Van nodded. "Have you?"

"It's about the Coastwise Line that I want to talk to you," Havens said. "Martin Matting, who operates the Line with his son John, is one of my oldest friends. I've known him for years. Since the war ended it's been doing a splendid business. Lately, however, things haven't been so good. I saw Matting this afternoon and some of the things he told me are rather puzzling."

"What sort of things?" Van asked.

"Mysterious things. Matting has an idea that the various misfortunes which have befallen the company haven't been entirely accidental. For instance, you may remember reading about the *Santa Cruz*?"

"The ship that went down in that Florida storm last month?" Van Loan nodded. "I remember it."

"A complete loss, despite the insurance." Havens leaned forward. "I mean, the coverage wasn't sufficient. The *Santa Cruz* was a crack new ship. The strange part is that she was off her course at the time she struck the reef and went down."

Van's attentive manner showed that his interest had been aroused.

"And there have been other incidents?"

"So many that Martin Matting's health is breaking. The Customs found undeclared cargo on one ship early this week. The Mattings were heavily fined. One of their captains, Olaf Swenson, was approached by unknown parties and offered a bribe to bring his ship to port late. When Swenson refused he was shot at. There was mutiny aboard another vessel. Some of the crew got broken heads."

Dick Van Loan frowned. "Anything else?"

"Yes. Only a few weeks ago the *Rio City's* engines were found to have been tampered with. So badly sabotaged that it took days and considerable money to repair them."

"In other words," Van said slowly, "your friend Matting believes there is some sort of organized plot against his company?"

"What does it sound like to you?" Havens asked.

"A well organized plot."

"I wonder if you'd talk with Matting," Havens suggested. "Maybe tomorrow.

The old fellow's really in a bad way—from worry, and not knowing what's going to happen next. It might not be quite as nefarious as it sounds, but I would like to get your slant on it."

ANY friends of Van's, listening to what the publisher of the *Clarion* said, might have thought it odd that Havens asked aid of a person of Dick Van Loan's temperament. That request, too, like the private elevator and the private entrance, had a significance and a meaning completely hidden from the social world in which Van Loan moved.

"I'll be glad to," he said thoughtfully. "Make the appointment, let me know where it will be and at what time, and I'll be there."

"Thanks, Dick. I was sure I could depend on you."

They settled back to enjoy the dinner the waiter brought. A few more customers trickled in. Appetizing aromas floated out of the kitchen. Up front, at the cash register over which he presided with a deft hand, the mustached Baptiste answered a telephone, looked over his dining room and got up from his chair.

Van saw the restaurateur approach. Baptiste, all apology, loomed up at the table.

"*Monsieur* Havens. It is for you. A telephone call from your office."

The publisher got up with a wry expression. "That's the way it always goes. Wherever there's a telephone, there's someone to call me on it. Excuse me, Dick."

He went briskly away, the apologetic Baptiste following. Van noticed that Havens' telephone conversation was brief. He also saw that when his friend came back his face was grave and his expression troubled.

"Something wrong?" Van asked.

"Very!" Havens drew a hard breath and lowered his voice. "We were just talking about the Mattings' father and son. John Matting was found dead in the music room of the Matting home at five-thirty this afternoon!"

Van Loan's eyes narrowed. He studied Havens' face before he spoke again.

"Dead?" he repeated then, and Havens nodded heavily.

"Murdered! Shot through the heart!"

CHAPTER III

THE PHANTOM



HE publisher's big Cadillac dropped Dick Van Loan at his Park Avenue apartment. The dinner at Baptiste's had been abruptly cut short. Havens waited in the car while Van took the elevator up to his suite.

This time there was no dawdling on Van's part. No pausing to admire the night view of the great city. Quickly, all his languor and nonchalance gone, he hurried through to the bedroom.

A snap of the light switch and he went on to the Empire bed. He slipped his hand in behind it, feeling for the concealed electric button there. He gave that a swift jab. As at the wave of a magician's wand things began to happen.

Noiselessly, smoothly, the wall partition behind the bed folded back. Simultaneously lights went on in the small, secret, windowless room revealed as the wall's aperture widened. Van hurried into the little room, taking off his clothes as he went.

All around him were things it was strange to find in a Park Avenue apartment. A complete chemical laboratory in miniature. A glass-faced series of cabinets containing a small but well-equipped arsenal. A wardrobe hung with a neatly indexed array of more than a hundred suits of clothing of all varieties, and in all states of repair and disrepair.

These and a litter of scientific precision instruments made the small room resemble something out of the pages of fiction. Or something from a picture screen.

What followed was even more fantastic.

Stripped to his undershirt, Richard Curtis Van Loan sat down before the triple mirrors of a dressing table set in the exact center of the secret room. Drawers containing every type of cosmetic known to the theatrical art were convenient to his reach. With various skin creams, crayons and shadow pencils, he set swiftly to work to transform the gilded Manhattan playboy into an entirely new and different character.

A light layer of a dark emollient made a foundation for the crayons he used with

experienced skill. Wrinkles, shadows, and lines miraculously appeared in the face his hasty fingers created. Like a cloud passing over the sun to obscure the orb of day, the well-known countenance of the young socialite disappeared from view.

Another face replaced it.

Suddenly, the three mirrors began to reflect the image of a middle-aged man who might have been born of Latin parents. His skin was swarthy. Deep lines ran from either side of his nose to the corners of his mouth.

But this was not enough. Feather-weight plastic dentures altered the size and shape of Van's mouth. Other devices beautifully modeled, gave his nose a spread and twist. His hair claimed his attention next. A color comb darkened it and a tomizer's spray kinked it slightly when a curved comb was drawn through it.

A final delicate touch of a crayon and Van was satisfied no one in the world would recognize him beneath the mask of the face he had fashioned. And no actor playing a character part before the footlights could have equalled the job he had done.

Richard Curtis Van Loan was gone. In his place stood a man who explained both the private entrance to the building, the private elevator and the fact that Frank Havens had asked his aid.

For this man was the Phantom Detective, the famed sleuth whose scientific means of deduction and brilliant crime detection had made him the most outstanding agent of the law in the world!

The Phantom was Frank Havens' inspiration. Long ago, when the *Clarion* had first waged battle with the forces of the underworld and all those who sought to cheat the ends of justice, Havens had needed someone of super ability, gifted talents and unquestioned courage who would carry the torch into the dark, sinister shadows of subterranea.

Such a person he had found in young Dick Van Loan, son of one of his dearest friends, now dead. Even in his university days Van's cleverness at reading clues correctly, and his scientific dabbling in local crime problems had focused Havens' attention on him. So when he had found the young man bored with his society life, he had suggested that Van try his hand at



Fred held up the keys he took from the Phantom. "Take a peek at these!" he exclaimed. "Ernie's openers!" (CHAP. XII)

solving a baffling mystery—and Van Loan had been successful.

In Van Loan, the newspaper owner, whose chain of publications girded the continent from Coast to Coast, had found the perfect answer to his needs. And so the Phantom Detective had been born!

Secrecy, from the first, had played an invaluable part in the Phantom's characterization. No man alive except Frank Havens knew that the blase Richard Curtis Van Loan *was* the Phantom Detective. The rôle of wealthy idler was a perfect cover for the operations of the great detective.

Success had been the Phantom's from the first. Step by step, case by case, he had gone forward from one baffling achievement to another until now the crime world looked on him as their most dreaded Nemesis.

Van selected one of the hundred suits in his disguise wardrobe. It fit in perfectly with the facial appearance of the dark-skinned, cold-faced man. Made of coarse brown tweed, it accorded with the flannel shirt and the plain knitted tie he put on, and with the stout, almost foreign-looking shoes and wide-brimmed felt hat.

Now, with minutes ticking away, there were several other necessities for the completion of his impersonation.

One was the tiny, jeweled, platinum plate made in the shape of a domino mask. This was the Phantom's personal identification. This opened the closed doors of the law to him. He was never without it. All of his suits were equipped with a secret recess in the waistband of his trousers to accommodate the jeweled disc.

With that went his master-key, invention of a famous Viennese locksmith, a tightly rolled black felt mask, and a gun. He spent a minute or two selecting a weapon from his arsenal. Finally he chose a flat automatic, blue-steeled and short-barreled. That fit snugly into a simple strap-holster under his vest.

Van checked, to make sure he had money in his billfold. Then he stepped back into the bedroom. Another touch of the button slid the wall partition back into place. He switched off the lights, let himself out and a few minutes later slipped into the front seat of Havens' car.

"Remarkable!" The publisher gave him a sidelong glance of admiration.

No matter what disguise Van used as the Phantom, Havens never ceased to be impressed with its perfection. No detail was ever overlooked. Nothing was too trivial to escape Van's attention. Too well he knew that a flaw anywhere meant disaster. For those he fought against had cunning criminal brains.

The big Cadillac purred south. It was the hour when Manhattan went to the theater. Streets were crowded with traffic. Pedestrians flowed along the sidewalks. The great incandescent pageant of the city reflected itself on the low-hanging clouds. It was cool, with an unseasonal nip in the air.

At Tenth Street Havens turned west.

Another few minutes and the car slowed. The Phantom's keen eyes took in the details of the houses along the way, before they fastened on the official sedan used by Inspector Gregg. Behind the Inspector's car a radio cruiser was parked.

Though a patrolman was on duty at the head of the steep steps before the door, no crowd had collected. Or, Van thought, maybe the crowd of the morbidly curious had got tired of staring at the Matting home and had gone on about their business.

He followed Frank Havens up the steps and into the building. Gregg, bluff and authoritative, was in the front parlor. His staff from the Homicide detail moved about. The smell of cigars was sharp on the air. A couple of cameramen went out. The fingerprint experts, the Phantom saw through heavy oak folding doors that had been pushed wide, were busy in the adjoining room.

The Inspector registered satisfaction when he saw Havens. The *Clarion* and the New York Police Department frequently worked together in their efforts to defeat crime. Under shaggy brows, Gregg's eyes shifted to the man who followed the publisher.

"This is Mr. Gray, Inspector." Havens made the introduction casually.

Gregg's brows went up. "Mr. Gray" was a prearranged name for the Phantom Detective that Havens used on such occasions. To Gregg the name meant that Havens, the only contact with the Phantom, had already summoned the great detective out of the obscurity which cloaked him so completely. And it also

meant that, if the Phantom deemed the case worthy of his efforts, Gregg would be spared a lot of headaches.

THE handclasp he gave "Mr. Gray" was significant. It was enthusiastic, grateful. He drew the Phantom out of earshot of the others and lowered his voice.

"A tough one, Phantom." The Inspector shook his head. "No clues, no peg to hang anything on. Just a murder out of thin air."

"Tell me about it," the Phantom requested.

"At a quarter to six I got a call. From the cook who phoned because the butler was too shaky and nervous. This butler, a party by the name of Thomas, was in the kitchen with the cook when he heard a shot—so he said. He hurried upstairs." Gregg nodded toward the room beyond the folding doors. "Young Matting had been playing the piano in there. But he wasn't playing when the butler reached the room. He was spread out on the floor, with a thirty-eight bullet-hole in his heart.

The Phantom's dark-skinned face shadowed.

"Did you find the gun?"

"We found nothing—absolutely nothing."

"Body still here?"

"I had it held. I was hoping Mr. Havens might bring you. I know that Martin Matting is a friend of his. I thought he might want you to look into this."

"Where's the elder Matting now?" the Phantom asked.

"Upstairs in his room. It was a severe shock and he's taking it badly. His health hasn't been too good lately. Coming home and finding his only son murdered didn't improve it any."

"I'll take a look in the other room—alone," the Phantom said. "Close the doors after me. Then I want to talk to the butler."

The Homicide men eyed him curiously as he walked away from the Inspector and went into the music room. Van knew what they were thinking. Often in the past the same thing had happened. Frank Havens had come to the scene of the crime with a stranger. The stranger had taken over on Gregg's orders, and then in some swift and mysterious fashion the case had been broken.

The folding doors slid shut behind the Phantom.

For a minute or two he stood motionless. His gaze took in the details of the music room. The old-fashioned piano with its heavy carving. A Victorian horsehair sofa to the left. Several chairs, a marble-topped table and a towering walnut secretary.

Slowly, the Phantom's gaze came to rest on the sheet-covered figure of the murdered man, stretched on the floor. The medical examiner had already left. The Phantom lifted the sheet and thoughtfully gazed down at the body.

Even in death John Matting was a good-looking young man. Cut down in the flower of his youth! Van could understand the father's sorrow. He leaned closer, studying the hole that had been drilled an inch below the upper left waistcoat pocket.

Whoever had squeezed the trigger of the .38 had done a remarkably accurate job. Van pulled the sheet back in place and walked to the window. It was shut. He pushed up the lower sash. His pencil torch wandered quickly over the sill. He leaned out, gauging the distance from the window to the back yard below. A glance was enough to tell him that it would be necessary to use a ladder in order to scale the sheer twenty feet of brick wall from the window to the flagging in the yard.

Turning away, the Phantom gave the room a systematic going-over. Gregg had said there were no clues. But the Inspector wasn't always right. Many times the Phantom had turned up leads that Gregg's men had overlooked. Inconsequential things on the surface, which later became vitally important links in a case.

But, he found out a few minutes later, this was not one of those times. As the Inspector had said, there was nothing visible to go on. Nothing that indicated anyone had been in the music room prior to John Matting's arrival and his death.

With a shrug, Van went back to the other room. Gregg had brought Thomas up for questioning. The butler, frail and gray-haired, sat slumped in a chair. He seemed stunned by the tragedy. He lifted his bewildered gaze as Gregg said:

"This gentleman would like to ask you a few questions, Thomas."

"Yes, sir. I'll be glad to help him."

"Let's step in the other room," the Phantom suggested.

Thomas suppressed a shudder as he got up.

CHAPTER IV

BLACKJACK MURDER



VAN had a purpose in using the music room for his inquiry. He pulled a chair out, carelessly placing it in such a position that while he talked to Thomas the butler would have an unobstructed view of the sheet-covered body on the floor.

"Thomas," Van began, "who was in the house before and during the time young Mr. Mattling returned from his office?"

The gray-haired butler's mouth opened. He looked startled.

"Nobody, sir!"

"That couldn't be possible," the Phantom said. "John Mattling was murdered. Somebody had to be here to fire the shot."

Thomas coughed. "But I'm positive there was no one here, sir. The front door has a burglar-proof lock on it. It works automatically. Mrs. Ferguson—Flora, the cook—was in the kitchen all afternoon with the door open. She would have seen or heard anyone coming in through the basement gate or the back door."

Was Thomas telling the truth? There was a ring of sincerity in his voice, but that could have been faked. A good actor could have been equally as convincing. But the Phantom didn't think Thomas was putting on an act. The man was genuinely shaken and grief-stricken.

"How long have you worked here?" he asked.

"Twenty-two years, sir."

"Tell me exactly what happened late this afternoon."

Thomas's story was brief, and to the point. John Mattling had come home shortly after five o'clock. He had gone up to his room, taken a shower, changed his clothes and come down to the music room. He had played the piano for a few minutes, then Thomas had heard the shot, and had run upstairs from the kitchen to investigate. That was all the butler had to offer.

"Was it John Mattling's custom to play

the piano when he came home from business?"

"Yes, sir." Thomas nodded. "Mr. John was a good musician. He always kept in practise. Usually he played for a half-hour, sometimes a full hour before dinner. He—"

The butler broke off. The Phantom saw his eyes widen as if a thought had just struck him. He straightened in his chair, drawing a deep breath.

"I almost forgot," he said. "The piano tuner—this morning."

The Phantom leaned forward. "Piano tuner?"

"A different man. Mr. Lang didn't come himself."

The Phantom stared at the butler. A few words brought a more complete explanation. Young Mattling had been particular about keeping his piano in good condition. It was old, and apt to get out of tune. At least once a month Mr. Lang stopped in to work on it.

The fact that a different man had come that morning registered with the Phantom. But he shrugged as he told Thomas that would be all.

With a sigh of relief the butler hurried out of the room.

Van walked back to the piano. He pulled out the stool, sat down and looked at the window. When he had first entered the music room the idea that someone might have used a rifle with a microscopic sight had crossed his mind. Now he dismissed that possibility. The piano was to the left of the window, out of range of anyone firing through it.

That indicated that the killer must have stood behind the instrument to trigger his shot into Mattling's heart. But the only piece of furniture in the rear of the piano was a towering secretary-desk that offered no concealment.

Van shook his head, puzzled. His eyes narrowed. Somebody had squeezed the trigger of the .38. Somebody had slain John Mattling.

How?

Van's eyes focused on the carvings of the panels above and around the music rack. Veneered carving in an arrangement of scrolls and curlicues. Perforated in some instances.

Suddenly Van felt the accelerated beat of his pulses. A new piano tuner? And

nobody in the room when John Mattling was playing the fatal piece of music!

Quickly Van folded back the hinged half of the piano top. What he was certain he was about to find was revealed in the next second's tick.

A shiny nicked gun was propped up against the bank of felt-tipped hammers. A gun cleverly rigged to the metal supports along which the hammers rested! A gun whose trigger had a threadlike wire fastened to the hammer of the B flat black key in the third octave!

THE gun was fixed so that its blunt nose fitted exactly into one of the carved perforations. It had been placed there so it could send its lethal message directly into the heart of the player whose moving fingers hit the proper note!

Van Loan didn't touch the gun. Instead of removing it he closed the piano and returned to the other room. As he went into the parlor, Gregg eyed him anticipatively. Frank Havens, a cigar between his fingers, also waited.

The Phantom shook his head. "That's all for now," he said briefly.

He was out in the foyer with Havens when he heard the tinkle of a telephone in the room they had just left.

"Just a moment, Mr. Gray," the Inspector called after him. "It's for you."

The Phantom's brows drew together. But he gave no sign of surprise when he swung around, retraced his steps, and took the telephone Gregg held out to him.

"Yes?"

A thin, disguised voice drifted across the wire. Though it was flat and toneless, Van had the impression he had heard it somewhere before.

"Phantom Detective?" the voice said. "I understand Havens has been in touch with Headquarters. That means you're on the Mattling case. I'm calling to give you some advice. Don't probe too deeply. What happened to him can happen to you!"

A click severed the connection. The dial tone buzzed in Van's ear. He pronged the telephone.

"Have that call traced, Inspector," he said. "Now, Mr. Havens, let's get out of here."

"Where to?" the publisher of the *Clarion* asked when they were in his car.



FRANK HAVENS

"The office of the Coastwise Line."

"Who called you?" asked Havens when the car was rolling. "Who knew you were at the Mattling house?"

"Mattling's killer!" Van pulled the brim of his felt hat lower over his eyes. "You've probably been shadowed. He knows you've contacted me. Nobody followed us down here from Park Avenue. However, they undoubtedly had a spy planted in Tenth Street. My usual warning. Hands off or else—"

"You learned something in the music room?"

Van nodded, but volunteered no information. Frank Havens was used to that. Once on a case, Van revealed little until he had tied up all the loose ends and was ready to issue final orders.

"What do you expect to find at the steamship office?" Havens asked hopefully.

"I'm not sure—yet. One thing is obvious. John Mattling was killed because of the business plot against his father's company. It's possible one of the reasons may be in his office."

The Cadillac reached West Street and the Hudson River waterfront. Here were the piers of the great liners that prowled the Seven Seas.

By day, West Street was a busy highway, a beehive of activity. After dusk it

PHA

became a deserted region. The stacks and masts of ships rising above the pier roofing stood stark against the night sky. There was little or no traffic. A few taverns along the way had their quota of seafaring customers, but the sidewalks were empty.

Over all, the damp breath of the river blew in dank gusts.

Havens drove slowly, craning his neck to see the names over the steel-doored pier entrances. Several more blocks and he pulled well in off the broad street and stopped. Leaving the parking lights on, he opened the door beside him.

"This is it, Phantom," Havens said, using that name because never when Van Loan was in disguise did he use his friend's real name.

He pointed to the corroded bronze letters that spelled "*Coastwise Line.*" Van nodded and got out. Faint juke-box music drifted from one of the taverns. Traffic on the overhead express highway drummed incessantly. The lap of the tide close at hand made a soft, lispng sound.

"The office is over this way." Frank Havens took the lead, Van Loan following. "We'll probably encounter the night watchman. What shall I tell him when he stops us?"

"I'll do the talking."

But there was no sign of any watchman when they went through a wire-grille gate and started along a runway on the north side of the pier. That, Van saw through the murk, led to a wooden building some distance away.

NO LIGHT shone from behind its grimy windows. Out on the river the whistle of a ferry made an eerie sound. The Phantom produced his master-key. While Havens stepped aside Van investigated to find out if the door was wired for a burglar-alarm system.

It was not, so he reached for the lock. But his master-key was not needed.

As the Phantom dropped a hand to the knob, it turned under his fingers and the door opened.

"What do you make of that?" Havens asked, his voice full of surprise.

The Phantom didn't answer. The pencil flashlight in his hand sent a beam of light slashing the piled-up black of the office. It zigzagged erratically. Then it came to rest on an object in a corner. The ex-

DETEC

clamation Havens gasped out was choked and horrified:

"Good heavens, Phantom! What's *that?*?"

Swiftly, the Phantom crossed the space between the door and the end of the office. He let the light stab down at the contorted figure of a man who huddled there.

It was not a pretty sight. The side of the man's head had been battered in. A pool of blood, thick and coagulated, circled it. One hand was outstretched, the fingers bent stiffly back. The man's other arm was half under him and his knees were drawn up in jack-knife position.

Somewhere a clock ticked monotonously. The Phantom's mouth tightened. Murder Number Two! A second killing in the web of the puzzle which, he saw, was momentarily becoming more complicated, more obtuse.

"Murder?" Havens said shakily.

The Phantom straightened. When he answered his voice was low and grim:

"Sapped to death! This case grows more interesting! Let's turn on the lights and see what it's all about."

A green-shaded desk lamp clicked on.

In its dawning glow the Phantom Detective made another quick discovery, one almost as dramatic as that of the dead man sprawled in the corner.

An old-fashioned square steel safe in the rear of the office had been blown open. Its heavy door sagged from twisted hinges. Scattered papers lay on the floor before it.

But the Phantom did not waste time with the safe. That told its own story. The invisible enemies of the Coastwise Line had made another strike. Not at the ships that plied the seas. This time their efforts had been directed closer to home!

The body in the corner drew the Phantom like steel to a magnet. The murdered man was about five feet six, young, not too well-dressed. A cloth hat had rolled across the floor. From the rumpled appearance of his clothing the man had put up some fight.

The Phantom dipped into the pockets of a shiny blue serge coat that needed a cleaner's attention. Out of the pockets he took a crumpled package of cigarettes, a ring with three keys on it, eight dollars in bills and coins. There was no other identification, but lose to the man's left side,

in a solid leather scabbard, the Phantom found a Smith & Wesson .45. A fully loaded gun that hadn't done him much good.

The Phantom's flash played over the floor boards beyond the blood pool. After a minute or two he picked something up and put it in his pocket, something that made his brows draw speculatively together.

Then he turned his attention to the steel box.

CHAPTER V

COVER OF DARK



HE safe had been blown with nitroglycerin. Brown soap had been used to fill in the crack around the door. A series of four small holes drilled above the dial had held the explosive which, the Phantom knew, had been set off by electric contact.

One of the dusty jute mats from the floor must have served to muffle the detonation. That, burned and torn, had been blown across the room. The blasters had removed their equipment along with what they had taken from the safe.

The Phantom was familiar with the look of death. This man who had been unmercifully blackjacked had been killed at least an hour previously. The condition of the blood on the floor made that much certain.

But who was he, what was he doing there?

The watchman? The Phantom Detective shook his head. The holstered revolver, as well as the man's appearance were against that supposition. The victim looked as if he might have been a gangster.

"Call Gregg," Van said to Frank Havens. "Try the Mattling house first. Headquarters, if he isn't there." He added, "Better use a handkerchief on the phone. Just in case."

Havens nodded. While he put the call through, Van stepped out of the office. There must be a watchman and he had to be somewhere around. The runway along the north side of the pier led past the office shack to an arched doorway set in a recess.

There the Phantom's flashlight found

the man he wanted. The watchman sat with his back against the steel-plated door, his head on his chest. Deep snores broke the quiet. The Phantom sniffed. The smell of whisky was pungent on the river air.

His flash picked out an empty liquor bottle which stood within easy hand reach of the sleeper. The Phantom went back to the office.

"I got Gregg," Frank Havens told him. "He'll be here directly. What do you make of it, Phantom? If this man isn't the watchman, did the watchman kill him?"

"The only thing the watchman killed," the Phantom answered shortly, "is a bottle of whisky. He's outside, snoring it off."

Havens shook his head. It was plain that to him the puzzle of the blown safe and the murdered man were too much of a mystery for any immediate understanding.

"There were three men in here tonight," Van said slowly. "And a woman."

"Woman?" Havens lifted his perplexed glance.

The Phantom opened his hand, displaying what he had picked up beyond the edge of the blood pool. In the light a gilt hairpin glimmered.

"Notice three different sized shoe prints in the dust," he said. "Also, the small imprint of high heels. One of the men, possibly two, took care of the safe."

"But the third man?"

"He might have been waiting to hijack what was removed from it."

"Money?" asked the publisher.

"Something more important than that," the Phantom told him. "Tomorrow I'll have a talk with Martin Mattling. I have an idea, however, that even Mattling won't know what they came after."

Frank Havens drew a deep breath. "You mean—"

"It's too early yet to determine the exact motive for John Mattling's murder, but the indications point to the business difficulties of the company. What was taken from the safe could very well be a link in the chain. In other words, something that John Mattling locked away for safe keeping, something which only he knew about—or thought he did—might be the pivotal point around which tonight's events have centered."

Inspector Gregg arrived twenty minutes

later. The Phantom made a brief explanation. If the Inspector was puzzled about what the detective and Havens were doing at the Coastwise office, the Phantom did nothing to clear it up.

"Check this man's prints, Inspector," he requested. "You'll probably find he's in the Gallery. I'll contact you in the morning to learn what you've turned up."

"You can't give me a lead on the box?" Gregg indicated the damaged safe.

"Later."

The Phantom said good night to Havens and faded out of the office.

Fifteen minutes later he was back on Tenth Street, part of the bulking shadows. He walked swiftly through the night. Before he had left the music room in the Matting house, he had drawn rapid plans. He put them into effect now, walking as far as the corner before he crossed the street.

THE killer would make an attempt to get the gun out of the piano. Versed in the machinations of the criminal mind, Van was sure whoever had rigged the .38 would return to retrieve it.

Van realized he didn't have much time to spare. Those who dealt in murder had been forced to wait until the Inspector left the house. Roughly estimated, Gregg had quit the premises twenty minutes ago. Impatience swept through the Phantom like a cold wind.

Too late?

He shook his head. He hadn't expected to find that murder had struck again at the Coastwise office, that it would be necessary to call Gregg away from the house before he could get back to it. One of the fortunes of war.

Flattening himself into the gloom in the areaway of the Matting house, the Phantom let his fingers feel for the lock on the grille-iron door under the stoop.

His master-key slid into its latch. Quickly he made adjustments on the barrel. That spread the flanges of the key until they fit accurately with the wards and tumblers of the lock. The key had never failed. It didn't now.

A turn of it and the latch clicked back.

Inside was a second door. That, too, opened for Van. He closed the door after him soundlessly. Lazy currents of warm air sifted by. For a minute he listened.

No sound broke the night quiet. Using his flash he went down a wainscoted passage that led to a flight of stairs at its rear.

He reached the floor above without difficulty. The music room was to the right. With his flash off and his gun in hand, he strained his ears again.

Silence, deep and somber, shrouded the darkened house.

The music room drew him. Would he be too late here? Had the killer already been here and gone? He had his answer in the next span of seconds. Once more he lifted the lid of the piano. He risked a quick stab of his torch. The gun was still there!

With a breath of relief Van moved back across the room. Anticipation tingled through him. He crouched in the murk, waiting.

Still no sound disturbed the heavy quiet. Once, from some avenue to the east, a fire siren shrilled. That dwindled in the distance. Five minutes dragged past. Then ten. Fifteen, and finally a half-hour.

Upstairs a clock struck with a musical chime. The echoes had hardly faded before the Phantom heard what he had waited for.

From somewhere in the rear of the house, below, came the faint tinkling of glass. Then the sound of window being cautiously raised. The Phantom's mouth tightened. Both sounds would have been unheard by anyone not expecting them. The visitor in the night had cut a ring of glass out of a window, turned the lock and raised the sash.

The Phantom shifted to a new position. He stood concealed behind the half-opened door leading into the parlor. The crack in the door gave him a view into the music room. Like a figure of stone he stood there, counting the almost unheard footsteps that brought the intruder up the same way the Phantom himself had come.

The beam of a flash light slashed the dark. The music room door stirred air currents as it was pushed wider. The eye of the torch played around the room like an investigating firefly. The night intruder was making sure the coast was clear.

The Phantom watched, his own eyes accustomed to the thick gloom. He glimpsed the outline of a shadowy figure. Some man

of medium height in a loose topcoat and a snapped-down felt hat. Some man who wasted no time in accomplishing the purpose of his nocturnal visit.

Under the cover of dark this man glided to the piano. The hinged lid was folded back. His flashlight rested on it. Gloved hands moved to unfasten the gun that had served its purpose.

Swiftly, the Phantom stepped from behind the door and noiselessly crossed the threshold of the music room.

Intent on getting the murder weapon unwired, the man didn't sense the approach. The Phantom's gun jammed against his back.

"Don't move!" The Phantom's voice was hard and implacable like the steel in his hand.

A quiver ran through the man he covered. Slowly, drawing in a harsh breath, the man turned his head.

"So you were waiting for me?" he said, in a taut voice.

"For the past half-hour."

"You figured I'd be back to get it!"

A NOTE almost of admiration was in the husky, rasping voice. The Phantom didn't bother to answer. His left hand went in under the man's coat as he turned him around.

The Phantom transferred an automatic similar to his own weapon from a shoulder holster to his own pocket.

"Back!" he ordered, turning the man and pushing his gun against the fellow's chest.

The light switch was on the south wall of the music room. The Phantom snapped it on. The mellow glow of twin lamps showed him the man at the other end of

his automatic in silhouette against the soft lights.

Under the down-turned hat brim, a thin, angular face was half-shadowed. Two predatory eyes, pale gray, watched the Phantom warily. The man's upper lip was extra long. His teeth, when he opened his mouth, were tent-shaped, uneven. He looked like an ordinary citizen, but the Phantom knew the species.

This man was a tool for someone. The brains that had engineered the gun into the piano were not in the head under the felt hat.

For some reason the man did not seem unduly agitated by his capture. A faint trace of mockery began to edge his lips. The Phantom understood better when, distinct in the quiet, he heard new footsteps.

They came from a point directly behind him. Quickly he stepped back, half-turning as he moved. He kept his gun level for a quick shot in either direction, but he never had a chance to use it.

The Phantom had time only to glimpse a man in felt hat and loose topcoat standing near the doorway. Undoubtedly a lookout for the crook with the long upper lip and the pale eyes.

Something sailed through the air. Seeing it coming, the Phantom tried to duck, to get his head out of the way. He was partially successful in saving himself a fractured skull.

But the gun hurled at him caught him above the left ear with enough impact to throw him off balance.

The Phantom reeled back against the sliding doors. He made a desperate effort to angle a shot at the man he had stopped

[Turn page]



TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER



at the piano. His hand seemed paralyzed, his fingers unable to move. Colored lights danced crazily before his eyes and, dimly, he heard the quick but quiet movement of feet on the floor.

He tried to call out, but his voice wouldn't come. He felt his knees buckle. Desperately he exerted every ounce of his iron will in an effort to keep from going out.

How long he stood there, hanging onto a chair for support, the Phantom didn't know. Gradually the lights stopped revolving, the rubber went out of his legs. Frustration was like a whip lash across his nerves. His plan had gone forward like clockwork to a point.

Then the clock had stopped!

The Phantom snapped out of it. His gun was on the floor. He picked it up and shoved it back into holster. The weapon which had been flung at him had been retrieved, but the men hadn't had time to remove the revolver in the piano.

Van Loan listened. Neither the elder Matting, Thomas, nor Mrs. Ferguson, the cook, had been aroused by what had gone on in the music room. Van completed the job of unwiring the .38 from the piano's mechanism. He covered the gun with the handkerchief he had used to get it out, stowed it in his pocket and switched off the lamps.

There was nothing to detain him further. The killers had won the first round. Other rounds were coming up. Their margin of victory had not been too great, and they had made one fatal mistake. They had left him alive. And, alive, the Phantom Detective would be a relentless Nemesis on their blood-smeared trail!

Van stepped into the hall. Would they be waiting for him outside? Waiting to finish the job of removing him completely? He didn't think so. They had seemed in too much of a hurry to clear out of the house. Still, it was with extra caution that he descended the basement stairs and went along the passage that led to the areaway gate through which he had approached the house.

He searched the gloom-filled street for a sign of them, for a car that might still be there, waiting to take them away. As far as he could see in either direction the street was empty.

Rapidly, the Phantom turned and

walked east until he found a taxi to take him back to Richard Curtis Van Loan's sky-high Park Avenue apartment.

CHAPTER VI

INFORMATION



PHONE call to Headquarters got Gregg at his desk the next morning. The Inspector had information.

"You were right," he told the Phantom. "The party you found dead in the steamship office last night is on file. He's

Ernie Berg, alias Frank Miller. Two-time offender. Grand larceny twice. He did six years for his last caper."

"What about his associates?" asked the Phantom. "Whom did he work with?"

"I'm looking into that angle now," Gregg told him. "Sergeant Shea, who caught up with Berg the last time he was wanted, tells me that Ernie always worked alone."

"Not this time." The Phantom was grim. "Any luck with the trace on the call to me last night at the Matting house?"

"Came from a place on Columbus Avenue—Elkhorn Tavern," the Inspector explained. "Pay booth. I had a man up there an hour ago. The booth was used off and on all evening. Impossible to get a line on who called you."

"I have the murder weapon," the Phantom told Gregg. "I'll send it down to you."

He rang off on the Inspector's surprised exclamation, and noted the time.

Still in his dark-faced disguise, the Phantom went back to the Matting house on Tenth Street.

The bright morning sun shed a fresh, golden glow on the street. It was vastly different from the gloomy thoroughfare of the previous night. The Phantom went up the front steps and pressed the bell in the mirrorlike brass plate. Old Thomas admitted him, pulling at the Phantom's sleeve when he stepped into the foyer.

"Could I see you a minute, sir? It's about last night. . . What Mrs. Ferguson found this morning. . . Somebody cut a hole in the kitchen window glass!"

The Phantom nodded gravely. "I'll call the Inspector's attention to it, Thomas. And now may I see Mr. Matting?"

In his second-floor front bedroom, Martin Mattling, a bathrobe over his flannel pajamas, sat looking out of the window apathetically. A light wool rug was across his knees. The Phantom needed only a glance to show him the man was still badly shaken. The first shock had subsided, leaving a nerve-numbing grief to take possession of him.

Mattling was in the late sixties. His thinning silver hair, wax-white face, sunken cheeks, and haunted eyes made him look years older. The Phantom explained the object of his call and sat down in a chair opposite the shipping man.

"I don't like to intrude upon you at a time like this," he said, "but justice doesn't wait, Mr. Mattling. I'm anxious to find those responsible for your tragedy. I'll have to ask you some questions."

"Please do." The man in the chair drew a long, uncertain breath. "John was all I had. I'll never get over this."

"Mr. Havens said that you believe there is an organized plot to put you out of business," the Phantom suggested.

Martin Mattling nodded. "I'm sure of it. John was, too. So much so that he had been investigating privately and quietly. Trying to get to the root of it."

"You know that your office was entered last night, the safe blown open. Have you any idea what was taken?"

"No." Mattling shook his silvery head. "We never kept much money on hand. I talked with Harry Murdock, my clerk, a few minutes ago. He's been with us for a great many years. He said that nothing had been touched apparently. Just some unimportant papers scattered around."

"Your son might have put something in the safe before leaving the office yesterday, something that neither you nor your clerk was aware of."

"Yes, that's possible," Mattling agreed.

Abruptly, the Phantom switched to the mishaps that had befallen the Coastwise Line. The detailed version of them which Martin Mattling supplied was an elaboration of what Frank Havens had already told the Phantom. But instead of shedding any light on the twin murders, Mattling's account of the disasters only seemed to make the riddle more complicated.

"I wish now," Mattling sighed, when he brought his recital to a close, "I had sold

the Line to Carter when he first came to me. If I had, all this would have been averted. John would have still been here and—"

"Carter?" The Phantom's interruption was quick and sharp.

"Barry Carter, a ship broker," Martin Mattling explained. "A speculator."

"Where can I find him?" asked the Phantom.

"He has an office in the Traders Building, down on West Street."

THE Phantom got up, said good-by to the old man, and then to Thomas when the butler let him out.

He headed toward West Street, walking briskly.

So someone had wanted to buy the Coastwise Line. And the Mattlings had refused to sell. To the Phantom Detective that information was more important than anything else he had heard that morning!

No more than twenty minutes later, Barry Carter, in his fifteenth floor office in the Traders Building looked at the card the thin, anemic youth who worked for him brought in and laid on his blotter.

"Says it's important," the boy volunteered, around the wad of gum in his left cheek.

"'C. S. Gray,'" Carter read. "Did he say what he wanted?"

"Nope."

"Send him in."

Carter, an energetic, thick-set man with gray-black hair and bright blue eyes, lighted a fresh cigarette from the one smoldering in an ashtray. He was about forty years old and fancied himself as being a pretty shrewd operator. He had been in the ship brokerage business for more than ten years, starting with a large Canadian concern, learning all there was to know about the business and then branching out for himself.

He had done well. In shipping circles they had coined a slogan for him. That was, "See Carter for anything from a rowboat to an ocean liner!" He liked it. But he felt it could be amended to include the word "battleship." Because he had engineered a deal for a couple of destroyers that had been used in the Pacific.

Carter stared curiously at the man who entered his office. To the best of his knowledge he had never seen him before.

"C. S. Gray" looked foreign. His dark-skinned face and kinked hair heightened the impression fostered by his stout, square-toed shoes and rough tweed suit.

To Carter the man didn't look like dough. However, he knew, there were a lot of refugees in town loaded with money. Maybe this Gray was one of them. Carter tried out his best smile and extended a hand affably.

"Sit down, Mr. Gray. What can I do for you?"

"You can give me some information," the Phantom told him.

Carter's bright blue eyes looked deep into the Phantom's steady gaze.

"What kind of information?"

The police badge lay in the Phantom's palm when he opened his fingers. Carter drew a sibilant breath.

"Who was the recent buyer you had for the Coastwise Line?"

The man at the desk relaxed. The tension seemed to go out of him abruptly and

acting for?"

"Not one in the world. He clammed up on me plenty when I fished around for particulars. I always like to know who the money man is in deals I go into. Sometimes the big coin fails to come through when the chips are down. Barlow wouldn't spill. Not a word."

"Where can I find this Barlow?" the Phantom asked.

"I'll let you have the address he gave me. Just a minute."

CARTER got up and went to a filing cabinet. He rummaged through it and came back with a slip of paper.

"Here it is—the Princess Court Apartments," he said, adding an address in the upper Nineties on the West Side.

"I guess that's all for the moment." The Phantom got up from his chair. "You never saw Barlow again, after the deal fell through?"

"Not a sign of him."

Next Issue: THE CASE OF THE MURDERED WITNESS

all at once. He reached for his cigarette, took a drag on it and inhaled deeply.

"You're working on the Matting murder," he said soberly. "Terrible thing. I knew John well. A great guy, one of the best. His old man's a prince, too."

"Who wanted to buy the line?" the Phantom repeated.

"Party by the name of Barlow, Ward Barlow. He came in here cold one day about a month ago. I never heard of him before. He told me he was acting for some millionaire who wanted to get in the shipping business with his associates. He said he'd cased the situation pretty well and would I get a price on the Coastwise outfit."

"Go on," the Phantom said, when Carter paused.

"I dropped in and saw the Mattings. No sale. The Line's been in their family for three generations. One of those things." He shrugged. "I told Barlow that, but he wasn't satisfied. He told me to go back and make them an offer—his offer. It was fantastic, much more than the ships and business were worth. I handed it to John, but he turned me down again."

"You haven't any idea who Barlow was

"Well, thanks anyhow," the Phantom said, and left.

Out on West Street, he stopped a taxi and climbed in. He gave the address of the Princess Court Apartments and settled back for the ride. In the last couple of hours the murder case had begun to open up. The gun in the piano. And now Ward Barlow, acting for some unknown individual who had been interested in acquiring the Mattings' shipping business.

The Phantom pondered while the cab sped uptown.

His mind went back to the office, to Ernie Berg, to the footprints in the dust, the gilt hairpin. A woman had been present last night when the ex-con had been blackjacked to death. Who was she? What part did she play in the double death drama?

The Phantom didn't know, but he had a hunch that he was destined to find out—soon.

"Here we are, boss."

The voice of the taxi driver broke in on Van Loan's thoughts. The cab had stopped a few doors from the Amsterdam Avenue corner. Van paid the charge on the clock, and looked the building over.

MASTERPIECE OF MURDER

CHAPTER VII

PRINCESS COURT



N EITHER expensive nor cheap, the Princess Court Apartments had the appearance of being in the medium price range, and fully occupied, of course, because of the housing shortage. There was no elevator, but mail-boxes in the vestibule with the names of the tenants above them made a complete directory. Van found the name "Barlow" and opened the front door which was unlatched.

He climbed near-marble steps to the third floor. There, four doors confronted him. His eyes flicked over the names above the bells before he stepped in close and listened at the end door at the left of the landing.

No sound came from inside. Somewhere above a child was crying thinly. The Phantom put his thumb over the bell button. But no one came to answer the ring.

A couple of minutes ticked away. Once more Van's master-key came into operation. He opened the door, stepped inside and closed it quietly after him.

He was in a narrow hall. There was a kitchen to the left, a living room at the end of the hall. The Phantom paused at the kitchen door. Unwashed dishes were piled in a sink where a leaky faucet dripped monotonously. A coffee pot decorated a gas stove. Several wan geraniums in pots were placed along the sill of the closed window.

The living room was small, gloomy. Its furnishings were conventional, adequate, but uninteresting. Van's gaze traveled to another short hall and an open door.

That opened onto a square recess. There was a bedroom with windows looking out on a courtyard, a bathroom facing it. In the bedroom, Van's gaze flickered quickly over the mahogany bureau, the desk in one corner, an unmade bed, and a table on which was a telephone and some magazines and newspapers.

The desk held the Phantom's attention. He intended to find out something about this Ward Barlow who had acted as an agent for an unknown client or clients in an unsuccessful attempt to buy the Coastwise Line. The Phantom had a feeling that

Barlow played an important part in the double murder drama. Barlow, he was sure, represented a link in the chain.

Van opened the desk drawers. The top one offered nothing of any interest. He did better with a second drawer. That contained a sheaf of letters through which he skimmed rapidly. But it was not until he reached the last one that he found what he considered to be a definite lead on Barlow's activities.

This letter, dated three weeks before, had been sent by air mail from San Francisco. It read:

Glad to hear you're working for S. He's a smart operator and can do you a lot of good. You know what he shook out of the Black Star Mine. But keep an eye out for Joe Normandy. He left here with the gal friend a few days ago. A hoodie I know told me Joe was headed for your town. That might be bad—

There were a few more lines, but Van didn't read them. For suddenly he had felt the crawl of his nerves telegraph a warning. The letter he had been reading went into his coat pocket. Simultaneously his knee closed the desk drawer. Before the rasp of the key turning in the front door lock had given way to the creak of the opening door, the Phantom had shifted his position from the bedroom to the bathroom.

Tense, motionless, fingers inches from his holstered gun, he waited.

The front door closed with a soft thud. There were sounds in the living room. The scratch of a match, the smell of cigarette smoke. After a pause of a minute or two a man stepped into the square recess and went into the bedroom.

From the narrow view the Phantom had of him, he was unfamiliar. He was short and stocky, with a mop of reddish hair and a round, ruddy face. He wore a gray suit and a maroon tie. He looked fairly prosperous, different from the type of man the Phantom had waited for in the music room of the Tenth Street house. This man might have been fairly successful in business, a solid citizen.

With interest, the Phantom watched. The man in the bedroom moved about briskly. From a closet he took two worn suitcases. He cracked both open on the top of the unmade bed and began to pack them hastily with what he took from the

THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE

drawers of the mahogany bureau. It was evident the man was about to take off and go places—in a hurry.

WHISTLING under his breath, he finished packing, snubbed out his cigarette and, seating himself on the edge of the bed, reached for the telephone on the little table beside it.

He began to dial a number. The Phantom had trained himself in the art of interpreting telephone numbers by the spaced click of the dial. In that way he could get the figures. The exchange to which the call was made was determined in the same manner.

The Phantom filed the number away for future use as the dial clicked it off—Columbus 6-5900.

"Hello, Tony? . . . Barlow speaking . . . Fred around? . . . Put him on."

Barlow whistled under his breath again as he waited for "Tony" to get "Fred." It was more than three minutes before the red-headed Barlow stopped whistling and spoke again.

"Fred? This is Ward. I'm getting out of here—on account of what happened last night at the pier. The boss is burned up. I'm going to hole in for a while until it blows over. That's confidential. I thought I'd better tell you in case you wanted to get in touch with me."

The Phantom heard the indistinct crackle of Fred's voice from the receiver. Fred spoke at some length. When he stopped talking, Barlow took it up.

"Yeah, I know," he said impatiently. "The Phantom Detective. Which lets me out. I don't mind tangling with the local gendarmes, but when they ring *him* in I take a bow. Just one thing more. About Swenson's boat, the *Star of Brazil*. Any word?"

Apparently Fred told Barlow there wasn't. The man on the edge of the bed ended the conversation by saying he would get in touch with Fred in a day or two.

He got up and glanced around the room as if making sure he hadn't forgotten anything. Then he picked up the two suitcases.

That was what the Phantom wanted.

Barlow, a suitcase in either hand, was not in a position to do any quick or fancy drawing. The Phantom shouldered the bathroom door wider, eased his gun out of

holster and loomed up in the entrance to the bedroom.

"Just a minute, Barlow. I see you're all packed. That makes it easier for us both. Drop that baggage and hold your hands high!"

The ruddy face lost its florid glow. The valises dropped with a bang and Barlow's hands went up.

He peered at the Phantom in blank amazement, with strained, protruding eyes. In them, the Phantom saw, as he frisked the man deftly, was a dull, hopeless expression of frustration—and understanding. . . .

In the busy city room of the *Clarion* Steve Huston, ace reporter, sat at his desk and stared at the clock on the wall across from him. Huston hadn't had much sleep the previous night. First, he had covered the murder of John Matting in the old house on Tenth Street, turning in one of his usual expert jobs. He had thought with that story making the first edition, he could call it a night. But just as he had been reaching for his hat, a flash had come in on the murder in the office of the Coastwise Line, and the city editor had yelled for him.

Steve had hurried over to West Street where he had found Inspector Gregg at work. He had hung around there long enough to get what pertinent facts he could. But it wasn't until the early morning hours that the murdered man had been identified from his prints as Ernie Berg, an ex-con.

To Steve Huston, familiar with the machinery of the law, the two murders undoubtedly had some mysterious connection. What it was, he had no idea. But the importance and significance of it was brought sharply home to him when Frank Havens, his boss, had called him up to his private office some twenty minutes ago.

Steve remembered every word of their conversation.

"This Matting murder," Havens had told him, "is one the Phantom Detective is investigating. I want you to stand by in case he needs you."

Steve's blue eyes had widened. The Phantom! Then that meant the murder of John Matting was more than just a run-of-the-mill killing. Steve had felt a quick thrill. More than once, in a *Clarion* crusade against crime, Huston had helped

the famous Phantom. His had been a small part, but it had flattered him to be associated with the great detective.

The world-famed Phantom was an idol of the reporter's. He liked to believe that he, perhaps more than anyone else, had been able to observe at first hand the brilliant methods of deduction the Phantom used to crack the puzzle dramas on which he worked.

STEVE HUSTON had also had other behind-the-scenes examples of the Phantom's technique. He had witnessed the Phantom's courage, the Phantom's ability to accept set-backs, then overcome them by one brilliant counter-stroke. So what Frank Havens had told him had brought quick anticipation.

Who or what the Phantom was, Steve didn't know, or care. Only the owner of the newspaper knew the Phantom's true identity. But that was all right with Steve. He wasn't curious. It was more than enough for him that he was allowed to figure in the crime sagas the Phantom wrote in actions.

The telephone on Steve's desk hummed. He reached for it, straightening when he heard Havens' voice in the receiver.

"Steve, come right up, will you?" the publisher requested.

When Steve entered his boss' sanctum, the publisher of the *Clarion* sat before his desk in an office as sumptuously appointed as the study in his own home. There were book shelves along the walls. They held rare first editions. The windows that looked out over the city boasted draperies of the same material that was used in his house.

Underfoot a Sarouk stretched the length

of the room. The furniture, in dull red leather, fitted perfectly with the color scheme of the decorations. Once the door of the office was shut the newspaper, the city, and the rumble of the presses were closed out completely.

"The Phantom will meet you at three o'clock," Havens said. "At the Green Spot."

Steve nodded, a quick smile expressing his pleasure.

"Fine. I'll be there."

Havens smiled, too. He remembered how, a long time ago, he had had the same kind of enthusiasm the reporter displayed. That was when, in his youth, he had been trying for a rung-hold on the ladder of success. The same ladder that, later, was to take him to the financial heights and the ownership of this great and powerful metropolitan newspaper.

In Steve, Havens saw the long ago reflection of himself. Because of that he had a genuine fondness for Huston. Carefully he had guided Steve through the intricacies of newspaper reporting. He had watched his talent grow. He was proud of the progress Steve had made on the *Clarion*.

The telephone on Frank Havens' desk rang. He picked it up. Steve saw him reach for a pencil. Havens listened a moment, then swung around, clipping off his words:

"Steve! The Coastwise freighter, *Star of Brazil*, is off Sandy Hook on fire! Get down there as fast as you can and talk to Captain Swenson. Find out if the fire looks like arson. Get all the particulars you can. This undoubtedly ties in with John Matting's murder!"

[Turn page]

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

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

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause aching backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights,

swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Ad.)

CHAPTER VIII

FIRE AT SEA



HUSTON lost no time. A fast call to Headquarters put him in touch with Inspector Gregg. Steve learned that a police cutter was leaving the Battery in twenty minutes for the freighter.

Huston took a taxi to the end of Manhattan and was on the cutter when it started down the Upper Bay.

He stood by the port rail, watching the oily water split as the cutter's keen nose sliced through it. Steve's imagination glowed. What Havens had said to him about the fire on the *Star of Brazil* and last night's murder in the house on Tenth Street having a connection, was sharp in his mind.

He sensed a story in his prospective talk with Captain Swenson. If the fire were arson, as the publisher had hinted it might be, it was important to the Mattling case.

The Statue of Liberty slid by. Steve hardly saw it. So he was to meet the Phantom! The Phantom was already tracking down the killers! Steve's expectancy made his pulses pound.

The cutter was well down the Lower Bay when the reporter noticed a man who had come out of the small cabin. He was a dark-skinned man, and the hair under his worn felt hat was kinky. He wore a coarse tweed suit, stout, square-toed shoes, and looked like a foreigner.

As far as Steve knew, he had never seen the man before. The fellow glanced in his direction once or twice, and Huston wondered why the man was looking at him so intently. Then he approached Steve, smiling faintly.

"Got a match?"

His voice was low and gruff. As unfamiliar as his face. Steve dipped a hand in his pocket and handed over a book of paper matches.

"Keep them," Steve said. "I've got plenty more."

"Thanks."

Instead of slipping the matches in his pocket the man held them in his left hand. Slowly his right hand moved up. Thumb and forefinger touched the lobe of his left

ear and through Steve an electric thrill ran tingling.

"Phantom!" he exclaimed incredulously.

Having completed the old identity signal he had used so many times in the past, the Phantom stepped closer to the reporter.

"Cancel the Green Spot at three. I can talk to you now."

"About the Mattling murder?"

The Phantom nodded. "Exactly. Got your note-book handy?"

"Right here." Steve produced it.

"Make a note of this. When you get back to town get a call through to the Chief of the San Francisco Detective Bureau. I want a full report on the Black Star Mine. Find out where it was located, who operated it, what happened to it. Got that?"

"Yes, what else?" Huston's pencil, writing shorthand, stopped moving.

"See if you can get some information on a man named Joe Normandy. Find out who Normandy is, what he does for a living, and the identity of his women acquaintances."

Huston put the book away when told that was all. The cutter, stepping up its speed, was off Coney Island. Ahead lay the ocean, a gray-green, wind-ruffled floor.

Faint in the distance east of the Hook, a spiral of smoke hung against the sky.

The Phantom eyed it speculatively. He had been busy since he had caught up with Ward Barlow in the apartment at the Princess Court. Using the telephone there he had called Gregg at Headquarters. The Inspector had come up and removed Barlow.

But Barlow had not talked. His last words before he was locked up, had been, "Nobody will shake anything out of me. I'm deaf and dumb from now on!"

Later, when the Phantom was turning over to Gregg the murder gun he had taken from Mattling's piano, the report of the fire aboard the *Star of Brazil* had come in. The Phantom had lost little time getting down to the cutter he had Gregg put in his service. Shortly before he left Headquarters, the Phantom had phoned Frank Havens, suggesting that Steve be assigned to cover the freighter.

When the cutter headed sharply southeast, the police skipper called for more

speed. The trough of the sea was heavy out there. Spray dashed in. The Phantom pulled the brim of his hat lower and turned up his coat collar. Once or twice he glanced over at Steve. The reporter's complexion was turning slightly greenish.

"Hold on," the Phantom told him. "Not much further now."

THE *Star of Brazil*, with two fire boats working at her stern, loomed up, listing a little to the windward. A Coast Guard vessel from the Hook was standing by. Most of the smoke had disappeared when the cutter, throttling down, approached.

The Phantom took in the details of the ship. She was about twelve thousand tons. The familiar blue-banded stacks of the Coastwise Line shone in the morning sun. There was the trim, clean-cut look to her that characterized all the Matting vessels.

Some of the crew were hanging over the forward rail. It was evident the fire had been extinguished.

"Run in close and we'll go aboard," the Phantom directed.

Five minutes later he and Steve Huston were on deck of the *Star of Brazil*.

An officer from the Coast Guard ship gave the Phantom a curious look. One of the cops from the cutter leaned to whisper something to the man. The officer's expression changed swiftly.

He saluted, with respectful deference.

"If there's anything I can do, sir—" he began. "My name is Clinton. I've been aboard since we answered the SOS."

"You can take me to Captain Swenson," the Phantom said. "I want to talk to him."

Clinton shook his head. "I can take you to him, but I'm afraid the skipper's not in a position to do much talking."

The Phantom was conscious of Steve beside him, of the look on the Coast Guard officer's face.

"What do you mean?"

"Captain Swenson," Clinton said, "had an accident when he was helping fight the fire in the hold. He slipped on the engine room ladder. He's in his cabin, unconscious, with a fractured skull!"

The ship's doctor stepped aside when the Phantom and Huston entered Captain Olaf Swenson's cabin.

The master of the *Star of Brazil* lay stretched out in his berth, bandages encasing his head. His seamy, weather-beaten face was in repose, his eyes shut. He was a big man, his massive body filling the berth completely.

His breathing was faint, hardly perceptible. The Phantom moved closer. The smell of the fire lingered acridly in the cabin. The fire boats had finished pumping and were hauling in their gear. Aft, one of the blaze battlers was shouting something from the freighter's stern rail.

"How is he?" The Phantom switched his gaze from Swenson to the doctor in the doorway.

"Not so good. I think he ought to be taken aboard your cutter and rushed to the hospital."

The Phantom nodded. "That will be arranged immediately. How did it happen?"

The doctor cleared his throat, directed a quick glance over his shoulder before he stepped into the cabin. He pulled the door shut behind him.

When he spoke his voice was low, but vibrant.

"I don't mind telling you I don't like any part of what happened. Robertson, the first mate, and Gleason, the second mate, claim they were right behind Swenson when he tripped on the ladder and fell. That sounds all right, but there have been a lot of peculiar things happening on this ship since we left Rio."

The Phantom made no comment.

"The fire in the hold, for instance," the doctor went on. "It had been burning a day and a half before it was discovered, smoldering down there while nobody knew anything about it!"

"What kind of a cargo?"

"Pampas rugs. Thousands of them. And mahogany. She's been down below her waterline. It's the grass mats that made the smoke." The doctor shrugged. "I smelled smoke all day yesterday. When I spoke to Gleason about it he said some grease had caught fire in the galley."

"What other peculiar things did you notice?" the Phantom asked shortly.

"Swenson told me somebody had taken a shot at him a while ago. The bullet just grazed his ear. He told me confidentially he was being watched all the time, that someone was trying to keep him from

talking to the company's owners."

"There wasn't any attack made on him that you know of?" asked the Phantom.

"I didn't see any. But on the run down and during this trip back I had a funny feeling that something was going to break."

STEVE HUSTON relayed the Phantom's orders for Swenson to be put aboard the cutter and taken back to Manhattan. The Phantom had a radio telephone call made from the police craft to the General Hospital, with a request that an ambulance be waiting at the Battery pier. Then, alone in the skipper's cabin, he gazed thoughtfully down at the injured Swenson.

Now and then the man's lips moved. His breathing grew heavier.

The Phantom leaned over the berth. Swenson's eyes were still closed but Van believed that the man was partially conscious.

"Can you hear me, Captain Swenson?" The Phantom's voice was low but clear. "Try to get what I say, Swenson. I want to help you. Was it an accident?"

A thin sigh came from the man in the berth. His bandaged head moved slightly. He seemed to be making an effort to open his eyes.

Outside on deck, the Phantom heard people approaching, men from the cutter with a stretcher.

THEY were almost at the door when Swenson spoke thickly.

"Mr. Jack—I'll tell him—all the news. . . Nobody—can—stop—me. . . Tried to—kill—"

The mumbling lips stopped moving. Swenson's big hand moved across the top of the sheets. His fingers fluttered like wind-tossed leaves.

Then they stopped their motion. Suddenly they folded back and went completely rigid.

The cabin door opened. Huston, followed by two of the crew and a couple of men from the police cutter, started to come in.

The Phantom reached over. He pulled the sheet up so it covered Captain Swenson's wrinkled face.

"No need to transfer him to the cutter now," he said softly. "He's dead!"

CHAPTER IX

BRONX LABORATORY



SLOWLY the *Star of Brazil* limped toward her New York pier. Steve Huston had gone back to town on the police boat. The Phantom, who had remained on board the freighter, went below.

He wanted to look at the cargo in the hold. With the young doctor as a guide, he descended the same steel ladder from which Swenson had fallen.

In the engine room, the Phantom stared thoughtfully up at the ladder. Under his feet were steel plates. The distance Swenson had dropped was no more than ten feet, at most. Yet ten feet, in a downward pitch, with a steel floor to land on, were enough to fracture any skull.

But had Captain Swenson actually slipped and lost his hold? Was his death part of the crimson-stained campaign of crime stretching back to the music room in the Mattling house?

Blowers had cleared away the recent smoke. Once more the bilge smell cut through. The Phantom picked his way into that part of the hold where the fire had started. His flashlight wandered erratically.

Bales of burned grass mats were piled high on either side of the compartment he was examining. The floor was too wet to hope for any clue. Yet the Phantom's keen, searching gaze discovered something after a few minutes' exploration.

Close to one of the safety doors on the freighter's starboard side was a twisted piece of metal. Van reached down and picked it up. He slipped it into his pocket and went back to the engine room.

"All right, doctor," he said. "Let's go up on deck and get some fresh air. We both need it."

The Phantom looked the crew over. They were not a prepossessing lot of men, representing many nationalities. Burly, capable Scandinavians, with a love of the sea born in them. The Latin type, swarthy as the disguise the Phantom wore. Men from many ports of call.

The Phantom's attention was attracted by a wiry youth picturesquely attired in a bright **Brazilian** sport jersey, and

trousers that had once been red. He was working at one of the pumps. Muscles rippled in his bare arms. His heavy-lidded eyes were peering at the Phantom.

The young man had thick black hair, a sharp-featured face, and a small scar on the back of his neck, which might have been the result of a knife wound. A sullen, half sarcastic smile played around his thin-lipped mouth.

To the Phantom's trained eyes the man—Dave Roy, the doctor had said his name was—looked more like a New York waterfront product than if he hailed from any of the South American ports where the *Star of Brazil* dropped anchor. To Van, Dave Roy bore the unmistakable stamp of a metropolitan hoodlum. Van filed his impressions of Roy away for future use while he went up to the bridge to talk to Robertson, the first mate.

Weather-beaten as Swenson had been, Robertson was moody and taciturn. He took his time answering the questions the Phantom put to him. His answers were noncommittal. Robertson had nothing to add either to the story of the fire aboard ship or the fall that had killed his superior officer.

The Phantom went back to Swenson's cabin. He made a complete check there, but without results. The log of the freighter was in order, its entries complete and nonrevealing. Swenson, apparently, had been careful to keep whatever knowledge he had come upon secret in his mind.

It was late in the afternoon when the *Star of Brazil*, with two busy tugs beside her, finally made her berth at the Coastwise Line's pier. Among those at the dock, the Phantom glimpsed a couple of Gregg's plainclothes detectives. Evidently, Steve had told the Inspector about Captain Olaf Swenson's death.

Tied up at the pier, the freighter offered no further interest to the Phantom. Just before he went ashore he saw Dave Roy, a cigarette dangling from his shapeless mouth, leaning over the rail, watching him.

Some twenty minutes after he quit the *Star of Brazil*, the Phantom was back in his Park Avenue suite.

He called Frank Havens, made an eight o'clock appointment with the publisher and sank down in one of the easy chairs

that faced the French windows of his terrace. From his pocket Van took the twisted piece of metal he had picked up in the hold.

HE TURNED it over in his fingers. It was undoubtedly lead, hollow in the center. It might once have been part of a piece of pipe. A sifting of what looked like burned ash spilled out on his hand. He rubbed a finger over it speculatively.

Later, he would determine exactly what the powder was.

In the secret chamber behind the bedroom panel, the Phantom removed all traces of the swarthy-faced "Mr. Gray." A few minutes spent before the triple mirrors of his dressing table and the handsome countenance of Richard Curtis Van Loan was reflected in the three glasses.

Thoughtfully, his mind still intent upon the case, Van changed into one of his well-tailored blue suits, a white shirt and conservative tie. Once more the bored diletante, he was ready to meet Havens.

This time Van was playing host to the owner of the *Clarion*. He had selected the Patrons Club for the meeting. There, at a personally selected table, he could talk to his friend without the danger of any eavesdroppers listening in.

Havens sat down at the table, eyeing Van quizzically. He hoped that Van would have some news for him about the Mattling murder case, something that would tell him the wheels of justice were already turning. He would like to know that those responsible for the cutting down of young Mattling and the ex-convict, Ernie Berg, were soon to be caught in the net of the law.

At the other end of the room Van's recent opponent at the billiard table, Lyn-ton Garner, was entertaining a few friends. Champagne flowed freely over there. Laughter rose above the buzz of voices. Van Loan glanced across at the festivities before he met Havens' gaze. Van understood the publisher's unspoken question.

"I haven't anything definite to report." Van spoke slowly. "I turned one of the gang over to Gregg this morning."

"Barlow. Yes, I know."

"So far he's refused to talk. Gregg is holding him in solitary. Sooner or later he'll crack."

"Who do you think Barlow is?"

Van shrugged. "Tool for a higher up. It's a well-organized outfit. I've seen samples of the way they work. Barlow's only a cog in the machine. Whoever heads the band has plenty of brains. The gun in the piano proves that. They intended to make Matting's death a masterpiece of murder."

"You haven't any idea who the top man is? Or why the plot against the Coastwise Line was perpetrated?"

"I have an inkling. It's still in embryonic form. There are several angles to the case. When I break them down, one by one they'll lead me through to the man I want to get!"

"Steve seemed to think that Swenson was murdered."

"I'm sure of it," Van said positively. "At a most convenient time and place. But in the excitement of scrambling down the ladder Swenson could very well have slipped. Murder would be hard to prove." "Then?"

"Just before he passed away," Van said, "Swenson mumbled a few words. I put them together and they made a definite statement. It was no accident. The same forces that struck at John Matting were at work on the freighter. They didn't want Swenson to talk. They saw to it that he didn't!"

"So whatever Captain Swenson knew is lost forever?"

"Perhaps not." Van Loan leaned forward. "I believe that young Matting was waiting for the *Star of Brazil* to dock. I have a hunch that Swenson knew the identity of some of the conspirators, and that John Matting needed that information. I'm sure that the crux of the plot revolves around what was taken from the safe in the steamship office."

"And that?"

Again Van Loan moved his shoulders. "Whatever it was I'll find it!"

Dinner over, they left the dining room. Lynton Garner, poker-faced as usual, smiled at Van and went back to his champagne glass. Outside the club, Frank Havens waved a hand at his car.

"How about a lift, Dick?"

"Thanks, I'll walk." In a lower tone, he added, "Steve is doing some research work for me with the San Francisco police. The report ought to be in soon. He'll

give it to you. Once you get it, contact me immediately."

Havens said he would and Van bade him good night.

THE swarthy-faced, foreign-looking character Van had dreamed up for the Phantom's disguise had outlived its usefulness. He realized that as he walked toward Park Avenue. Too many people had seen it. Too many people would be looking for him. And there still was the second man in the music room, the one who had hurled the gun at him, to reckon with.

Others also—aboard the freighter!

A new face was needed and a new face he created as soon as he reached his apartment. This time he molded it with careful and expert precision. It had to be a disguise completely different from the other. To that end, after thoughtful consideration and with the knowledge of what confronted him, Van made the countenance of a heavy-featured, phlegmatic youth a mask for his own handsome face.

This new impersonation was a type that might mingle with the shabby riff-raff of the underworld and not be out of place. The Phantom wanted the disguise to last. He never liked using too many changes on one case.

In another suit of clothes, gray and baggy, and with a narrow-brimmed hat on the side of his head, he studied himself for a long minute before he gave a nod of approval to his handiwork.

This stupid, oafish-looking person would never be suspected of having any intelligence. The Phantom checked to make sure all his necessities were on his person, then he left the apartment and went directly to the garage where he kept his cars.

That was a block and a half from Park Avenue. Van paid well for the service he got there. The garage proprietor asked no questions and the Phantom never volunteered any information. He had arranged a signal with the owner of the place, something like the one he used with Steve, and that sufficed to allow him to drive away in any of the three sleek, super-powered cars he stored there. Privately, the garage owner suspected that his good customer was connected with the government.

All three cars were kept on the ground floor, ready for instant use. Entering the place, Van gave the signal and in short

order he had the multi-cylinder motor purring under the hood of the sedan he selected.

Steel doors opened. The car went through them. A few more minutes and Van Loan, on one of the East Side avenues, was heading toward the Bronx and his larger laboratory near the Westchester line.

He made sure no car followed. The panoramic, glare-proof rearview mirror he had devised reflected no trailing headlights. In a surprisingly short time he was in the vicinity of his lab.

The Phantom parked around the corner from it, extinguished the lights, locked the car and went forward on foot.

The building, which once had been a small warehouse, stood by itself, conveniently away from other houses. The neighborhood knew the place as the research laboratory of Dr. Bendix, an elderly scientist. What they didn't know was that Bendix was one of the Phantom's top characterizations.

Occasionally, to keep the legend good, he let himself be seen as the bearded savant.

Inside was a complete setup for his intricate work. This laboratory was larger than the one in the secret room at the Park Avenue apartment. Here were the latest types of scientific precision instruments, ray machines, all the other equipment the Phantom needed for the war he waged.

The arsenal was bigger than that in his penthouse, his chemical-testing facilities greater, his wardrobe held a wider range of disguise garments.

Indirect lighting snapped on when the Phantom closed the door after him. Heavy curtains at the windows prevented any glimmer of light from entering or escaping. In this quiet retreat the Phantom had solved some of his most difficult cases.

Now he set to work to learn more about the piece of metal he had picked up in the burned hold of the *Star of Brazil*.

ITS powder dust spilled on a glass slab reacted to the chemicals he applied to it. Almost at once he got sulphur as a partial content. But that was not enough. He reached for another chemical vial. Two drops of an acid from it and the identity of the powder substance came up as *galvasol*,

a liquid fire element used in the late days of the war in the manufacture of incendiary bombs.

The Phantom nodded. The lead piece had been part of the arson plot designed to destroy the freighter. But Van had suspected that. What he wanted was for the piece of lead to tell him more about the fire.

He put it in a cleaning bath. Next, he placed it on the slide under his powerful Lecroix microscope. He adjusted the lens, snapped a button, and slowly turned the lead piece until he detected the imprint of lettering that formed words and figures.

Barely discernible were "Pyrotech Mfg. Co." and under that the number "11786."

Van had jotted that down when the telephone across the lab rang.

"I have Huston's report," Frank Havens said over the wire. "The one you wanted—from San Francisco."

"Good. Tell Steve to be at the Green Spot in a half hour."

CHAPTER X

ELKHORN TAVERN



OCCUPYING a Longacre corner, not far from crowded Times Square the Green Spot was an ordinary thirst-slaking oasis, in the heart of theaterland. The Phantom had found it to be a convenient rendezvous for meeting Huston.

No different from a hundred others of its kind, the Green Spot's backroom made an excellent place for private conversation. The *Clarion* reporter was there, waiting, when Van went in and gave him the customary signal.

Steve's eyes popped at sight of the new face, the new slouching figure that eased up to him.

"I have what you want," Huston said, as he recovered from his first surprise. "It came in an hour ago."

The Phantom took the folded envelope and glanced at its contents. The enclosure was a closely typed report, relayed by telephone and taken down by a *Clarion* stenographer as it had come in over the wire.

"Thanks, Steve. I'm sure this is going to supply valuable information."

"Anything else you want me to do?"

"Yes." The Phantom laid a slip of paper on the table. It contained the name and number he had found on the piece of lead. "Hop over to Long Island City the first chance you get. See Mr. Belford at the Pyrotech Company. I want to find out who bought this fire bomb case and contents. Follow through on it, Steve. I'm confident it will lead to something important."

After Huston left, Van took the type written enclosure from the envelope Steve had brought. The letter he had removed from the desk drawer in Barlow's apartment was in his pocket. The report, he hoped, would clarify the obliquities in the note.

It did.

The Black Star Mining Company, according to the Chief of the San Francisco Bureau of Detectives, had flourished in the Golden Gate city two years previously. It had been one of the most gigantic stock swindles the West Coast had ever known. A million dollars had been mulcted from the public.

The Phantom read on, his interest increasing.

The company had been a one-man affair. Its head had been a Rafford Saturn. Van stopped there and looked at the letter to Barlow. His eyes focused on the lines:

Glad to hear you're working for S. He's a smart operator and can do you a lot of good. You know what he shook out of the Black Star Mine—

Rafford Saturn?

The Phantom turned back to the typed report. Carefully he read Saturn's description. The man was wanted in California by the police. It seemed that Saturn, after selling thousands of shares of the worthless stock in an abandoned mine located somewhere in British Columbia, had slipped away with his profits intact, shortly before the police moved in on him.

The Phantom was much interested in Saturn and in the details of the man's swindling proclivities. For this same Saturn, he had every reason to believe was Barlow's employer, the "boss" Barlow had mentioned on the telephone. The same man who had engineered all three murders!

Information on the Joe Normandy referred to in the Barlow letter followed the

data on the Black Star Mine.

Normandy, it seemed, was a licensed private detective with a San Francisco office. A shady character who capitalized on the secret information of his clients, according to the report. Normandy had closed shop several weeks before, and had disappeared from San Francisco.

The last thing the Phantom had asked Steve to check on drew a blank. Normandy didn't have any one "girl friend." The report said that his feminine acquaintances had been many and varied. No one in particular had ever been identified as his sole interest.

Van held a match to the typed paper. He let it burn slowly, dropped its charred fragments to the floor and rubbed them out under his foot.

Time to swing back into action.

He dropped a nickel in a telephone in a booth in the rear of the back room. Dialing the same number Barlow had dialed, a d which Va had committed to memory, he waited for the call to go through.

HE REMEMBERED another call. A warning that had been delivered to him as he was leaving the house on Tenth Street. The voice, thin and disguised, still haunted him with its familiar note. He had tried vainly to remember where he had heard it before, whose voice it was.

"Yes?"

"Columbus six, five, nine hundred?"

"That's right."

"Grogan there?"

"Who?"

"Eddie Grogan."

"Never heard of him."

"What place is this?" the Phantom asked.

"The Elkhorn Tavern. Look, pal. You've got the wrong number."

Van hung up. He drew a quick breath. Elkhorn Tavern? That was the place from which the warning had been telephoned, the Columbus Avenue address that one of Inspector Gregg's men had investigated, in an attempt to trace the call.

Van left the Green Spot.

Fifteen minutes later he was entering the Elkhorn Tavern. The place was three doors in from the corner, on the west side of the avenue. From the front it looked like a small ale shop, but inside it spread out.

There was a small dining room to the left. A place big enough for dancing, in the back. Another room with tables and chairs was to the right and a large, long bar in the front.

It was well-filled. But its clients, the Phantom saw at a glance, were neither well-groomed nor prepossessing. The majority of them looked like Broadway stumblebums, people who eked out a precarious existence by playing the horses, or with cards or dice.

The Phantom edged into the well-patronized bar. He ordered a beer, that being more in keeping with his character than his usual lime and selzter. He coaxed it along, outwardly unconcerned with those around him. But his eyes were busy seeking a familiar face.

A half-hour passed before his vigilance was rewarded. Then a man came in from the street. The Phantom scrutinized him surreptitiously. The flamboyant shirt and the once red trousers had been replaced by a brown suit and a cap, but he recognized Dave Roy at once.

The member of the freighter's crew who had watched the Phantom so intently aboard the *Star of Brasil*, sidled up to the bar. His heavy-lidded gaze slid over the Phantom without lingering. He rapped on the bar with a half-dollar.

One of the shirt-sleeved men behind the counter came up to him.

"Well, see who's here! All the way from the banana country! How'ya, Dave?"

"I'm okay. Let's try some of that special rye for taste. With ginger ale."

The barman came back with a drink. Roy tossed it off, wiped his hand across his mouth and nodded.

"Not bad. Where's Tony?"

"Upstairs—if he's here."

"I guess I'd better go and look him up," Roy said.

He backed out from the bar. The Phantom arranged it so that as Roy left the room his own glass was empty. Quietly he got out of the line along the bar.

Roy went through the room with the tables and chairs, opened a door at the rear. The door closed after him. The Phantom shot a swift glance at the bartender to whom Roy had been talking. The man had his back to him, wasn't watching. The Phantom went on and into the back room and over to the door Dave

Roy had gone through.

It opened on a narrow flight of stairs. A wan light shone from the landing above. The Phantom closed the door after him and started up the steps. He moved soundlessly, like a shape of shadow. Above, he heard Roy saying:

"Hello, Tony. Mike told me you might be up here."

"So it's you? I hear your ship docked late this afternoon. I don't get it."

"What do you mean?" A belligerent note crept into Roy's tone.

"I thought the *Star* wasn't supposed to dock at all."

"That stuff burned too slow." Roy took a drag on his cigarette. "You heard what happened to Swenson?"

"Yeah. I'm glad something went through on schedule."

The Phantom climbed three more steps. That gave him an eye-level view of the room. The door was open, a ceiling light filled it with a garish glow. Roy leaned against the door frame, hands rammed in his pockets.

THE Phantom looked at Tony. There was no mistaking his thin, angular face, his extra long upper lip and pale, predatory eyes. He was the man who had come back for the murder gun in the piano!

He was lounging in a chair, his feet on the edge of a table. Tonight he wore a checked tan jacket, gabardine slacks, and well-shined sports shoes. A pearl-gray felt hat with a red feather in its band was tilted over his forehead to shade his eyes from the ceiling light.

"I need some dough," Roy said abruptly. "What are the chances?"

Tony pulled a breath in through his teeth.

"I don't know. The boss isn't feeling too hot. I don't know if it's a good idea to talk money right now."

"Why?"

Tony dropped one ankle over the other and yawned. "We've had a lot of tough breaks. Ernie's gone."

"Picked up?" Roy sounded interested.

"No, given the long sleep. Sapped. And that's not all. The Phantom has taken over!"

Van saw Roy stiffen. "That ain't good," he said, before he added, "Who fixed Ernie—the Phantom?"

Tony's head twisted around. "Grow up," he growled. "Since when does the Phantom go round blackjacking guys to death?"

"Then who did it?"

"A person or persons unknown." Tony shrugged. "The boss is trying to find out. Ernie blew the box at the steamship office. Him and Barlow. But they never got what they went after. Somebody else did."

The Phantom's eyes narrowed. Confirmation of what he had suspected started a new trend of thought running through his analytical mind. So Saturn's play for what was in the safe had missed! If he hadn't got what he had sent his two hoods after, who had?

Were there two separate forces at work? Two crime gangs fighting for the same mysterious booty?

CHAPTER XI

THE PHANTOM'S PLAN



LISTENING, and watching, Van heard Tony go on talking.

"Barlow got the shakes," Tony said. "Afraid to go back and tell the boss what happened. Nobody knows who muscled in and worked Ernie over with the sap."

"Where's Barlow now?"

"Holed in somewhere. He buzzed Freddie and told him he wouldn't be back." Tony ripped out an oath. "He'd better keep scarce. If he shows up again he's due for a little gun gangrene!"

Roy wasn't satisfied. He stepped further into the room. "I'm flat," he said. "I did my share. I want the rest of the coin, due me."

Tony looked up at him. His small mouth twisted into a sneer.

"Yeah? And what are you going to do if you don't get it? You can't do a solo on this. Open up to the cops and you'll burn for Swenson. Clam up and stick around—that's your best bet. When there's dough shed again, you'll be paid off."

Roy thought that over for a minute or two. "Okay. How about you lending me fifty bucks until it happens?"

The man lounging in the chair laughed sarcastically.

"A magician couldn't find a half C on

me, pal."

The telephone in the room rang. Lazily Tony reached for it, pulling it up off the floor beside the chair.

"Yes? . . . This is Tony speaking. . . He's here now, believe it or not. And bleating for money. . . What's that? . . . Tonight, right away? . . . I'll do that."

He hung up, put the telephone down and lowered his feet to the floor.

"That was Fred," he told Roy. "He's at Brownie Hack's. He was asking about you. He wants me to bring you down so you can speak your piece."

Roy looked dubious. "Suppose I don't want to go? If the big guy is gonna hold me responsible—"

Tony got up, pushing back his chair. "You'd better come, kid." His voice was soft, insinuating. "Maybe you can proposition Freddie for a handout—before you tell him your story. Or maybe—"

The Phantom had heard enough.

Turning quickly, he went down the stairs, through the back room, out past the bar, and onto Columbus Avenue.

He had left his car in a midtown parking lot on his return from the Bronx laboratory. There wasn't a chance of getting it before Tony and Dave Roy left the Elkhorn. A taxi slowed at his signal. Watching the front door of the tavern, the Phantom shoved his police badge into the driver's face.

"Police business," he explained briefly. "A couple of men are coming out of that tavern in a minute or two. Murder suspects. I've got to follow them. Here's how I'll do it. Wheel over to the curb and stop. Put your flag up. I'll be in the next doorway. They'll probably hire you to take them somewhere. Look in your mirror when they get in. If they're the men I want I'll raise a hand."

"What do I do then?"

"Drive them where they want to go. The minute they pay you off call the Elkhorn Tavern. I'll be by the telephone booth. Ask for Charlie."

"Okay. Suppose the wrong people hail me?"

"Tell them you're engaged. Wait for my signal. And get over there—fast."

The hackie made a U turn and got into position. The Phantom melted into the doorway of a darkened laundry next to the tavern. He had hardly merged with

the gloom there when he saw Tony and Roy come out of the Elkhorn.

They took the bait without a hitch. Tony opened the door of the cab. Roy got in. Tony spoke to the driver and followed.

The Phantom's hand had gone up.

With a whine of its motor the taxi pulled out from the curb. The Phantom turned his footsteps back to the Elkhorn Tavern.

The Phantom had spotted the telephone booth in the tavern when he had lingered at the bar. It was in the hall, between the restaurant and the room with the waxed dance floor.

Back in the place, he pulled out a chair at a table within hearing distance of the bell in the booth. He ordered a sandwich and waited.

So far, Van felt partially satisfied with the night's events. Dave Roy had fitted himself into the murder picture. Roy was another of Saturn's paid hireling. But that fact didn't register with the Phantom as much as did the information he had overheard. The news that Saturn didn't know who had hijacked whatever had been taken from the wrecked safe, or who had beaten Ernie Berg to death.

VITAL information! Yet, information that made the case more complex. Van's mind became crowded with thoughts. Out of them he pondered an idea that suddenly presented itself. He was working on that when suddenly the telephone in the booth rang.

"I think that's for me," Van said to the waiter who brought the sandwich.

He pulled the folding door of the booth shut after him. The waiter stood looking in at him. The Phantom nodded when he unhooked the receiver and heard the cab driver's voice ask for Charlie. The waiter turned and went away.

"This is Charlie," the Phantom said. "Where did you drop them?"

"Thirty-eighth and Eighth. Second door in from the corner. Elite Bowling Alley."

"Good—thanks." The Phantom added, "I owe you five dollars. Let me have your name and hack number and I'll see that you get it."

He made a quick notation with his pen-oil on the back of an envelope, hung up and paid his check.

Some twenty minutes later the Phan-

tom reached the Elite Bowling Alley. The alleys occupied a two-story taxpayer wedged in between a gaunt tenement house on one side and an all-night garage on the other. The place was crowded, all six alleys in use when the Phantom slouched in and mingled with the men watching the pins being mowed down.

He loosened his coat, looking for Tony or Roy. Nobody paid any particular attention to him. Evidently there was always a crowd of spectators at the alleys. The Phantom moved out of one group and into another. He cased the place carefully, but without reward. If Roy and Tony were still there they were not in evidence.

Impatience tightened Van's nerves. He had gone so far. He wanted to go the rest of the way. Roy's meeting with the Fred that both Barlow and Tony had spoken to on the telephone could supply a link in the chain. He had to find them!

A stout youth with a bad complexion was standing next to him.

"Seen anything of Fred around?" the Phantom asked casually.

"No. I only just got here. Why don't you speak to Brownie?"

"Where'll I find him?"

The stout youth used a thumb. "Over there, at the cash register."

The Phantom's eyes moved in the direction of the thumb. A coatless man, his vest half-unbuttoned, the blue sleeves of his shirt held up by arm garters, was talking to a couple of men at the cash register to the left of the main doorway.

"Brownie" Hack was almost bald. His skin seemed transparently white in the alleys' lights. A dead, chewed cigar was tucked in one corner of his mouth.

The Phantom slipped away from the stout youth and took up a new position that gave him a diagonal view of Hack. The crash of flying pins and the rumble of bowling balls made continuous thunder. It began to make monotonous reverberations in Van's ears. Something like the click of train wheels on steel tracks.

The thunder of the balls and pins said, "Tony—Roy—Tony—Roy!" in increasing volume. Van hesitated. To a k Hack questions might make the bald man suspicious. His mouth went tight as he finally decided to waste no more time.

Past the men's washroom, the Phantom saw the novel post of a boxed-in stair-

way, but the steps were directly in Brownie Hack's line of vision. He had to wait until Hack left the cash register or became engaged with some of his clientele.

At least ten minutes elapsed before Van saw his opportunity. One of the bowlers approached Hack with a sheaf of score sheets. Hack began to count the strings run off. He half-turned his back to the stairs as he became engrossed in the matter of the payoff.

When Hack straightened and pushed down the keys of the cash register, the Phantom was up the stairs and on the landing above.

A ground-glass door lettered "Office" was painted with light. There were two or three other doors along the passage, dark, showing that unoccupied rooms were behind them. The Phantom considered the office. To do any listening outside it would set him up as a clay pigeon for the first person who came along and saw him there.

But he had to do something, and do it quickly. He picked out the half-open door adjoining the office on the east side of the building and faded into that. He pulled the door shut after him and snapped on his flashlight.

HE WAS in what apparently was a card room. Folding tables were stacked along one wall. Chairs were folded against another. A window with a Venetian blind half-way down let in some of the light from the neon sign over the front entrance to the alley.

There was no connecting door to the office. And the wall separating one room from the other was too thick to let the voices of those in the office come through.

Checked, the Phantom went to the window, raised the sash. He was in no better position than he had been before. The thunder of the alleys was not quite so loud, but the office window was shut, its blind all the way down, the slats hiding the light inside.

Van closed the window and walked back to the door. As yet he had no way of determining whether Roy and the long-lipped Tony were actually in the office or not. There was only one way to find out.

The office door opened when the Phantom turned its knob. The sharp smell of cigarette smoke greeted him. Three men

were in the room—Tony parked on a leather lounge, Dave Roy, his face flushed, standing beside a desk, and a third man who sat behind the desk, tipping forward and back in a swivel chair.

The Phantom knew he must be Fred. And Fred, a glance told him, had been the second man in the Matting music room. The man in the loose topcoat and felt hat who had hurled the gun at him.

Fred was big, big all over. He had an authoritative air. Hair, gray and bushy like his thick brows, had recently been barbered. He had a lot of face, jowls, and a full-lipped mouth.

He was well-dressed in a conservative dark business suit and was of a slightly higher type than either Roy or Tony. Fred might have been Saturn's right-hand man, the man who handled the details and kept the boys in line.

"What's yours?" Fred's head turned in the direction of the doorway.

"I guess I got the wrong place." The Phantom started to back out.

Fred stopped him. "Just a minute. Who are you looking for?"

As Fred asked the question, the plan the Phantom had been thinking about at the Elkhorn before the taxi driver's call swept back in to his mind. Desperate situations called for desperate measures. He saw his plan of action and grasped at it.

"That's my business." The Phantom's voice was thick, and he sounded as stupid as he looked.

That was all Fred needed. Quickly he swung out of the swivel chair. A half-dozen steps took him over to the door. His gaze probed the Phantom while his shoulder nudged the door shut.

"Come in."

The Phantom slouched past Roy. Tony yawned and sat up straighter on the lounge. Fred dropped a big hand to the Phantom's shoulder and turned him around.

"What's your name?"

"Charlie."

"Who are you looking for?"

"What business is that of yours?"

"Fresh punk," Tony observed. "Want me to push his teeth in?"

Fred paid no attention to the suggestion. He continued to study the Phantom, deeper color coming into his face. The Phantom leered at him, a perfect example

of a moronic, dull-witted dolt who didn't realize the danger he was in, or the type of man he confronted.

"I think," Fred said slowly, "we'll have a gander at your pockets. Just to find out what really gives."

Tony fumbled a cigarette out of his coat and laughed.

"Why waste time, Fred? Smack him in the kisser and throw him out."

"Let's see what he's carrying around with him beside his weight." Fred's hand moved in under the Phantom's worn jacket. "I've got a hunch he isn't quite as dumb as he looks. Couldn't be and get by."

CHAPTER XII

ON ORDERS



RED'S fingers closed over the Phantom's holstered automatic. Roy chuckled and Tony's brows went up when Fred dropped the gun on his desk.

"Maybe you've got something," Tony said.

The Phantom's battered wallet, flashlight and the keys he carried made a heap on the shiny top of the desk. Fred missed the secret hiding place in the trousers' waistband where the Phantom kept his jeweled identification mask-plate. But Fred apparently had found enough to make his voice sharp and quick.

"Take a peek at these!"

He held up the three keys on the ring he had been examining. Roy looked at them blankly. Tony frowned.

"So what?" he asked.

Fred tossed the keys over. "Ever see these before? That little key. You must—"

Tony jumped up. Suddenly his predatory eyes glinted. He looked from Fred to the Phantom and then back to the keys in his hand.

"Ernie's openers! That's his locker key—same as mine!"

"And take a look at this."

Fred's hand came out of the Phantom's last pocket. He held up the Detective Bureau badge the Phantom had flashed for the taxi driver's benefit.

"A copper!" Roy's exclamation was full of venom.

Fred shoved the Phantom into a chair.

He began to smile, a slow, unpleasant smile that started with his mouth and went up to wrinkle the corners of his eyes.

He rubbed the shiny badge between thumb and forefinger. From below, the noise of the alleys made a rumbling background for the big man's curt laugh.

"A gumheel—walking in here and playing games! How do you like that?"

The Phantom pushed himself further back in the chair. He kept the same stolid, stupid look on his disguised face. The success of the desperate measure he had decided upon hung in the balance. His plan was to play directly into Fred's hands with the hope that the big man would bring Saturn around to decide his fate.

Would he?

The Phantom knew that he would have his answer in the next few minutes.

Tony, jingling the keys Van had removed from Ernie Berg's dead body, broke the silence.

"What are you going to do with him, Fred?"

"I don't know." The big man sounded thoughtful. "I haven't decided. If this dick cracked through to us, he knows something. And if he knows, some of his pals do, too."

Dave Roy looked alarmed. "Maybe they've got the joint ringed?"

"Take a look downstairs." Fred spoke rapidly. "Speak to Brownie. He knows a flatfoot when he sees one!"

"He must—letting this lug get by," Tony cut in.

Roy left the office, fast. Fred swung around to the chair in which the Phantom sat slumped. His lips curled back over his teeth.

"I'm allergic to the law," he said, spacing his words carefully. "If you're one of Gregg's stooges you're on your last job." A gun slipped into the hand that opened the top drawer of the desk. It was an ugly, blunt-barreled, blue-steeled little cannon. Fred toyed with it. "Open your big mouth and talk. How'd you get down here?"

"Followed your two friends from the Elkhorn."

Fred swung around to Tony. "So that's what you do—leave yourself wide open for any badge to tail you! Why, I ought to—"

"Wait a minute!" Tony began to boil. "This guy's lying! Nobody shagged us away from the tavern. I made sure of that."

"I followed the taxi they took," the Phantom said to Fred.

Deeper color came into the big man's face again. He stared at Tony, shaking his head.

Tony walked over to the chair. "I've got a good mind to blow you up!" he grated.

"Get back." Fred pushed him away. "I'll do the exploding around here."

The door opened and Dave Roy came back. The bald-headed Brownie Hack followed him into the office. The bowling alley proprietor had a tight, apprehensive look on his wax-white face.

"No cops downstairs!" Roy said.

HACK stopped a foot away from the chair. He bent forward and stared at the Phantom intently. Then he shook his head.

"Never saw him before in my life, Fred!"

"I suppose he sawed a hole in the roof and ju t dropped hrough." Fred's sarcasm was double-edged. "One of your jobs is to watch the stairs. Swell job. You turn your back and the police walk in. I wouldn't be surprised if the Commissioner—or the Phantom—was wandering around the building! The Phan—"

He stopped significantly and looked at Tony. Van knew what that look meant. Fred's mind had gone back to the house on Tenth Street, their frustrated attempt to get the gun out of the piano.

Fred was mutely asking, "Is this the one who was waiting for you in the music room?"

Tony got it immediately. He shook his head. "Not him. The other was dark and foreign-looking."

"Get downstairs," Fred growled at Brownie Hack. "This time watch yourself. It's getting so," he added, when the bald-headed man went out, "I can't trust anybody. Looks like I've got a bunch of blockheads on the pay-roll. One more slip and there's going to be some changes made!"

"What are you going to do with this luggie?" Tony asked, changing the subject.

"Watch him." Fred handed the blunt-barreled gun over. "I'm going to make a phone call. Keep this party seated. I suppose," he said, from the door, "I'll come back and find him gone and you two mugs full of holes!"

He slammed the door. Roy, sucking on a fresh cigarette, tried to grin. "Got a bad disposition, ain't he?"

"You'd have one if you were in his place," Tony answered. "The boss don't like mistakes. That's all that's come up since the beginning."

"Swell chance I have of getting any scratch tonight," Roy complained. "And I ain't got enough to buy a hotel room."

"Maybe you won't need one." Tony chuckled.

Roy pivoted on his heels. "If I had my way," he growled, "I'd croak this copper in a hurry. Stick him in a heap and roll him uptown. I know a made-to-order place for dumping stiffs."

The Phantom paid little attention to the conversation of the pair. Fred, he knew, had gone to make a telephone call. To Saturn, undoubtedly. It wouldn't be long now before he would be in a position to know what Saturn's orders were.

Either the boss of the outfit would want to see him or would pass the word for a quick and easy disposal. Someth ng along the lines of Dave Roy's suggestion.

But the Phantom didn't think Saturn would have him eliminated before taking a look at him. Before talking to him. The "boss" was no fool. The breaks had been against him, but the groundwork for the man's murder plot had been carefully laid, cleverly planned.

The office door opened and Fred returned. Tony with a bead on the prisoner, spoke without turning his head.

"What do we do, Fred? Press the trigger?"

"Give me that rod." Fred took his gun back. "We're tak ng a little ride, with our pal here. Somebody wants to have a look at him and split a bit of gab."

An uneasy expression clouded Roy's face. He peered over at Tony. The long-lipped hood took off his hat, dusted it on the sleeve of his coat and adjusted it to its usual slanted angle on his head.

"Bring the car around back." Fred tossed an ignition key to Dave Roy. "What markers have you got on it, Tony?"

"Jersey."

"You'll find a set of Connecticut plates under the front seat. Put them on. Have the bus ready in ten minutes."

Roy said he would and ducked. Fred got a hat and coat out of a closet across the room. For a minute he stood fingering his jowls thoughtfully. Then he went back to the closet and began to root around on its upper shelf.

Watching, the Phantom saw him take out a squash racket. It was in flannel case, in a metal press. Fred unscrewed the four fasteners, removed the flannel cover and tossed racket and press back into the closet.

He shook out the flannel case, measuring it with his hands as he glanced in the Phantom's direction. "Ought to do," he said, half under his breath.

AT HIS desk he reached for a pair of scissors. With those he cut a hole in the middle part of the flannel. The Phantom knew what the squash racket case

Roy to get going.

The car moved away.

"Try this for fit." Again Fred passed his gun to Tony while he dragged the flannel hood out of his coat pocket.

With one hand he pulled off the Phantom's narrow-brimmed hat. With the other he dropped the racket case over the Phantom's head. A jerk and it slid down to his chin.

"Made to order," Tony said.

"Okay, Dave. Let's see if you can navigate on land as bad as you did on the wet salt stuff. Keep her at legal and watch the lights."

The Phantom relaxed on the rear seat. He didn't try to fathom what direction the car was taking, what avenue it had turned into. His strained mind vibrated with thoughts and ideas. Paramount was the knowledge that Rafford Saturn, the chief killer, had ordered Fred to bring him to wherever the car was headed.

The Phantom wanted nothing better than to meet Saturn, the arch-swindler for

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was for, but he still sat slouched in indolent silence when Fred approached him.

"Look, pally." Fred made it sound inviting. "You're going for an auto ride. We're taking you downstairs, Tony on one side, me on the other. This gun will keep you company every step of the way. Any notions on your part and it goes bang!"

On his feet, the Phantom made no move to stop them. In the last few minutes, had he so desired, he could have helped himself to at least three opportunities to escape. More than once he had wriggled successfully out of tighter situations. But this time he had set his course. He was staying with it, to the grim and bitter end!

Fred and Tony escorted him down a rear stairway to the back entrance to the alleys. A narrow cut led through to the street on the west side of the gaunt tenement. A car stood there, its motor running, Connecticut license plates at front and rear.

With Fred's short-nosed gun jammed hard against him, the Phantom crossed the pavement and followed Tony into the rear seat. Fred pushed him down and told

whom the California police had been searching. Much, he was sure, depended on the meeting. His own personal safety was disregarded. Somehow he had the facility for overcoming what, to others, meant certain disaster. The Phantom's record for successfully combating overpowering odds stood as a brilliant beacon, shining through the murky haze of his present peril.

He pushed his legs out, and by moving his head up and down against the back of the seat managed to get his nose into the slit Fred had scissored in the flannel hood. Tony had wound down the window and the air that came in was cool and fresh. Van breathed it gratefully.

He wondered what Frank Havens or Inspector Gregg would think if they could see him. The *Clarion* publisher wouldn't be too apprehensive. Havens knew of what the Phantom was capable. But the grizzled Gregg wouldn't be quite so sure. The inspector wouldn't take any bets on his living to see tomorrow morning's dawn. But then, Van told himself, the Inspector was a realist. He saw things only as they were.

CHAPTER XIII

THE VOICE



WHILE the car sped along, the Phantom arranged the details of the case in orderly sequence. First, the mysterious conspiracy against the Coastwise Line. Then Matting's death, what was supposed to be Saturn's masterpiece of murder. Next, the blackjacking of Ernie Berg. Then his own stop-over at Barry Carter's office and the tip that had jailed Ward Barlow.

Each event dovetailed smoothly with the others.

His thoughts went back to the *Star of Brazil*. To the dying Swenson. To the fire in the hold. And finally, spun out like the threads in an embroidered design, his thoughts centered on the three men in the car, the menace surrounding him.

The car stopped for numerous traffic lights. It made several turns. The Phantom didn't know which way it was going, but he was sure of one thing. They were not leaving the city. He could hear the nocturnal growl of the metropolis, vibrant and unceasing.

Nobody spoke for a while. Tony finally broke the silence.

"Who's handling the Bandstand angle?" he asked.

"I am," Fred said.

"Any luck with the blondie? The gal called Rita?"

The Phantom's ears went up. Blondie? Quickly he remembered the gilt hairpin he had picked up in the office of the steamship company. He had had a feeling that a woman was mixed into the case somewhere.

There had been mention of a "girl friend" in the letter he had taken from Ward Barlow's desk. But that girl was Joe Normandy's heart interest. Could she be the same one Tony was asking about?

The Phantom wrinkled his brow. It was entirely possible. The former West Coast private eye, he was confident, had a lot to do with the mystery. Barlow had been warned against Joe Normandy. But so far, in Van's investigation, no trace of Normandy or of the woman had come to light.

He listened while Fred said, "No luck so far. She's a smart trick. Knows all the answers. I've got to be careful. A wrong move and she powders."

"Yeah," Tony said, shifting his position on the upholstery. "It's only a guess on the boss' part. How does he know that—" "Turn it off," Fred interrupted.

The car began to slow. Finally it stopped. The Phantom figured they were on a side street. There must be a main avenue nearby. Faintly he could hear the whir of tires, sounds of late activity.

"See if it's okay," Fred ordered. "We'll sit here, keep our friend from getting lonesome."

The front door of the car opened and closed. Dave Roy went away, his footsteps fading out on cement. Tony shifted his position again, lighted a cigarette and spoke guardedly:

"Roy wants a piece of change. He's jittery. He thinks the boss is burned on account of the freighter getting in."

"The boss isn't happy," Fred answered laconically. "Maybe bringing this party will cheer him up some. I gave him the story on the phone. He's interested."

Five minutes ticked away.

The Phantom sat relaxed, motionless. But his nerves were on edge, his mind steel-sharp. He was anxious to meet the chief conspirator, this unknown Saturn who, from deep concealment, played his murder game through his pawns.

Dave Roy came back. Tony again wound down the window.

"Okay," Roy said. "Bring him in."

Fred began to get up. "Get back and watch the street," he said to Roy. "We don't want any nosy cops. or inquiring citizens walking in on this."

"Nobody around," Roy told him.

"Look, pally." The gun jolted the Phantom again. "We're taking a short stroll. You won't be able to see. Just keep walking and we'll play Seeing Eye."

The "short stroll" was across a width of pavement, through what sounded like a metal door, and down more cement walk. A stale, unpleasant smell of refuse penetrated the slit in the hood over the Phantom's head. It was significant. He breathed it in while the gun urged him on.

Another door opened. Wood, this time. They were evidently in the back of the building they had entered. From further

away came a low blend of conversation, voices and movement.

Fred stopped him for a minute.

"We're going upstairs. No hurry. Feel for the steps with your feet."

WHEN the Phantom didn't bother to reply, again the gun prodded him on. Carpetless stairs rose steeply. He went up, counting each step.

"Hold it," Fred said, when the Phantom's investigating foot found nothing but air. "Straight ahead."

Boards creaked. The warmth of the place seemed to increase as they went on. Fred guided the Phantom with the gun. Tony on the prisoner's left turned him sharply when Fred stopped his forward progress.

"Inside."

A door closed. The smell of cigarettes became stronger. The room they had entered was quiet. No sound disturbed its serene silence. From below, the buzz of voices now made a faraway sound, echoing faintly.

"Nice work, Fred!"

A voice, sudden and sharp in the quiet, made the Phantom's nerves crawl. He knew that voice! He had heard it before—on the telephone in the Mattling house. The same voice that had delivered the warning!

The same voice that somehow was familiar despite its flat, thin, obviously disguised tone. The voice that had tormented him because he had been unable to place it. Instinctively stiffening, he searched his mind again for the identity of the speaker.

This was Saturn. It must be Saturn, the head killer!

"I think," the voice went on, "I'd like to have a look at the gentleman."

A hand fastened over the back of the flannel hood. The gun stayed hard against the Phantom's back. Fred pulled the racket case away and light, after the complete black of the blindfold, dazzled the Phantom.

For a moment he could see nothing clearly. Only the glare and dance of fluorescent lighting. Then, gradually, the room and those in it began to assume their proper proportions.

It was a fairly large room without much furniture. A couple of wooden tables,

some straight chairs, a carpetless floor and bare plaster walls.

Tony stood a foot away, a cigarette, as usual, dangling from a corner of his mouth. Dave Roy, who had come up the stairs after them, had gone across and seated himself on the window sill. The shade was fully drawn behind him. Roy looked nervous, ill at ease.

The Phantom didn't glance at Fred, who stood close to him. His narrowed gaze swept the room for a trace of the Voice. There was no one in the room except the three who had brought him there.

It took another few seconds for Van to understand.

"Move him in a little further," the unseen speaker instructed.

The Phantom had it then. Off to the right, a panel in a door had been pushed back, making a narrow, slit-like aperture. In it he saw a pair of probing eyes. They fastened on him brightly in a steady, peering gaze.

"That's better."

The eyes raked the Phantom from head to foot.

"You've never seen him before?" the Voice asked.

"I haven't," Fred answered. "As I said, he walked in on us unexpectedly."

"How about you, Tony?"

"No sale, Boss. He's a stranger."

"And you, Roy? You've never seen him before—on land or sea?"

THE last two words in the question made the Phantom speculative. They seemed to indicate that Saturn, if it were Saturn using the panel-slide, was trying to connect the stupid looking character Fred had picked up with the freighter and those who had been aboard it.

"I never saw him, either." Roy made it positive.

"And you think he's a detective? Because of the badge you found on him? And the gun?"

"What else can I think?" Fred shifted to the defensive. "He bragged about how he had tailed Roy and Tony."

"Detective?" The Voice sank a pitch lower. "Maybe you're right. Maybe he's important. In any event, I'd like to have him identified. I have a reason. And I think I know how to get the necessary information."

"How?" Fred didn't try to conceal his curiosity.

"There are ways." The Voice held a cryptic note. "Take him upstairs and see that he's made comfortable. I don't want any mistakes. Then come back here. I've got a job for you."

The flannel hood went back over the Phantom's head.

Another minute and he was out in the hall again, the boards creaking under his feet as he was escorted up another flight of stairs to another room.

As he went along, his strained nerves began to loose some of their tension. Somewhere in the back of the Phantom's trained brain, the answer to the perplexing problem of where he had heard that voice before began to strike a responsive chord.

Out of the welter of thoughts and counter-thoughts he had piled up in the back of his mind, he began to realize that the answer he wanted was slowly taking form and shape!

CHAPTER XIV

MIDNIGHT CALL



DEEP in dreamland, Steve Huston was rudely awakened by a knock on the door of his furnished room. A sharp, imperious, annoyed knock. The kind of a knock that demanded an answer even though it was close to midnight.

The knuckles of Steve's landlady continued to beat out a tattoo until, hearing it through the mists of slumber, Huston sat up with a jerk.

He ran his hands through his tousled hair. He yawned and then, suddenly half-awake, swung his feet to the floor.

"Coming."

The edge on the rocker of a chair in the gloom struck Steve's ankle. That was all he needed to jar him away from the last vestige of the deep sleep he had been enjoying. He winced, rubbed his ankle against his other leg, found the key and opened the door a crack.

"You want something, Mrs. Stone?"

His landlady, bundled in a faded rayon robe, sniffed.

"Want something? I've been trying to

wake you up for the last five minutes. Telephone. In the future," she added, "you can tell your friends to call at respectable hours."

"Tell 'em I'll be right down. By the way, who is it?"

"They didn't say. You newspaper men—all alike!"

Mrs. Stone headed for the stairway, muttering as she went down it.

Steve found his bathrobe and slippers. He was sure the call wouldn't be from the office. Unless, of course, something new in the triple murder case had unexpectedly broken.

The Phantom? He didn't flatter himself as being that important to the great detective. So important that the Phantom would summon him at this late hour.

Then, Steve asked himself—who?

He didn't have to wait long to find out. The telephone was on the wall near the entrance to the kitchen. Steve picked up its dangling receiver.

"You Huston?" a voice asked. "On the Clarion?"

"That's right. Who's this?"

He couldn't place the speaker.

"Look," the one at the other end of the wire continued. "You've been writing stuff about John Matting's murder. Maybe I can give you a lead on it. I've been thinking it over carefully. I know something. Maybe we can make a deal."

"How did you find out where I live?"

"That wasn't too tough. I called the newspaper and asked them."

"They don't hand out addresses," Steve said.

"They did to me, sonny. When I told them that I was a relative of yours who had just arrived in town. How about it? Do you want to meet me or don't you?"

"Yes. Where and when?"

"Thirty minutes. That'll give you time to put on your rompers. I'll be in front of Shefford's flower store, Broadway and Sixty-second."

"I'll be there," Huston said, and hung up.

It took him five minutes to get his clothes on. While he dressed he wondered about the caller. A lead on the case the Phantom was handling! Steve was well aware that in the newspaper business a man couldn't afford to pass up a bet. Sometimes undercover tips paid off in

round numbers.

This man who had called him undoubtedly was on the make. If he had any real information he would want money for it. But that was all right with Steve. More than once he had got more than his money's worth out of this kind of appointment. What he laid out, of course, went on his expense account.

Leaving the boarding house, Steve didn't have any trouble finding a cruising taxi. That took him across and uptown. It stopped in front of the Shefford flower shop. The reporter paid the charge, let the cab go and looked around.

There was no one in sight. He glanced at his watch. He had made the place almost within the second of thirty minutes. But the sidewalk in front of the florist's was empty except for himself. No one came toward him in either direction.

Five minutes grew to ten. Steve began to lose his temper. Was this a gag? Some of the bunch at the office working out a practical joke? Somebody getting a laugh out of his naive belief that he was about to learn something?

HE DECIDED to wait five more minutes and then go home. Four minutes had elapsed when he saw a man coming across Broadway. Steve stopped. In the gloom he saw a down-pulled felt hat, a loose topcoat, the shine of well-polished shoes.

The man swung up to him, an unlighted cigarette in the corner of a mouth characterized by an over-long upper lip. Under the brim of the hat cold, predatory eyes raked Steve.

"Got a match?"

Steve handed over his matches, waiting. The man struck one, cupped it between

his hands, and puffed on his cigarette.

"Huston?" he asked.

"You're the one who called me?"

"That's right. I've been parked out across the boulevard, watching. Just to make sure you were alone," he added. "If you're ready, we'll roll. On the hoof. It's not far from here."

"What's your name?" Steve asked.

"Just call me Tony."

"Where are you taking me?"

"Up Columbus a few blocks. I know what you're thinking." He grinned. "I ain't got the information. I'm just an errand boy. I'm taking you to the party who'll do business with you. Right?"

Huston shrugged. "Yes, if the information's on the level."

"It is."

They crossed Columbus Circle and continued north. Tony slowed his rapid pace. Ahead, Steve saw a tavern, the word "Elkhorn" lettered on its windows where beer advertisements, together with a placard announcing a coming boxing carnival at the nearby St. Nicholas Arena, held a prominent place.

To the reporter there was nothing suspicious about either the tavern or Tony. Similar trips in the past had led him to similar places. People who had undercover information for sale were generally of Tony's type and usually held forth in beer saloons or other spots of the kind.

From the front the Elkhorn looked like a small ale shop. Inside, Huston saw it was deceptive. To the left was a dining room. Behind that, a place large enough for dancing. Another room, cluttered with tables and chairs, was off to the right.

A few people loitered at a large, long

[Turn page]

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bar in the front. Tony led Steve into the room with the tables and chairs. He opened a door at the rear.

"Upstairs," he said. "Two flights."

Steve nodded and started up. On the first landing a wan light made his shadow dance on the plaster wall. No sound disturbed the quiet. The second landing was just as gloomy. Four doors were along it. For the first time since he had met Tony, Huston began to wonder if this visit he was making was strictly on the up and up. He moved his shoulders as Tony stretched out a hand.

"In there."

The hand turned a knob. The door opened and Steve walked in. It took him a few seconds to accustom his eyes to the yellowish light that came from a wall fixture. He noticed a half-open door on one side of the room, darkness behind it.

Then his gaze cut swiftly to the figure of a man stretched on the floor. Huston's nerves crawled. Horror, like an electrical current, vibrated through him. For a second longer he stood staring in bewilderment.

He couldn't believe what he saw. But when he went jerkily forward and bent over the prone figure, understanding lashed him cruelly.

"Phantom!" Steve exclaimed incredulously.

The next instant he could have cut off his tongue. With paralyzing suddenness the reporter realized that he had been brought there to say that one word!

If Huston needed any proof to tell him the mistake he had made, it came on the heels of his gasped outcry. There was a sound of movement in the darkened room behind the half-open door.

Then a voice, flat, thin, colorless, spoke. "That was what I wanted to hear! All right, Tony. Take care of him!"

Steve, ice-water rushing through his veins, looked up and into the muzzle of a leveled gun. Tony's lips were drawn back over his prominent teeth. The cold, predatory eyes glinted with sardonic pleasure.

"Straighten up. I'll frisk you, just to make sure."

BREATHING hard and fast, Steve was backed to the wall. Tony's hand made quick exploration in search of a gun.

When he didn't find one, he laughed.

"Clean. I must have made that phone call sound good."

Huston hardly heard what Tony said. The horror choking him filled him with a sickening fear. They had trapped the Phantom! They hadn't been sure of his identity and he, Steve Huston, had obligingly walked right in to make it positive!

But even self-reproach, grim and bitter, was of secondary importance to the reporter.

What had happened to the Phantom? Was he alive or dead? How had he ever let himself get into their clutches?

Tony, in front of Steve, covered him with his gun. Over his shoulder Steve's strained gaze riveted on the figure sprawled on the floor. As he peered through the yellowish light Huston thrilled inwardly.

The Phantom's left hand had moved. It slid up across his chest. His left forefinger went straight before it crossed his lips in a mute request for silence!

It took all of Huston's acting ability to keep his burst of relief out of his gaze. He felt he should get some kind of an award for hanging onto the same tense expression that made his face white and stricken.

It was good enough to deceive Tony.

"I wasn't sure you'd fall for that stuff on the chicory," he said. "I thought you newspaper boys were smart. Every day I learn something new."

The Phantom, while Tony spoke, flexed his arms. When he had been taken into the room, earlier, the jaunty Tony had stepped in behind him, taken a swipe at him with the butt of the same gun he was holding on Steve.

The blow, short and sharp, had caught the Phantom on the left side of his skull. A glancing shot, momentarily stunning him. But it hadn't been enough to knock him out completely.

The Phantom's superb recuperative powers had seen to that.

It served his purpose to make Tony and the others imagine he was out for the count. Lying relaxed on the floor, he had waited for their next move. The idea that they would reach for Steve, and bring Steve there to identify him, had crossed his mind.

CHAPTER XV

FAST EXIT

After all, why not? Saturn was diabolically clever. Saturn knew that Frank Havens waved the wand that had put the Phantom Detective on the case. He knew, too, that Steve occasionally did leg work for the master criminologist. The fact that Steve had been on the *Star of Brazil*, with the unknown character who had taken charge there, in itself was revealing.

The Phantom's glance took in the picture of Tony and the reporter. Tony's back was toward him, just for an instant. That amount of time was all the Phantom needed. He rose to his knees, then to his feet like an avenging shadow, soundless, deadly.

Two steps carried him forward. His left arm coiled around Tony's throat. His right hand gripped Tony's pistol wrist in a ring of steel. He wrenched the gun loose while Huston, clamping his lips down on the exclamation that surged to them, ducked out of the way.

The Phantom's plan was near its climax. He had deliberately allowed himself to be trapped. The idea had paid off on the credit side. He was sure he had learned enough to have warranted the chance he had taken. Now he had to clear out with Steve, follow through to a smashing wind-up.

He let Tony have it. This time the butt of the hoodlum's heavy gun didn't deliver a glancing blow. There was enough force to its bludgeoning impact to put Tony on Queer Street without actually caving in his skull.

The Phantom extended a leg to break Tony's fall. He let him collapse on the floor with the grace of a billowing parachute—and with no more sound.

WHIRLING, the Phantom grabbed the startled Steve's arm.

"In here! Come on!"

The Phantom tore at the knob of the door that had been half-open. Saturn, keeping out of sight again, had been lurking in there. But when he had shut the door he had not only turned the key in the lock but, from the feel of the knob, had jammed the top of a chair under it.

The Phantom shook his head. There was no time to break it down. And Fred had taken his master-key. If they were to get out of the Elkhorn alive, every second's tick counted!



EXPECTING a barrage of lead the Phantom and Steve dashed for the landing outside, but shots failed to materialize. No one was in sight. The same curious quiet prevailed. It was almost as if time stood still.

The Phantom's mind worked swiftly. The whole episode—from Steve's entrance in the room to Tony's knockout—had taken no more than a few minutes. The Phantom knew that as he directed a sweeping glance up and down the landing.

To use the stairs as an exit would be foolhardy. Any moment Fred or Dave Roy would be coming up them with Saturn's instructions. Messengers of murder!

At the extreme left end of the passage, the Phantom found what he figured must be there. An iron ladder led up to a small door, the door to the roof of the tavern. With Huston at his heels, the Phantom went up the ladder with the agility of a fireman on rescue work.

The owner of the Elkhorn evidently believed in complying with the city's fire ordinance. The door was unlocked. The Phantom shoved it open as Steve's sibilant whisper came up behind him:

"Someone coming!"

The Phantom reached down and pulled. The reporter scrambled up after him. Van pushed him out on the roof. For a breath-take longer the Phantom perched himself on the top rung of the ladder, listening to the rapid footsteps on the stairs.

In the wan landing light he saw Fred's big figure cross to the door of the room he and Huston had just left. Fred's deep voice broke the quiet:

"Okay, Tony. I'll take over from here."

The Phantom didn't wait any longer. Out on the graveled expanse of the rooftop he joined Steve. Stark against the night sky, Huston was pointing. The Phantom nodded. The roof was on a level with the buildings on either side of it. They took the one to the south, vaulted the low, separating wall, and went on until they found the rusty top of a fire-escape ladder that cascaded down the brick rear

wall. The Phantom let Steve go first, stowing Tony's gun in his pocket before he followed.

There were only three floors to negotiate. Below them yawned a cement-lined recess. Part of the same alley on which the Elkhorn backed, the alley the Phantom, in the flannel hood, had been led across, with the odor of refuse cans sharp in his nostrils.

Still there was no pursuit. The Phantom waited, cloaked in the shadows, to make doubly sure. He looked up at the roof they had just left. No one peered over its coping. If Fred had spread the alarm, Dave Roy and Saturn must be out on Columbus Avenue.

"This way, Steve!"

The Phantom cut left, along the alley, and out into the quiet side street.

Ten minutes later they were in a taxi, rolling down Broadway. For the first time, Huston expelled a long, pent-up breath of relief.

"Too close for comfort! I thought sure I had ruined everything!"

The Phantom, watching through the rear window, settled down on the seat. No car was following.

"As it happened," he said, "it couldn't have worked out better."

Steve explained about the telephone call. He didn't ask questions, but it was beginning to dawn on him that the man beside him must have purposely got himself into the predicament out of which they had so successfully squirmed.

Huston detected a look of satisfaction on the Phantom's disguised face, and the detective seemed completely relaxed, entirely at ease.

"How about buzzing the Inspector and having him clamp down on that tavern?" Steve suggested.

"No use. When they find us gone, they'll clear out in a hurry. But there is one person Gregg can pick up for questioning. Make a note of it. His name is Hack. He's the manager of the Elite Bowling Alley, another one of Saturn's headquarters."

The reporter's eyes widened. "Saturn?"

"The fugitive from Californian justice. The same Rafford Saturn in the report you got for me. The king size swindler whose Black Star Mine netted him a fortune before he beat the police to an

airport. His was the voice from the darkened room. He seems to make a specialty of concealing himself while looking his victims over."

"If you know who he is—" Steve began.

"Why don't I pick him up?" The Phantom laughed. "As yet I have no concrete evidence that Saturn is the murder-mad killer I know him to be. So far, the plot against the Coastwise Line is incomplete. Until I find what was taken from the safe at the office the night Berg was black-jacked, there can be no arrests."

"But Saturn won't hang around now! He knows you're after him."

THE Phantom shook his head. "He'll be on hand for a while. Berg was his tool. Berg and Barlow were sent to the steamship office to get something from the safe. They got it, but they didn't hold onto it for long. An opposing force stepped in and hijacked it."

"Then you think—"

"I don't think, I *know*. Saturn is making every effort now to get that thing back. Whatever it is—and I have my own ideas—it's of vital importance to him. He can't disappear until he has it. It's the motive for the murders. He *has* to get it!"

Huston was puzzled, but asked no further questions. He knew how the Phantom operated, never showing his hand or going into lengthy explanations until the chips were down and the case about to be solved.

Steve was slightly surprised that the Phantom had told him as much as he had. He turned it over in his mind while the Phantom changed the address he had given the hackie.

"What about that piece of lead with the words and figures on it?" the Phantom asked then.

Huston jerked back to attention. "I completely forgot about it in the excitement of what happened. I have the dope on it for you. I saw the man you sent me to at the Pyrotech plant. He traced the number through the books. The casing was sold to an outfit in Jersey. Part of a big order. I went over there and spoke to the foreman. He told me a lot of their stuff had been stolen during the past month."

The Phantom nodded. Any of Saturn's paid employees could have picked it up,

loaded it with its incendiary contents, smuggled it aboard the freighter.

It looked like a blank on that, but it didn't bother the Phantom too much. He knew the fire in the hold had been arson. He had suspected as much before he had gone down to investigate. And Dave Roy had confirmed it in his talk with Tony.

The taxi drew into the curb and stopped before Huston's boarding house. Steve opened the door and stepped out on the pavement.

"Watch yourself," the Phantom warned. "They lost tonight. Saturn isn't the forgetting kind. He'll try again—and again. . . ."

In the morning the Phantom was waiting in Gregg's office at Headquarters when the Inspector, finished with the lineup, barged in.

The Phantom seldom visited the busy building on Centre Street. He usually kept himself clear of the Department when on a case. But occasionally he found it vitally necessary to contact Inspector Gregg. This was one of those times.

Gregg, who hadn't seen the Phantom's new disguise, registered surprise when he saw the oafish young man waiting for him. A word, a glance at the small jeweled mask plate and the Inspector understood.

"I've been expecting to hear from you, Phantom," he said.

"New developments?"

"Yes, and no."

Gregg sat down at his desk. He looked tired, worn. Van knew the pressure always applied to Homicide when a murder made the newspapers' front pages. The press always screamed for the arrests of the guilty. If not immediately forthcoming, Gregg had to shoulder the blame.

And, the Phantom realized, the press, the pulpit and the public all demanded that John Matting's killer be brought to justice.

"Huston was in touch with me early this morning," Gregg went on. "About the suspect you wanted picked up at the Elite Bowling Alley. Shea brought him in an hour ago."

"Did you find out anything from Hack?"

"No." Gregg shook his grizzled head. "He isn't on file, either. Claims he rented an office to a man named Fred Lavery. Said he was a sports promoter. Hack pretends to know nothing beyond that."

"He knows plenty." The Phantom made a gesture. "But turn him loose. I was hoping you might throw a scare into him sufficient to make him talk."

"I can work him over again, if that's what you want."

"Don't bother. Hack's only small change anyway."

GREGG cleared his throat.

"I've been thinking about the way Matting was killed," he said confidentially. The Phantom had explained the details of the gun in the piano at the time he had turned the murder weapon over to Gregg. "I'm not satisfied with the story Thomas, the butler up there, told."

"Thomas?"

"I've got a good mind to bring him in. He strikes me as being as open to suspicion as anyone else. That piano tuning angle. I talked to Lang, the man who always did the Mattings' work. He said somebody called him up and told him not to go that day. And get this. Lang claimed the voice sounded like Thomas'."

"Got a motive?" Before Gregg could answer, the Phantom said, "Thomas had no part in it. You can be assured of that. I know the killer. I've met him."

The Inspector's jaw dropped. His mouth opened. He stared at the Phantom as if he hadn't heard correctly. Van smiled faintly.

"I'm not ready to have him apprehended," he said. "Too many loose ends. Not enough concrete evidence to make it stick. When I take him it's got to be absolutely open and shut."

"But—" Gregg started to say something, stopped and got his jaw back in place. "He isn't Barry Carter?"

The Phantom moved his shoulders. "I hope to have him ready for you soon, Inspector. Meanwhile there are two things I came down here this morning to do. One, I want to look at the Gallery. When I finish there, have Ward Barlow in here. I want to talk to him—privately."

The Phantom didn't spend much time in the Rogues' Gallery. There was no trace of Fred's pictures, but Tony of the long upper lip stared at him, full-face and profile. He was Tony Rocci, alias Anthony Rodgers. He had one conviction chalked against him for breaking and entering. He had been arrested twice before that,

but discharged both times because of a lack of evidence.

There was nothing on Dave Roy. The Phantom left the Gallery and went back to the Inspector's office.

Barlow had been brought around from his cell in the Tombs. He sat slumped in a chair, cuffed to the plainclothesman beside him. Barlow looked at the Phantom blankly. The gray suit he wore was wrinkled. His reddish hair seemed salmon-colored in the light filtering in. His round, ruddy face held a gray, sullen expression.

"Unlock your cuff and fasten it around the arm of the chair," the Phantom directed the detective who had brought Barlow in. "Make sure I'm not disturbed."

The plainclothesman nodded, eyeing the Phantom curiously. The officer probably had his own ideas as to the identity of the man who had taken over Gregg's office. But he said nothing as he went out and shut the door behind him.

The Phantom rested against the big desk. His gaze roved over Barlow. The man grew nervous under it. He began to move his feet, to cough.

"What do you want with me?" he rasped.

"Some information."

"I'm not talking. I told the Inspector that, I told all the cops the same thing. You don't get anything out of me."

"I think differently." The Phantom's tone was quiet. "I want to know what you and Berg went down to the Coastwise Line office to get out of the safe. What Saturn sent you for, what Ernie Berg was killed for?"

A new light came into Barlow's strained eyes. The mention of Saturn had changed his expression. A furtive, cunning glint shone in his gaze.

"I happen to know," the Phantom continued, "that Saturn is anxious to find you. He holds you personally responsible for the failure of his caper. I was talking to him last night. To Saturn, Fred, Tony and Dave Roy. They think you're hiding out."

Barlow ran his tongue over his dry lips.

"So what?"

"You're safe as long as Gregg keeps you in jail. They can't reach you in your cell. The minute you're back in circulation, you're done for. You know that, Barlow. So do I."

Barlow's heels played a tattoo on the floor. He began to perspire, sweat beading his forehead, wetting the palms of his hands. He swallowed, coughing again.

"You're trying to throw a scare into me!"

"Perhaps. Principally, I'm trying to make a deal with you. I want the story of what happened that night at the steamship office. I want it complete—and true. If I don't get it, I'm going to fix it so that the Inspector turns you loose, so that Rufford Saturn knows exactly where you are!"

CHAPTER XVI

BARLOW SPEAKS



JUST for a minute the Phantom was not sure whether Barlow would crack or not. The same sullen, defiant look spread across the man's round face. The lids had come down over his eyes. He stopped the nervous tapping with his feet. He seemed to draw into himself, to stiffen and grow rigid.

"You win," he said at last. "What do you want to know?" His voice was a husky croak.

"Start at the beginning. Where did you meet Saturn?"

"About a month ago Fred Lavery called me up. I worked a couple of gambling deals with Fred. He knew I was always ready to take a shot at any money pitch. He said he had a party in from the Coast with plenty of dough. I went up to the Hotel Marleigh and Fred introduced me to a masked man he said was Saturn."

"What else?"

"For a while I fooled around, not doing much. He paid me twenty-five a day. I figured something big was going to break sooner or later. I tried to find out from Fred what Saturn's racket was. If Fred knew, he wouldn't say. I had an idea he didn't know—about the racket, or who Saturn really was."

"Go on," Van said, when Barlow hesitated.

"Fred rented the apartment at the Princess Court for me. He had to buy the furniture and pay a big bonus. I was told to hang out there and wait for orders.

They finally came. I was to go down to the Pyramid Building—”

“Skip Barry Carter,” the Phantom interrupted. “I know all about the proposition you made him for the Coastwise Line.”

Wonder crept into Barlow's gaze. He drew a deep breath before he continued:

“The other night Fred phoned me. I went to the Elkhorn Tavern. Saturn wasn't there, but Fred and Ernie Berg were. Fred had the boss' orders. Ernie and I were to go down to the Coastwise office. Ernie was to crack the safe. We were to get a brief-case out of it and then powder—in a hurry.”

The Phantom's eyes narrowed. A brief-case?

“Did Fred tell you what was in the brief-case?”

“No. Before Dave Roy left on the *Star of Brazil* he had seen Matting with it. He described it to Fred so there wouldn't be any mistake. It was black leather with Matting's initials on it in chromium.”

“What happened at the office?”

“Ernie blew the safe. Not a hitch. The night watchman was a lush. We knew that. So we slipped him a bottle and he went away to enjoy it. Nobody bothered us until we had the safe ripped. Ernie had lifted out the brief-case when the door of the office opened and a man and a dame came in.”

“You knew them?”

“I'd never seen either of them before.”

“What happened then?”

“Plenty.” Barlow tried to suppress a shudder. “The man told Ernie to hand over the brief-case. Instead, Ernie went after his shooter. The man must have had a sap up his sleeve. Before Ernie could get his gun, the man was beating the life out of Ernie. He grabbed the brief-case and tossed it over to the dame.”

“What did you do?”

“I ducked—fast. He would have come after me when he finished with Ernie. I didn't have a rod on me—nothing. So I slid by the dame and beat it as fast as I could run. Next day I called Fred and—”

“That's all,” the Phantom checked him. “I know the rest.”

Another minute and Inspector Gregg, with the plainclothesman who had brought Barlow around from the Tombs, returned to the office.

“Lock him up,” the Phantom directed.

There was nothing further to keep him at Headquarters. He noted the time. He had a luncheon appointment with Frank Havens at one. Following that, there would be a long interval before night came with its chance to use the information he had obtained in his meeting with Saturn and Company.

That was information, the Phantom believed, which would prove to be of utmost value!

BARLOW and the plainclothesman left. Gregg reached for a paper among the litter on his desk.

“One thing more before you go, Phantom,” the Inspector said. “Who knew that John Matting played the piano? I talked to his father last night. The old man's feeling slightly better, getting over the first shock. He gave me a list of John's friends. Those who had heard him play. I thought you might like to look at it.”

“I would,” the Phantom said positively. “Splendid idea.”

There were seven names on the list. The Phantom glanced at each in turn before he laid the paper down on the desk.

“Anything revealing to you?” Gregg asked.

“As you say—yes, and no.” The Phantom chuckled. He put on his hat. “Thanks for the use of the office, Inspector. I hope by tonight we'll have some of those loose ends I spoke about tied up.”

With that he was gone. . . .

As Richard Curtis Van Loan, groomed in the best Van Loan tradition, the Phantom was in the lounge room at the Patrons at one o'clock precisely. For once the publisher hadn't beaten him to the appointment.

It was almost ten minutes after the hour when Havens got out of a taxi and came in.

“Late,” Van Loan chided. “Ten minutes late.”

“I have a good reason for being tardy,” Havens said. “Something you'll be interested in hearing.”

Van looked around the lounge room. One of the octogenarian members of the club was dozing placidly in the depths of a huge leather chair at the windows. Van took no chances. Even elderly ears could pick up information not meant for them.

And age sometimes made men garrulous.

Van waited until they were out in the corridor that led to the club's main dining room before he spoke.

"What is it?" he asked Frank Havens then.

"Martin Matting called the Inspector a few minutes after you had left Headquarters," Havens said. "He had an offer for the Coastwise Line. A substantial offer."

Van Loan raised his glance quickly. "From Barry Carter?"

"From the principal himself. A man named Stephen Courtney. I think you know him."

"Courtney?" Van repeated. "He's one of the directors of this club. He went out just a minute or two before you came in."

"What do you know about him?" Havens asked.

"Not a great deal. He's a millionaire, and supposed to be retired. He was at Lynton Garner's party the other night. You saw him—a large, handsome, impressive-looking person."

"I think I remember him." Havens frowned. "Anything significant in his offer to Matting?"

"Possibly. What is Martin Matting going to do about it?"

"He's about ready to give in and sell," Havens said. "He has no incentive to run the line, now that John's gone."

They walked on to the dining room. A waiter ushered them across to Van Loan's usual table. The sun streamed in, making the silver and glass glitter. But Dick Van Loan hardly noticed it.

"I think," he said slowly, shaking out a napkin, "I'll hang around here after lunch, until Mr. Courtney returns. He's usually back at three o'clock. I'll have a little chat with him. . . ."

Broadway, when the Phantom turned into it that night, was an incandescent riot of color. Huge sky signs sparkled and glowed with rainbow gleams. Theater marquees advertised their plays. Restaurants and the favorite night spots along the great boulevard of pleasure were becoming crowded. It was an unchanging spectacle, always the same, yet always new.

The Phantom, back in his last disguise, walked along in the crowd. No other city in the world held the same effervescent

excitement and charm. No other city boasted the same carefree, pleasure-bent citizens. Around him, in the throng, were all nationalities, all races, creeds and colors.

At Forty-ninth Street, Van crossed Broadway and walked west for half a block. He was putting into use some of the information he had learned while a hooded prisoner in the car that had driven around the city before stopping on the quiet side street in the rear of the Elkhorn.

That stratagem was obvious. They had tried to confuse him as to where he was being taken. Saturn wanted to keep the tavern good for further use. They hadn't figured the Phantom, after Huston identified him, would ever leave the place alive.

OUT of the welter of neon signs, blazing against the dusk, Van saw the one he wanted. In brilliant blue and crimson, the word "Bandstand" flickered on and off in a frothy billow of rippling letters. A length of canopy stretched from the entrance to the curb. A giant doorman presided over the double plate-glass doors.

The Phantom nodded to him and went inside.

He entered a shallow foyer, shallow because every inch of space was given over to the tables and chairs set in close formation behind the corded purple draperies that partially shut off the foyer from the main room.

Van checked hat and topcoat. He slipped the numbered brass disc into his vest pocket, lighted a cigarette and waited for the manager to come over to him.

"Reservation?"

"No, I'm a lone."

A folded bill changed hands. The manager caught a glimpse of its denomination and thawed.

"Yes, sir. Right this way."

"Something a little out of the spotlight's glare," the Phantom suggested. "It hurts my eyes."

"I understand."

He was given a table on the left side. It commanded a good view of the dance floor, the center aisle, and the rear of the bandstand. It was just what Van wanted. He sat down, anticipation beginning to quicken.

If luck were good, before the night ended he felt sure further links in the chain would be forged—to tighten around Saturn and his paid gangsters. Joe Normandy, ex-private eye from the Coast, and his blond girl friend were about to enter the case. The Phantom believed both played leading roles. Behind-the-scene roles. His purpose was to drag them out and into the white shine of the all-revealing light of justice!

First, he intended to find the blonde, the girl Tony had called "Rita"—the blonde Tony had asked Fred if he had had any luck with. The girl Fred had said was a smart trick, who knew all the answers.

The Phantom was sure that she must be the one who had lost the gilt hairpin in the steamship office the night Ernie Berg was murdered.

Rita?

He gave his order and relaxed in his chair. The second floor show was about to begin. A rotund master of ceremonies stepped out to send his booming wise-cracks over the amplifiers. Routine stuff. Neither amusing nor novel.

The band gave out with special music for the show, eight girls came through a series of painted screens. Comely, lightly dressed damsels who lifted their voices in song. Four of the eight were blondes. From where he sat Van had a good view of their made-up faces, their fixed, artificial smiles, their gleaming, powdered skins.

Which one was Rita? The waiter came back with his lime and seltzer. The Phantom touched his arm.

"Which one is Rita?"

For a second time a folded bill worked magic. The waiter shot a glance at the dancing girls and bent over.

"Third from the left end. The one with the rhinestones on her shoes."

Van watched the girl. She was like the others, about the same size, with the same curves and the same unreal contortion of cherry-red lips, supposed to be a happy smile.

She was young, attractive. He imagined she had blue eyes. He couldn't tell from where he sat. There was too much eyeshadow around them for that, anyway. He watched her until the number ended and the girls danced off to scattered applause.

Then, the Phantom's gaze wandering, he instinctively stiffened.

A man was coming down the center aisle. A big man with an authoritative air. He had a lot of face, jowls, and a full-lipped mouth. His hair, gray and bushy like his thick brows, had recently been barbered. He wore a conservative dark business suit.

Fred!

The Phantom's left hand went half over his face. But there was no need of concealing it. Fred didn't seem interested in anyone at the tables. He went on down to a table reserved for him at the edge of the dance floor. He sat down, wedged a cigarette into a long black holder, and had a short conference with a waiter.

After a minute the Phantom saw Fred take an envelope out of his pocket. He palmed that over to the waiter who nodded and slipped it in his jacket.

The Phantom smiled. A note to Rita?

CHAPTER XVII

BANDSTAND GIRL



CONTINUING with a sister act, a pair of sad comedians, and a novelty juggler, the floor show went on. The Phantom kept his gaze on Fred more than he did on the floor show. Finally, he saw the waiter come back to the big man, lean over to say something. Fred nodded and started to get up.

The eight girls had scampered on again. This time in leis, with grass skirts and Hawaiian guitars. From the corner of his eye the Phantom watched while Fred ambled up the aisle.

As the big man went out between the purple curtains, the Phantom signaled his own waiter. He paid his check and was in the foyer in time to see Fred passing the coatroom counter.

Van glanced over at the girl who had checked his hat and coat. She was talking to a man and woman who had just arrived. She wasn't paying much attention to anything else.

The Phantom started after Fred, down a carpeted passage with a red-bulbed fire-exit door at its end and another door diagonally across from it. That door was swinging shut when Van reached it.

He pushed it cautiously wide enough to slide through. Three steps led down to another corridor. That one ran straight to the rear of the Bandstand. Fred lumbered on past the kitchens and wine room without bothering to look back.

The Phantom slipped along in his wake.

A pair of baize doors with port-hole windows in them let Fred through where the corridor ended. So far no one had come out to question the Phantom's presence. He figuratively kept his fingers crossed when he reached the double doors.

One of the port-holes gave him a view of the region beyond. He saw a wide recess with a series of doors on either side of it. Dressing rooms for the members of the floor show. As proof of that the two girls who made up the sister act entered the recess and disappeared into one of the rooms.

Fred had come to a stop. He dropped his cigarette, stepped on it and pulled up his sleeve to look at his watch. From the front of the night spot the Hawaiian number was ending. Guitars twanged. Voices throbbed out. Applause rattled like distant hail on a tin roof.

The Phantom thought fast. From what he knew about Fred, the big man was trying to proposition the blond Rita about something. What? The Phantom's mouth tightened. The girl knew what had happened to the brief-case her companion had snatched from Ernie Berg. Saturn had to have the brief-case. Fred was the chief killer's go-between. Fred was here to do business.

And from his familiarity with the place he had evidently visited the Bandstand before.

The Phantom wanted to be in on whatever Fred's proposition was. As he had told Steve, Saturn had to recover what had been taken from the safe. The Phantom wanted the brief-case himself. It contained the last link in the chain, the motive for all the killings, the explanation of the conspiracy against the Matplings!

But how to learn what Fred was about to set up?

As the thought ran through his mind the eight girls trooped back. Fred stepped up as Rita was about to pass him. He said something, she looked at him with a frown, and before she could answer Fred had walked her back to the door through

which the girls had come.

There was a light over it, an unshaded electric bulb. In its glare, the Phantom had a clear, unobstructed view of the faces of the two. Fred's, loose and jowly. The blonde's, cold and calculating.

The baize doors prevented the Phantom from hearing their conversation, but he had a way of overcoming that obstacle. He knew the trick of lip-reading. He had practised it until he was expert at telling exactly what people said, even though he couldn't hear them. More than once this talent had served him well.

It was to serve him again, as he stood there, one ear tuned for possible footsteps behind him, his gaze riveted on the pair under the light.

"I'm ready to negotiate," Fred was saying. "What time do you quit here?"

"Not until after two," the girl told him.

"We want to clean this thing up right away. It's just a question of price. Where can I meet your friend?"

"I'll have to find out and let you know."

"Can you phone me when you leave?"

Rita's cherry-red lips curved in a sardonic smile. "In a rush?"

Van saw that Fred was keeping his temper tightly in check. His big face grew redder, but he managed to force a smile.

"Yes," he said.

"I'll think about it," said Rita.

HER lips still held the smile. Fred's full lips twisted. The Phantom could see that he was not used to dealing with women. This one was deliberately exasperating him. Fred couldn't slap her around as he did the men on his pay-roll.

She knew that, and was getting some ironic satisfaction out of keeping him dangling. The Phantom remembered what Fred had said about her being smart and knowing all the answers. She was, and she did.

"Look, babe." Fred tried another tack. "Don't let's waste time. Your pal's got something to sell. I've got the money to buy it. Let's get together and cut out the stalling."

"Write your phone number down and I might give you a ring—later."

The big man had to be satisfied with that. He fished a card out of one pocket, a fountain pen from the other. He wrote something and handed the card over. Rita

waved it in the air to dry the ink, the smile biting deeper into the corners of her mouth.

"I'll be waiting for your jingle." Fred looked around for the exit.

The Phantom turned and soundlessly hurried back to the Bandstand's foyer. He ducked into the washroom, gave Fred five minutes' grace and then, exchanging the brass check for his hat and coat, dropped a tip in the check girl's saucer and went out.

He had a lot of time at his disposal before the wheels of the case would begin to turn again.

Patiently, in a coffee shop down the street, the Phantom, over a cup of steaming java, drew up his plans. . . .

It was ten minutes after two when Rita came out of the side entrance of the Bandstand alone.

She was dressed in a dark suit with a fingertip length coat over it. A scarf was drawn lightly around her blond hair. She glanced up and down the now deserted street before turning west, then started toward Eighth Avenue, walking rapidly.

The Phantom, from the shadows of a building's doorway across the street from the night club, started after her.

He had made careful preparations. He had a taxi waiting at one end of the block, another at the other, ready for him to trail the girl, in whatever direction she went.

But a taxi, he sensed, was not going to be necessary. Rita walked past the cab he had stationed at the Eighth Avenue corner. A couple of others slowed for her, but she made no effort to stop them. She went on, crossing the avenue, swinging along at a brisk, rhythmic pace.

No one was more skilled in the art of tailing a suspect than the Phantom Detective. Years of training had made him a deft pursuing shadow. He made no mistakes, never betrayed his presence.

Entirely unaware that she was being followed, Rita turned south. Two more blocks and she rounded a corner. The city was growing hushed after its nocturnal activity. The streets were practically empty and the Phantom had to use supercaution to keep from being noticed.

He passed the house into which Rita had disappeared. The soft slam of the vestibule door made echoes. Van scru-

tinized it as he drifted past. What he saw was a four-story private dwelling that had been remodeled into apartments—small suites.

The place was no different in appearance from any in the row of houses of which it was a part. Outwardly the same, but inside vastly different. This building was a nest for birds of prey, for a killer's girl friend! For one who held the secret of Saturn's masterpiece of murder!

The Phantom continued slowly down the street. It was futile to hope to learn what answer Rita was giving Fred on the telephone. But he had a hunch that business would be done that night between the two factions. He crossed over from one side of the street to the other, stopping at a darkened corner liquor store.

From there he kept the house Rita had gone into under direct observation. There was a light behind the drawn shade in a second-floor window. The blonde's apartment? Once Van saw a feminine head and shoulders make a silhouette against the shade.

He recognized Rita's hairdo.

No more than twenty minutes elapsed before Van had action. A small, dark coupe entered the street from Eighth Avenue. It stopped a door in from the avenue. Parking lights were snapped on. A man got out and Van, flexing himself further back into the shadows, saw Fred walk quickly along, glancing at the numbers over the doors of the houses.

He went up the steps and into the vestibule of the building with the lighted window. The Phantom waited no longer. The chips were down and it was time to act. The front door had hardly closed behind the big man before Van was in the vestibule.

A DUPLICATE of the master-key taken from him at the Elite Bowling Alley slid into the lock. Gentle pressure and the door clicked open. Murky light from a low-powered lamp gave just enough illumination to show him the stairs.

From above came the sound of another door closing.

The Phantom went up the stairs. Quickly he approximated the layout of the second-floor suite. The lighted window indicated the living room was in the front of the house. The door that had shut was

in the rear.

He strained his ears. He heard footsteps fading away inside.

The master-key again and the door made an aperture large enough for him to enter the apartment. He was at the head of a hall, an arrangement not unlike Barlow's rooms at the Princess Court.

The kitchen was the first room in line. The hall beyond it rounded a bend, ended at the living room. The spicy smell of cigarette smoke was sharp on the warm air.

The Phantom breathed it in as he closed the door.

"Where's your friend?" Fred's voice, loud in the quiet, was full of surprise. "I thought you said you'd have him here."

The girl laughed. "What do you think he is—a dope? First we talk price. If we see eye to eye on that, then we'll arrange for you to meet him."

"Suspicious?" Fred sneered.

"Brother, you can say that again! Joe knows who he's dealing with. A wrong move on his part and instead of a wad of money all he'd get would be a knife in the back!"

The big man let that go. The Phantom heard the oil he pumped into his tone when he gave in:

"All right, have it your way. My man's ready to pay thirty thousand bucks for the brief-case—intact."

Rita laughed louder. There was genuine amusement in it.

"Who's kidding who? Thirty G's? We know what that stuff in the case means to Saturn."

"Fifty grand."

"Reach again."

"Okay, what's the final?" Fred began to lose his patience.

"One hundred thousand dollars!" Rita said sibilantly. "Don't turn on any tears. We know how much Saturn shook the suckers down for on his mine deal. One million, the papers said. Joe tells me it was closer to two. So what's a hundred grand to a guy in the upper brackets?"

Van waited tensely for the big man's reply. If Fred wouldn't play ball, a new difficulty would be added to the case. More work for the Phantom. But if Fred was ready to hand Saturn's cash over—

"We'll meet that." A note of resigned finality colored the statement. "Where's

the brief-case?"

"You go to this address and ask to see this party." A paper rustled. "Wait there. You'll hear from us within an hour."

CHAPTER XVIII

SECOND-FLOOR FRONT



IN THE hall there was a sound of movement. The Phantom stepped noiselessly into the darkened kitchen. Footsteps came along the carpeting outside.

"I wouldn't try to cross us up, if I were you," Rita was telling Fred. "Joe's got quite a reputation for handling people who try to outsmart him."

The door to the landing opened.

"In an hour," Fred said gruffly, the door closed, a bolt rasped, and the click of heels went by the kitchen door.

"He's gone, Joe," the blonde said softly.

There was a sound of movement in the bathroom beyond the kitchen. A door swung open.

"The big lug!" a nasal voice said contemptuously, "trying to knock us over for thirty G's. You handled it swell, baby."

"I'm afraid." Rita's voice sank to a whisper. "They'll kill you sure—if they can!"

"Don't worry. I've played headstones with that kind before. I know how to talk their language."

"What are you going to do?"

"Pick up the brief-case and blow down. It'll take me twenty minutes or more to get it. Guess I'd better get started."

The two passed the kitchen. The Phantom heard the man at the front door, putting on his coat. Then the sound of a kiss, the flutter of the girl's quick intake of breath.

"Be careful, Joe!"

The man laughed. "Sure. That's my middle initial. You pack your stuff. The minute you hear from me—blow. Meet me at the Kensington. You can hole in there until morning, until we get on the plane. Right?"

The bolt rasped back. The door opened and closed. Once more the tap of heels went past the kitchen where the Phantom was concealed.

He gave Rita enough time to get back to

the living room. Then, his steps muffled to silence on the hall runner, he followed the corridor to the living room door.

Rita, to calm her nerves, had lighted a cigarette. She took a deep drag on it as the Phantom stepped across the threshold and into the room.

"Good evening," he said pleasantly. "You've finished your business with Fred. Now it's my turn to do a little bargaining!"

His hand opened and the lamplight reflected on the new Detective Bureau badge Gregg had given him that morning.

Rita's cigarette stayed poised half-way to the cherry-red lips. The Phantom couldn't help but admire her composure. The shock of seeing him there, badge in hand, must have been terrific. Anyone else, under the same circumstances, would have gone completely to pieces.

This girl, he saw, was evidently used to sudden surprises. Adept at concealing her emotions, no trace of what must be surging through her showed in her eyes or face. The cigarette completed its journey to the cherry-red lips. She puffed on it, her gaze locked with his. When she spoke her voice was like ice:

"A dick? How'd you get in?"

"I was behind you all the way from the Bandstand. I waited across the street until Fred showed up. Sit down. I think we can talk better that way."

"What do you mean, talk?"

The Phantom's own tone was steely. "I think you're going to prefer that to putting on your hat and coat and going down to Headquarters with me."

The expression in her eyes told him she understood what he was driving at. Instead of an immediate arrest, he was holding out bait. He saw she was determined to find out what that bait was.

Rita sat down in the corner of a three-cushion divan. She crossed one trim ankle over the other.

"What do you want to talk about? You must have listened in on what I said to Fred. What he said to me."

"It wasn't enough. Where did you send him?"

She shook her head. "You'll never find out from me!"

The Phantom moved his shoulders. He watched her intently.

"Maybe you'll change your mind when I tell you this. Your friend Joe faces a

first degree murder rap! Barlow can identify him, and Barlow's in jail—waiting. All I have to do is turn you in, meet Joe at the Kensington and—you can guess the rest."

EACH word, delivered with smashing impact, had its effect. The fingers holding the cigarette began to tremble. Rita's breathing quickened. She pressed a hand over her heart, her long lashes coming down to hide her eyes.

"What happens if I answer your questions?" she murmured.

"I'll see that you get a break with the police. Normandy's out. Neither you nor anyone else can save him. But you can make it a lot easier for yourself."

The lashes went up and her eyes were suddenly clear, bright and hard. Like scintillating diamonds, filled with blue gleams.

"What do you want to know?"

"Where did you send Fred to wait for Normandy?"

Her curved lips drew together in a tight line. The Phantom knew what she was feeling. Overwhelming disappointment must have numbed and chilled her. Normandy was about to collect a hundred thousand dollars. Probably she had been promised a generous split.

Normandy had plane reservations for the next morning. A flight back to sunny California—with Saturn's bundle of money to spend and enjoy.

Now, in one catastrophic instant, the dream was ended!

"All right, I'll tell you." Her voice turned listless, lifeless. "I sent him over to the apartment of one of my girl friends. It's on Thirty-eighth Street, near Lexington."

She added a number. The Phantom jotted it down in the back of his mind.

"What's in the brief-case?"

"Papers that Saturn wants. I don't know what they are exactly. Joe never bothered to tell me, except that they are worth a fortune."

She was probably lying when she said she didn't know. The Phantom shrugged. It didn't matter particularly. The brief-case was his target.

He gave her a sharp, searching look before he spoke again.

"Normandy," he said then, "knew Saturn in California, at the time Saturn was

reaping the phony stock rewards the Black Star Mine paid him."

He saw new attention come into her expression. She didn't say anything, but he knew he had captured her interest.

"Saturn skipped," he went on. "Time passed. As I put it together, Normandy must have found out that Saturn, here in Manhattan, had assumed a new character, a new name. How did he find out?"

"Joe saw Saturn's picture in a magazine—with the new name," the blond girl said.

The Phantom nodded. "So Normandy packed up and came East to blackmail Saturn. That's obvious. What isn't, is how he knew that Saturn was trying to wreck the Coastwise Line. And how did he find out about Ernie Berg and Barlow's visit to the steamship office that night, or the fact the safe was to be blown?"

Rita's diamond-hard eyes, with the blue gleams, shadowed. The Phantom waited for her answer. It came after a tense minute.

"Joe knew Ernie. He had done him a favor once, helped him out of a jam. He met Ernie a few days after he arrived here. Ernie told him about working for Saturn. He told him the whole story, how he was to get a lot of money. Joe made a deal with him."

"A deal in which Berg was to double-cross Saturn?"

Rita nodded apathetically. "Ernie gave Joe the tip-off when the safe-blowing job came up. They fixed up a plan so Joe was to get the brief-case. Later, he was to pay Ernie a slice of the take. To make it look good, Joe was to walk in just when Ernie had the safe open. Joe was to hijack the brief-case after giving Ernie a light going-over. I was to take care of Barlow," she added, "if he tried to make trouble. That hen-hearted character! All he did was duck out the minute Joe came in."

"Joe didn't pull his punches." The Phantom's face was like stone. "He didn't want to have to pay Ernie off, later. A lot better for Joe to finish it up without delay and have the brief-case without any strings."

She made no reply. Where money was concerned, the Phantom saw, Rita wasn't too fastidious about principles. A double doublecross, when engineered successfully, was working a smart deal. In crookdom's code anyone who could get away

with it had done something to be proud of.

GRADUALLY, the Phantom was aware of the increasing scent of perfume. He had thought it came from her to him, stirred on air currents that seemed suddenly to cross the room. Then he noticed that Rita had caught its aroma, too.

She sniffed, turning to him.

"What are you going to do with me? I've told you the truth!"

The Phantom had pushed slightly back in his chair, raising its front and teetering it on its rear legs. His gaze riveted on a door across the room, a door that evidently opened into the bedroom of the second-floor front suite. He watched the door narrowly, not too surprised when he saw it begin to open, saw the lamplight glinting along the barrel of a leveled gun.

Tony followed the weapon in.

"All right, Phantom! Up with your hands!" His predatory eyes were hooded, his long upper lip twisted back over his teeth.

"Phantom!" Rita gasped.

Tony's eyes flickered in her direction. "Stay where you are. I'll take care of him first! Gabby dames like you come later!"

The Phantom's hands had obediently gone up. But he didn't seem outwardly disturbed at the new turn of events. When he spoke his tone was conversational, almost amused.

"So Fred sent you back to check, just in case? You must have come up the fire-escape. And you must have knocked Rita's perfume bottle over as you came in. I've been wondering how long—"

"You can stop wondering—and breathing!" Tony's arm went up. "You're finished!"

The two shots he triggered made one echoing crack.

As he squeezed the gun, the Phantom's purposely teetering chair crashed over backward. With eel-like agility, he slithered sideward, the two slugs whistling narrowly past his head.

Before Tony could fire again, the Phantom's tackling lunge hit and threw him off balance. The Phantom crashed into the cold-eyed killer like a truck without brakes. His fingers reached for and fastened over Tony's pistol wrist. He wrenched the gun clear with his right hand, uppercutting with his left.

Tony went all the way back to the wall. He slapped against it, hung there for a minute, then fell in a heap, half over a table.

The Phantom picked up the gun, shoved it in his pocket and helped himself to the telephone. Quickly he dialed a number while Rita stared at the motionless Tony in fascinated wonder.

"Headquarters?" The Phantom's voice was quietly even. "Homicide." Then, after a minute, "Get me through to Inspector Gregg immediately. I want a squad car and a couple of his men sent up here at once. Just a minute and I'll let you have the address. . . ."

Fifteen minutes later, with the dazed Tony and the blond Rita held in the custody of Sergeant Shea, the Phantom eased himself out of the picture.

The minutes were ticking away. The address the girl had given Van beckoned him on. Tony's interruption had already consumed priceless time, but there was one satisfaction. The cold-eyed thug had fired his last shot. Tony was all through in his rôle of badman for Fred and the "boss."

The net now contained two—Barlow and the dapper gunman. The Phantom intended to see that that score was increased before the thin, gray dawn came creeping up out of the east!

CHAPTER XIX

HUNDRED GRAND



QUICKLY the Phantom hailed a taxi and settled back as the cab rolled away. One thing that had puzzled him was clear at last. That was how Normandy, the private eye, knew about the safe job. So Berg had crossed Saturn, and Normandy had crossed Berg. Van smiled faintly. The usual ethics of the twisted, criminal brains that hatched their nefarious plots. He was not surprised by Rita's confession.

There was no honor among killers, no loyalty. Nothing except a case of dog eat dog!

The Phantom's thoughts swung around to Stephen Courtney, for whom Dick Van Loan had waited that afternoon at the

Patroons Club. As the bored and indolent socialite, Van Loan was in a good position to draw Courtney out on the matter of the man's contemplated purchase of the Coastwise Line.

Innocently, but artfully, Van had let Courtney know he had heard the news from Frank Havens. In his naive, blase manner he had wanted to know if he could invest in the company when Courtney took it over. His questions, couched in such a way they aroused no suspicion, had finally brought another key piece in the murder puzzle to fit accurately into place.

Van had learned that Courtney had contemplated purchasing the freighter line for some time. Others had known about it, also, apparently. But Courtney, so he said, hadn't been in a position to make the purchase for at least six months, or until certain blocks of stock he held had reached certain levels.

That, to the Phantom, was important. It meant that Saturn, learning about the proposed purchase of Coastwise by Courtney, had seen a chance to make a profit for himself. Not one counted in thousands. Saturn was shooting for another easy million—the price he would tack on to Coastwise when Stephen Courtney was ready to buy.

Then Saturn had gone to Barry Carter, the ship broker. But the Matplings had turned down his offer. It must have been then, Van decided that Saturn had dreamed up his reign of terror—the various happenings to the ships with the blue bands on their stacks that was to bring the Matplings to their knees, face to face with financial disaster.

Or, Van told himself, if not to actual ruin, at least Saturn believed he would create so much trouble and misfortune that, in the end, the Matplings, father and son, would be glad to accept the offer made them.

That was the way Van saw it. He was convinced he was correct.

The taxi, slowing, aroused him from his thoughts. He was close to the corner where he had told the taximan to drop him. He fished change from his pocket, paid the driver, and headed for the number Rita had supplied.

She could have lied about that, too. But Van didn't think she had. Some deep,

intuitive sense always told him when a person was deliberately falsifying facts. The blonde hadn't been truthful when she had said she didn't know what was in the brief-case. But when she had given him the address her tone, the look in her face and eyes had been convincing.

The street, like the one he had left, was gloomy and empty. Van's glance tried to find a waiting car, one ready for either Fred's getaway—or Normandy's. But there was no car in sight, nothing except the blank expanse of the block, set with its separated light posts.

The address was on its south side of the street, more than three-quarters of the way down the pavement. It loomed up as a five-story apartment house of the old fashioned walk-up variety. Potted shrubs flanked either side of the entrance. The doors opened on a marble-lined vestibule. As had been the case of his stop-off at Barlow's apartment here also were mail-boxes and names.

Van let his flash rove over them. Rita had said "Whelan" was the name of her friend, the girl who worked with her at the Bandstand and with whom she had arranged for Fred's rendezvous with Normandy. Dona Whelan. It came up on the second row of mail-boxes, neatly typed, with 2D after it.

In the hall of the apartment house, Van consulted the phosphorescent hands on his watch. More than thirty minutes had gone by since Joe Normandy had left Rita's place. Thirty minutes. The ex-private detective had told his girl friend it would take about twenty to get the brief-case and take it to Thirty-eight Street. Ten minutes overdue. Was he too late?

APARTMENT 2D was in the center of a long, straight hall. The Phantom's pulses quickened, for as he drew closer to the door he had a feeling of closing in for the kill. This must be near the final scene in the drama that had begun with the concealed gun in John Matting's piano. For, once he had the brief-case, with its contents intact, he would be only a step away from the real killer, Rafford Saturn!

Dona Whelan, Rita had told the Phantom, would not be occupying the apartment that night. She had left it clear for the two who were to use it to complete

their private transaction. And, in leaving it, she or someone else had neglected to latch the front door. It was not only unlocked, but stood slightly ajar.

The Phantom's shoulder pushed against it lightly. Gun in hand he went forward—two steps, three, four. That brought him into a square foyer where a dusk-shadowed mirror reflected his head and shoulders. The next instant the surge of a satisfied thrill swept through him electrically. He had been ten minutes behind time, but he was not too late!

Both Fred and Normandy were there, in a room to the left of the foyer, talking behind a closed door.

Fred's voice came to him first, arrogant and demanding:

"If you don't believe the figures on the bands around the bills, sit down and count them yourself. One hundred grand in big denominations. Go ahead, check them over."

"Don't worry," Joe Normandy assured him. "That's what I intend to do. And you don't get out of my sight until I've totalled up."

The unlatched, open door puzzled the Phantom. Had one of them left it that way in case a quick exit was necessary? He averted his head again. The crisp crinkle of money, being counted with the aid of a moist thumb, was audible in the quiet.

"Satisfied?" Fred asked.

"Yeah. Just a word of advice. You know what I did to Ernie. Don't try to get any of this dough back—unless you want the same thing to happen to you!"

Fred's laugh was low and venomous. "Why, you chiseling gumheel, I've a good mind to stuff that coin down your throat! As a matter of fact, you can—"

Joe's snarled oath broke what the big man would have said. The Phantom heard a chair being pushed back; a sound of hurried movement. Then Fred again.

"You never had a chance to walk out of here with that dough! A hundred grand! What do you think we are—a bunch of school children? Here's a receipt."

What the Phantom knew was a gun with a silencer attached made a husking rasp. A strangled exclamation followed. Fred laughed. A chair fell over and there came the soft thump of a falling body.

Then quiet again.

Rigid, the Phantom made no move to

enter the room. Not yet! He stood there, tensely motionless, while he heard the dial of a telephone clicking off a number. There was no need this time to try to decipher the call numerals.

The Phantom knew who Fred was getting in touch with!

In a low, not too steady voice, Fred said:

"I got it! . . . Yes, the dough, too! . . . Yes, he had a slight accident. . . No, he won't bother you again . . . Right! I'll be up with it as soon as I can get out of here. . . Might be a while. I've got to do something with the stiff."

The telephone went back on its base. The Phantom's left hand closed around the knob of the door. He pushed it open.

"Drop that gun, Fred!" he ordered curtly.

The big man with the loose face and the jowls was standing a pace away from the lanky figure of Joe Normandy. Normandy lay on his back, his arms stretched wide, an expression of surprise engraved permanently on his dead features.

The Phantom had never seen Normandy before. He didn't waste any time looking him over. Fred had let go of his rod. It bounced on the floor. The Phantom put a foot over it while he moved in closer. Fred peered at him as if he were seeing a ghost.

"The Phantom!" The words came in a squeezed-out exclamation that seemed shaken from somewhere deep inside him.

The Phantom's gaze shifted to the table over which the two had bargained. The brief-case lay there, black and shiny, with the initials "JM" in chromium on its flap.

Beside it, neatly arranged in stacks, were bundles of money.

THE Phantom ran his hand over Fred in search of another weapon. But the big fellow was no two-gun man. The hooded automatic under the Phantom's foot was the only persuader Fred had packed.

From the foyer came voices. Fred's worried eyes had a hopeful gleam as they darted over the shoulder of the one facing him. The Phantom shook his head.

"Not your friends," he told Fred. "Mine! A couple of plainclothesmen I directed to stop in here—for you and Normandy. They won't want him, now. But they'll be

glad to take you on a trip—from which you'll never come back!"

It was almost forty minutes later when the Phantom, the remainder of his night's operation in full working order, climbed out of a taxi in an aristocratic section of the slumbering city.

He was close to the East River, in a neighborhood of tall, expensive apartment buildings similar to the one in which the gilded Richard Curtis Van Loan maintained his own lofty suite. Here, in the Sutton Place area, the silence of the morning hour was undisturbed.

East, over the huddle of Long Island City, the first faint crack of dawn was visible against the night sky. A few hours now and Manhattan would awake to another day of teeming activity. Another day, Van thought, with millions of newspaper readers to scan the headlines of the *Clarion*, and the other sheets, carrying one of the most sensational crime stories of the decade!

"Want me to wait?" the taximan asked hopefully.

"No, thanks. I have transportation back." The Phantom handed over a bill and the cab drove away.

Van breathed in the cold river air. A few minutes more now and the case of Saturn's masterpiece of murder would be history. But he felt no particular exultation. He was about to trap the killer, but the trapping itself could not return young Mattling to his father or sponge the slate clean of the other murders.

The Phantom walked toward one of the impressive apartment structures. Its bronze canopy was decorated with a scroll on which the name "Warwick Arms" stood out in illuminated lettering. The lobby beyond the revolving door was wainscoted in brown mahogany.

A fireplace was on one side, and deep, inviting furniture was placed conveniently for those who called and waited. The night shift of elevator operators and hallmen sprang to attention when the Phantom emerged from the revolving door.

He asked for the man in charge and when the night manager appeared the Phantom drew him aside and spoke rapidly. The man listened without comment, tried to conceal his surprise and then, a trifle nervously, ushered the Phantom down the lobby and up to an elevator

where another liveried employee stood waiting.

"Take this gentleman to the twelfth floor, Robert," he said. "Twelve A-J."

The fire-proof door closed automatically. The elevator went up. Without a jar it stopped, the door opened. The operator supplied directions and the Phantom stepped into a broad hall paved with mosaic tiling.

He found the door he wanted and touched his thumb to the pearl circle of a bell button. Musical chimes, muted and silvery, sounded from within. After a minute's pause the door swung inward on well-oiled brass hinges.

Then a surprising thing happened. It was not too surprising to the Phantom, but it would have been to any of the others who had figured in the case. The man in conventional butler's attire who stood blinking at the Phantom was the same gray-haired, elderly Thomas who had discovered John Matting's dead body in the music room of the Tenth Street house!

The Phantom's right hand moved up and touched the lobe of his left ear. Thomas nodded. About then the Phantom heard piano music from somewhere in the apartment. Through the shoals of quiet came the Spanish lilt of *Querido Mio*, John Matting's melody of death!

CHAPTER XX

JAWS OF THE TRAP



MUSIC lilted for a moment more, then stopped abruptly. From somewhere down a corridor a door opened. A voice spoke.

"Was that the bell, Thomas?"

"Yes, sir. It's Mr. Lavery."

"Wait just a minute and then send him in."

Thomas' frail hands shook like dry leaves in an autumn wind. The Phantom heard his thick, fast breathing. Sixty seconds ticked away. Then the voice came again.

"All right, Thomas."

The Phantom went forward. A warm puddle of light came from the room at the end of the corridor. A moss-soft carpet crunched under his shoes. The Phantom quickened his pace as he neared the door.

"Not Fred, Mr. Saturn. He was unavoidably detained!"

The brittle snap of the Phantom's voice followed the dull slam of the door he shut after him.

The room the Phantom entered was furnished with charm and simplicity. Paintings and appointments were in exquisite accord. The color scheme was perfect as a background for the Empire furniture.

But the Phantom's gaze, paying no attention to his surroundings, riveted on the man who, beside an escritoire across from a small black, ebony baby grand, peered at him in transfixed amazement.

The Phantom saw why Saturn had made him wait a full minute before going in. That had given him enough time to mask himself. A narrow strip of blue silk, with two eye openings, covered his face from the middle of his forehead to his mouth line.

He stood there, the shimmer of the Chinese dressing gown he wore, catching the indirect lighting and accenting its warm, rich coloring.

The mask, which the Phantom knew he always wore when he met Fred or any of his other hirelings, combined with the luxury of the room, the gray dawn at the windows and the glimmer of the robe he wore, gave the meeting a dramatic unreality.

But there was nothing unreal about Saturn's strangled exclamation. That came like the crack of a whip.

"You!"

"You might add 'finally'!" the Phantom said. "Tonight—or this morning—ended your plotting, Saturn! This is the payoff for the names on your murder list!"

The masked man seemed to recover quickly. Some of the tenseness in the shoulders vanished. He moistened his lips, forcing a laugh.

"Think so? Maybe I have something to say about that. You're clever, Phantom. You live up to your reputation. But perhaps you're not clever enough. Presently we'll see."

"The long trail. From California and the dupes you swindled, to the Matting house." The Phantom spoke retrospectively. "And now your answer to the law!"

Saturn shrugged and put a cigarette between his lips, raising the mask slightly to do so. There was a silver table lighter

on the escritoire. He reached for it with his left hand, his right hand going beyond it.

In the next breath Saturn had snatched a gun from behind an elaborate brass inkstand. He whirled around, the weapon trained on the Phantom.

"Don't make a move! These walls are sound-proof! A long time ago I vowed neither you nor anyone else would ever put me behind bars!"

The triumphant lash of his statement was like the tolling of a vibrant bell. The Phantom, without changing his position, stretched his arms and empty hands away from his sides. But instead of registering dismay, his disguised face kept its same placid expression.

"No use, Saturn. Your gun's empty!"

The man didn't lower the weapon. His eyes narrowed behind the oval slits in the blue silk.

"What are you trying to do?"

"You see," the Phantom said, "old Thomas was only too glad to assist when the occasion came up. Thomas was very fond of his Mr. John. He wanted to do something to even up for the young man's murder. So when you said you needed a butler that gave him a chance."

Saturn got it at last. "You planted him here!"

"And he took care of your gun! Put it down, Saturn! You haven't a chance. You never had from the first!"

WITH a snarl that blended rage and hate, Saturn let the gun fly. The Phantom dodged nimbly to one side. The heavy weapon crashed through the window. A shower of broken glass made a splitting, tinkling sound to blur the masked man's fury.

The Phantom had him before Saturn could wield the heavy bronze vase he had snatched up from a nearby table, had him caught by the throat. Like a terrier with a rat, the Phantom put all the pressure possible into his strangling grip. He was like a steel machine, in his superb physical condition which always was kept at the peak of perfection. It gave him relentless power.

But Saturn was no weak opponent. The man knew that his one chance for survival was to beat the Phantom off, brain him and skip in a hurry. He fought with

animal-like ferocity. The sheer madness of his attack broke the Phantom's throttling hold. Saturn's fist cracked against the Phantom's jaw. He drove his knee into his opponent's stomach, maneuvering so that he could get to the table and use one of his heavy ornaments as a bludgeon.

For a minute Saturn believed he had a chance of winning.

Under his desperate attack, he seemed to feel the Phantom weakening. Exulting, he pressed in for the finish. But in the next second he found that the Phantom had tricked him. Instead of weakening, the Phantom, rolling with Saturn's vicious blows, came up under them with a judo hold.

He had waited to get Saturn in the right position for it. That minute came when the other man let go with everything he had. The Phantom caught his left arm. A master of the judo art, that method of self-defense in which a child could overcome an assailant five times its weight, the Phantom threw the masked Saturn over backward in a bone-snapping half somersault that pitched him up against the piano.

Like a hawk descending on its prey, the Phantom swooped down, making one of his lightning swift draws. The butt of the gun that an instant before had been in its holster, cracked against Saturn's black-gray head. With a sighing breath that turned to a moan, the masked man rolled over on his side.

The Phantom straightened as the door he had slammed shut banged open. Through it he had a hazy impression of Inspector Gregg, Frank Havens, Steve Huston and half a dozen of the Homicide detail streaming into the room.

The Phantom shoved his gun back into its leather carriage. The Inspector puffed up, peering first at him and then at the brightly robed figure on the floor.

"He's yours from here on!" The Phantom made a gesture. "Your man, Inspector—Rafford Saturn, alias—"

He stopped speaking long enough to pull the recumbent figure in the Chinese dressing gown fully out into the light. He leaned over and jerked away the blue silk mask.

Revealed was a lean, aquiline face that went with the shock of gray-black hair. It was a face so familiar that the staring

owner of the *Clarion*, couldn't suppress his exclamation of astonishment.

"Alias," the Phantom said, "Lynton Garner, clubman and society figure!"

In the lounge room of the luxurious suite Lynton Garner had subleased on a five-year term, the Phantom, Steve Huston and Frank Havens enjoyed the coffee Thomas brought in to them.

In the other room, the Inspector was still at work on Garner. Out there was activity and the drone of voices. But when Thomas closed the door and left this room, the quiet was unbroken.

"What a story!" Steve enthused. "Society Lion Caged! Kill-Crazy Clubman Revealed As Long Time Fugitive From California Justice!"

"Inspector Gregg Breaks Case Brilliantly!" the Phantom added.

Havens exchanged a knowing glance with Van and smiled significantly. He put down his coffee cup.

"We have most of the details from Fred Lavery," the publisher said. "Fred broke down completely and told everything in an attempt to lighten his sentence. I know that the papers and documents that Mattling assembled and kept in the brief-case were complete evidence of Garner's plot against the Coastwise Line. Not only that, but John Mattling had discovered who Garner really was. That information also was in the brief-case, ready for the district attorney as soon as the *Star of Brazil* docked and John got Captain Swenson's story to complete the picture of the plot against his father and himself."

THE PHANTOM nodded.

"Garner couldn't run the risk of being shown up as Rafford Saturn," Huston broke in. "He had to shut Mattling off. He had to get the brief-case. And he had to have Swenson taken care of. Otherwise all his plans to continue on in his rôle of millionaire society man were ruined forever."

"Exactly," the Phantom agreed. "But Saturn never had any intention of letting Normandy walk off with the hundred thousand dollars."

"What I don't understand," Frank Havens murmured, "is how Garner, or Saturn, to give him his real name, knew about John Mattling's secret investigation in the first place."

The Phantom finished his coffee and reached to pour more from the silver pot.

"I can answer that for you. Swenson let it slip one night at a waterfront tavern. The skipper was being kidded about the various things that had happened to Coastwise. He had had just enough to drink to loosen his tongue. He boasted that his boss was going to lift the jinx from the Line. He said he had seen the evidence John Mattling was gathering. He bragged, 'He's got a brief-case full of facts for the district attorney. And when I come back from my next trip, I'll have more evidence for him!' That was about the way it went."

"Who heard him?" Steve queried.

"Fred!"

Havens fingered his chin. "You suspected that Garner might be Saturn?"

"Not at first. What clinched it was the talk I had with Stephen Courtney. And"—the Phantom smiled—"Garner's name was fourth on the list Gregg had made of John Mattling's friends who knew he played the piano. We'll give the Inspector a gold star for that one."

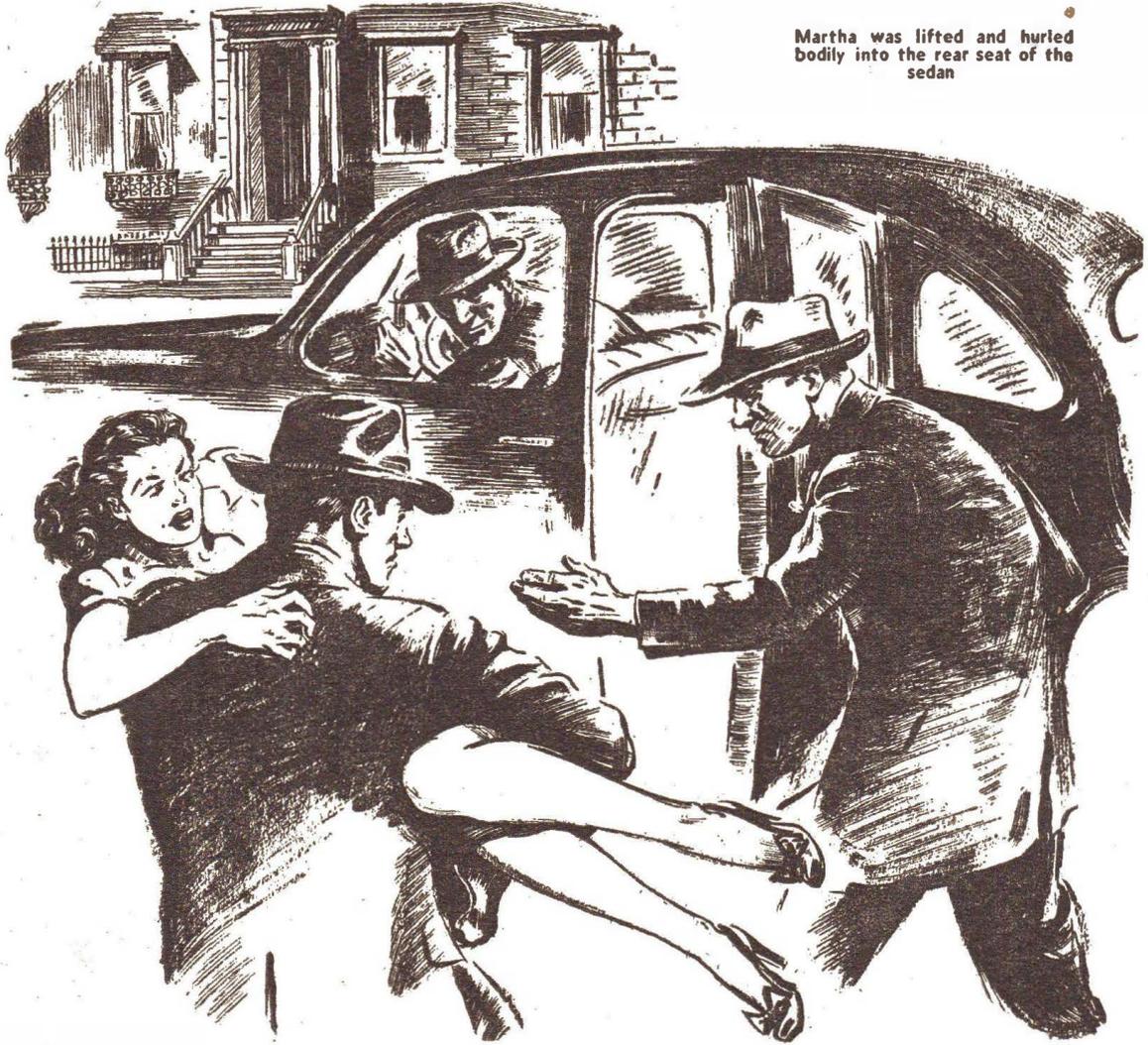
"Gregg picked up Dave Roy half an hour ago," Steve volunteered. "The Inspector also has warrants out for two of the freighter's crew—Robertson and Gleason. Roy admitted they were working with him, that they gave Swenson the push that threw him off the engine room ladder. Looks like a clean sweep all around."

"And another closed case," Frank Havens declared.

The Phantom got up. Gray dawn had given way to a rosy glow that lay along the horizon to the east.

A new day, another day! Van smiled faintly as he contemplated its promise. Not a very exciting one. For, after a few hours' sleep, the Phantom would disappear into the mists out of which Frank Havens called him, and Richard Curtis Van Loan, dilettante, would be back in circulation, making his usual rounds with customary suavity.

Yet there was always another case to confront him. Another case standing just ahead, another warped-brain killer confident that he, smarter than those who had gone before him, could outwit and cheat the wheels of justice—and the Phantom Detective!"



Martha was lifted and hurled bodily into the rear seat of the sedan

THE MURDER DOUBLE

By WAYLAND RICE

When a slain man seemingly comes back to life, there's plenty of explaining for Private Detective Loring to do!

A FULL two minutes after he sat down, overlapping the chair and making it creak alarmingly, the enormously fat man was able to speak. He went through an assorted series of grunts and wheezes before claspng his short, keg-like arms across his chest and twining the thick fingers between one another.

The fat man looked across the desk at Clint Loring. He didn't see much. Loring was nearly forty, drab in appearance, with a lean face and a too-large nose. His eyes were his most predominating feature for they were very grey and very alert.

"You don't look like much of a detective," the fat man said. "A tough one, I mean."

"You should talk," Loring commented acidly.

The fat man laughed and his laughter sounded like the high notes of a steam calliope.

"I am a little out of shape, granted. But I'm hiring you and I can pick my man. I'm told you're tough and rough. The type I require. What are your rates?"

"Twenty-five a day for shadowing people. Fifty if it calls for mayhem, and the rates go up to ten grand for a neat murder job. Which type of service did you want?"

The steam calliope shrilled again. "Good! Excellent! You've a sense of humor, too. I don't want murder done. I want it prevented."

"Why?" Loring asked tonelessly.

"Because the would-be murderer happens to be a niece of mine," said the fat man. "Do you want to hear the story or shall I find myself another boy?"

"Go ahead. Nobody is stopping you. Yet!"

"Very well. You undoubtedly recall the murder of Philip Vinion a week ago. He was taken for one of those rides, shot a few times, and dumped onto the side of the road."

LORING nodded. "Vinion played them wrong. He is supposed to have monkeyed with a buzz saw named Morey Hartnick and got himself tangled up with the teeth. How does your niece ring in?"

"She is Martha Vinion—Philip's sister," explained the fat man. "Frankly, Philip gambled too much and lost too heavily even though he was a wealthy young man. He dropped thousands at Morey Hartnick's place and always paid by check until he probably figured he was being cheated. Then he made the outstanding checks valueless by withdrawing his account. Morey Hartnick has a reputation for handling welchers in his own way. He handled Philip."

"And where do I come in?" Loring asked. "Be warned, too, that if I'm required to buck Hartnick, it will take a large fee. Hartnick doesn't like any shamus, and working against him won't be healthy."

"I can pay within reason. I'm not a wealthy man. To be perfectly honest, Philip, Martha, and their cousin Emery Castle, all support me. I'm uncle to the

three of them. That is why you must prevent Martha from killing Hartnick and yet never let her even guess that I retained you."

"Thirty a day and expenses," Loring said promptly.

The fat man nodded all four chins. "Very well, that is agreed upon. My name is Gregory Firth. I'll provide you with a photo of Martha. You can meet her train and somehow intimidate her into going back to Hollywood."

"Is she on the screen?"

"Yes—in a way. She's a stunt girl. Does all the dangerous things the fancy paid stars won't risk their pretty necks to do. Martha is pretty, too—could even be a star, I understand, if she so desired. She doesn't have to work at anything for she is quite wealthy. Especially since Philip's death when all his money went to her."

"Why does she work then?" Loring wanted to know.

"Obviously because she likes taking chances. Don't underestimate her, Loring. She can box, duel, wrestle, or what have you. My suggestion is that you meet her, indicate you are a killer hired by Hartnick, and scare the liver out of her. Once she leaves town, your job is done. I am prepared to make a five hundred dollar advance. It's all yours if you get her away before the thirty dollar a day fee runs out."

Loring picked up the ten fifties, folded them, and tucked them into his pants pocket. He accepted a studio shot of Martha Vinion. She seemed to be about twenty-six or eight, a stunning brunette with the somewhat sturdy figure of a girl who had kept in physical trim all her life. She reminded Loring of a calisthenics teacher—in a mild sort of way.

Firth gave him further details as to train times and showed him a letter she'd written wherein she stated badly that the police were a bunch of dopes and she was going to get Hartnick herself. She sounded as if she meant it.

Loring met the train. As the crowds poured out of the gates, he kept consulting the photo in his hand until he saw her. She was smaller than he expected and not quite so sturdy looking. He wondered what kind of fools the movie studio higher-ups could be to use her as a double instead of turning her into a star.

She carried two heavy bags quite easily. Her eyes coolly scanned Loring as he moved toward her.

"Miss Vinion?" Loring said, "I'm a reception committee of one to see that you reach your uncle's home without trouble."

"Did Greg send you?" she demanded.

"No. I don't even know who Greg could be. But someone else sent me. I have a car outside and we can talk about it on your way home."

She seemed content with that and surrendered the two bags. They felt as if they were loaded with pig iron to Loring. He escorted her outside the station to where his medium-priced car was waiting. He got in beside her and drove north, heading toward the big public park.

"You're going in the wrong direction," she commented quietly.

"Yes, I know. But I can't talk and drive, so we'll do our chinning in the park. It won't take very long."

HE DIDN'T say anything more until they were deep in the park. It was cold, there were few people around. An ideal spot for Loring's job which he suddenly didn't want to do.

"The man who sent me is named Morey Hartnick," he said.

She reached for the door handle. "I should have guessed. Good-by."

He seized her arm, thrust his coat back to show the butt of the gun nestling under his right arm, and put a scowl on his face.

"Hold it!" he snapped. "When Morey details a man to do a job, it's got to be done. I'm not going to hurt you."

She gave him a lopsided grin. "I'm scared skinny," she said, her voice heavy with scorn. "Maybe this will be interesting. Go ahead and talk."

"Thanks," said Loring, inwardly breathing a sigh of relief. "First of all, Morey didn't knock off your brother. Secondly, your brother rated being knocked off. Third, the cops have absolved Morey because he has an alibi nobody could bust, not even you. Fourth, it'll be a waste of time trying to reach him—and you might get hurt if you try. That's all."

"Quite a speech. Pretty too," she said mildly. "But Morey Hartnick will have to do his pleading in person. I intend to see him and if I'm hurt on the way, I won't be the only one. Also, I have a

letter which Phil wrote me the day Hartnick killed him. He explained the whole thing to me."

"Let's see it. The letter." Loring held out his hand.

She opened her purse and he relaxed.

Right after that, things stopped for Clint Loring. Ended in as complete a temporary blackout as a bomb could have produced. Her fist was small, but her muscles weren't. Loring's head snapped back, he folded over the wheel and stayed there. He didn't know that Martha Vinion lifted her two bags out of the car, trudged rapidly away, and finally snared an empty cab.

Loring only knew that when he woke up, his jaw was swollen, his teeth ached, and any ego he had formerly possessed was gone now. He managed a wry grin as he started the car. That girl was dynamite. Dangerous as Morey Hartnick could be, he'd find himself in a mess if he underestimated this Amazon.

Loring drove to Greg Firth's address. It turned out to be a brownstone front in a fashionable apartment section. The mere fact that it still existed in utter defiance of the towering skyscrapers all around it was concrete indication that whoever owned it must be very wealthy.

Loring rang the bell. When the door opened, he found himself confronted by a young man who seemed to have dressed himself neatly in a tuxedo—and then had it half ripped off him. Before either Loring or the stranger could speak, Greg Firth waddled toward them.

"If it's Martha come back, let her in, Emery," said the fat man. Then he recognized Loring. "Oh—so it's you, eh? Well, what happened? You were supposed to keep her from reaching Hartnick. It's my impression that you failed."

"Up to now, I have," Loring confessed. "You should have told me she knew how to throw a punch and land it right. Where is she?"

The young man stepped back, scowling. "So you're the tough private detective, eh? You look more like a creampuff to me—and your results seem to pretty well bear me out. I've a mind to take a poke at you myself."

Loring laughed. "So Martha messed you up too. Where did she go after the fun?"

"How do we know?" Firth put in. "She came here, said one of Hartnick's men tried to intimidate her and she wasn't losing any time. We tried to reason with her. A total waste of energy, I assure you. Emery here—this is Emery Castle, my ward—tried to keep her from going out. You can see what happened to him. I was a bit more successful."

"What did you do, sit on her?" Loring asked. "Come on, talk. We're using up time. That doll will plug Morey the instant she lays eyes on him."

"I talked her into taking a gun along," Firth said. "She had none with her. I told her mine was upstairs in my room. When she went in, I closed and locked the door. But I, too, misjudged her. She went out of the window, down a trellis and—off somewhere."

"Did she take your gun?"

"Unfortunately, yes. At least it is missing, and six bullets were taken from a full box of cartridges for the gun."

LORING brushed past Emery and hurried to a telephone. He checked the number of the night club which Morey Hartnick ran as a sideline. He tried to contact him without any luck. Nobody had even heard of his name. Loring felt the first pangs of utter dismay. He could not let that girl kill a man. He asked for the club manager.

"This is a pal of Morey's," Loring said. "I'm being given the run-around, but I've got a message for him. Phil Vinion's sister is looking for him, with a thirty-eight, and she knows how to use it."

There was a click in Loring's ear. By the haste with which the manager had hung up, Loring knew his message would be delivered instantly. He then asked where Martha's suitcases were and went upstairs to open them. In one he found the letter which her brother had written the day he was murdered.

The letter was brief, written in ink on a piece of Hotel Metropole stationery. It stated that the writer had been cheated at cards, was taking steps to see that Morey Hartnick did not cash certain checks, and that he knew he was in grave danger when Hartnick discovered what had happened. Phil told his sister that if he died, Morey was responsible no matter what his alibi was. Loring casually slipped the

letter and envelope into his pocket, taking care that nobody should observe this act.

"Does Martha know any way to reach Hartnick?" he asked Emery Castle. "Any of the gambler's friends who might unwittingly furnish her with a lead?"

"How can I answer that?" Emery snapped. "I'm not a mind reader, and Martha never confided in me. But she knows the locations of Morey's gambling houses. Some of them anyway, because Philip told her about them when she was home a few months ago."

"I've got to locate Hartnick," Loring grumbled. "The only way to stop her now is by reaching her intended victim first. You two stay here. If she comes back, tie her up or something."

Emery Castle looked into a full length mirror in the hallway. "Or something," he repeated hollowly, as he tried to arrange his disordered clothing.

Loring hurried back to his car and headed in the direction of the Hartnick night club that he had earlier contacted by phone. He parked as close to it as possible, passed the doorman with a wave of his hand, and skipped the hatcheck girl too. A headwaiter started to bow until recognition came into his eyes and he checked the bow quickly.

"What do you want here, copper?" he demanded, no polish in his voice at all.

Loring spoke softly. "I called a little while ago and issued a warning that somebody is gunning for Hartnick. Not that I care very much, personally, but Hartnick has to keep on living until I can get this killer-diller out of town. For the first time in my notable career I have to protect a punk. And without getting paid for it directly. Where is he?"

The headwaiter gave him a suave smile. "Mr. Hartnick, you said? I don't recognize the name. You may look around."

Loring grabbed him by both lapels. "Look, you stuffed-shirted gorilla. It may mean Hartnick's life and if he's killed, you'll go back to massaging dishes at the restaurant sink. I tell you he's in danger."

The headwaiter shook himself loose. He raised a hand, crooked one finger, and two bulky men approached. He whispered to them. Then he crooked a finger at Loring and led him across the ornate foyer of the club to a dimly darkened hallway.

There Loring was shoved against the wall by one of the burly men. The other rapidly searched him, removed gun, wallet, and a sap. He put these into his own pocket.

"Take him to Morey," the headwaiter ordered. "When he gets through talking to him, take him into the country and beat the ears off him."

They led him out a side door, across a courtyard to a sedan parked and waiting. They drove uptown to what seemed a very sedate cafe, dimly lighted and well patronized. A string ensemble played muted music.

BUT this was a blind for the real source of income from the property. Upstairs were plush gambling rooms and Morey Hartnick's main offices. The gambler was a lithe, gray-haired man who looked more like a successful banker. He sat behind a large and expensive desk and seemed to belong there. He knew that Loring was coming.

"Sit down, shamus," he said pleasantly. "And tell me why a private eye should go to all this trouble to warn me about some dumb girl who is on the warpath for me. It'll buy you a drink if you tell the truth."

"I could use one." Loring sat down. "It's the truth all right. She's Phil Vinion's sister. A stunt girl in the movies who knows how to shoot, among other things. Punch, too. Look at my jaw if you don't believe it."

Morey laughed and went to a small bar where he poured two drinks. He gave Loring one.

"Now look," he said seriously, "I didn't kill Phil Vinion. Even the cops are satisfied as to that. I got a perfect alibi for the time of his death. Trouble is, it's so perfect the thing seems rigged."

"He reneged on some checks payable to you," Loring said. "That's reason enough for a big-shot gambler to gun him down."

Morey raised his glass and took a short drink. "True, and I might have had him gone over. Even bumped off the way he was. But—I didn't do it. Someone beat me to the punch and I'm left holding his worthless checks to the tune of twelve grand."

Loring, despite himself, felt that Morey told the truth.

"I've been retained to see that this sister

doesn't kill you," explained the detective. "She's on the loose, armed, and perfectly capable of doing a job on you. All I ask is that you take precautions and let me tag along."

"Why?" Morey asked suspiciously.

"Do you know Martha Vinion?"

"Never saw her or even heard of her until now."

"Then how do you propose to pick her out if she saunters your way with a gat in her purse? I've seen her. I'm not apt to forget what she looks like."

Morey nodded. "That sounds logical enough. Maybe you're right about her being dangerous, too. I've got a penthouse uptown where I can hole up in cases like this. Okay, we'll go there, but if this is some sort of a trick, shamus, you won't like what will happen to you."

"It's no trick. I'm dead level, Morey, because I don't want that girl to kill you. Let's get out of here. Phil may have told her all the spots where you hang out."

Morey travelled like an old time mobster, with a bodyguard of four men. They formed a box around him, two in front, two in back. Loring wasn't permitted inside that cordon. He trailed along behind them. They left the gambling house and started across the sidewalk toward the car parked at the curb.

They had almost reached it when the gun cracked. Nobody knew where the would-be assassin was hidden for there was no appreciable flash. Morey groaned, clapped a hand against his side, and leaned weakly against the man closest to him.

Loring scanned the windows across the street. He saw no one. Morey's guards were well drilled. They didn't waste time going for the killer, but herded Morey to the car as fast as he could move. It pulled away as Loring crawled into the crowded tonneau. There was no more shooting.

"How bad is it?" he asked Morey.

The gambler groaned and gritted his teeth. "Bad enough, but I thought you said she knew how to shoot. And while we're at it, shamus, this looks fixed to me. You could be a fingerman."

"I could, but I'm not," Loring said quickly. "Slow up. I'm going back and try to find that girl."

"Hear that, boys?" Morey said. "He's going back." His laugh was short, harsh.

Before Loring could make a move, he was looking down a slanted gun barrel. Behind it, one of Morey's guards spoke.

"He's going back. Just like that."

"Show him we enjoy his company," Morey ordered between groans.

For the second time that night Loring passed out. This time to the tune of a heavy gun butt expertly applied on exactly the right part of his skull.

WHEN he woke up, they were dragging him from the car to a rear door of some tall building. An elevator waited and he was thrown inside it. When he tried to get up, somebody kicked him savagely in the ribs.

He dropped down again, but let his hand encounter the spot where his gun should have been. There was just an empty holster. He regarded two pair of big feet planted close to him. The owner of one pair spoke.

"You can handle this guy. He's only half out of the fog anyhow. I'd better go with the others. Morey says if we don't bring in that girl, we go back to being bouncers. Me, I like the life I lead now."

The car came to a stop, the doors slid back, and both men pulled him into a corridor. Then one got back into the elevator. The other prodded Loring with his foot.

"Come on, get up!" he ordered.

Loring got to his hands and knees. He stayed there, shaking his head groggily, but he had recovered his wits far more than he indicated. During one violent shake, he saw that his guard had a gun carelessly held but ready to bring into play at the slightest sign of treachery.

"I'm dizzy," Loring said. "Things are spinning."

He raised himself a little, swayed, and grabbed at the guard's trouser legs. The gun didn't move. Loring drew away, pulled himself almost erect, and then seemed to collapse. The guard raised his free hand to keep from being knocked down.

Loring suddenly moved in. One arm went around the guard, the other pinned his gun hand down. He butted the man hard in the pit of the stomach, wrenched the gun free, and then snapped home a punch to the face. It connected, half blinding the bigger man. Loring finished

him off with a straight jab to the chin.

Then he raced for the stairway. It was a hopelessly long way down, but two floors below he heard an elevator, and dashing out into the corridor, he pushed the button just as the car flashed past the floor. It stopped, came back, and took him aboard. Two minutes later he was running through the lobby of this apartment house.

He hailed a cab outside and gave Gregory Firth's address. He was fortunate they hadn't taken his change, for they still had his wallet. He relaxed as much as possible, to think over this wierd situation. Morey was scared and had given orders that Martha was to be either killed or kidnapped. Now Loring had to save her.

Two blocks from the address, he paid off the taxi driver and waited until he had pulled away. Then Loring moved toward the brownstone front where the fat uncle and his nephew, Emery Castle, lived. Martha was bound to return there. Undoubtedly Morey Hartnick's boys were waiting for her, too, but they'd be invisible until the moment they struck.

Loring saw a sedan roll slowly past the house. He was concealed in a doorway, but was close enough to recognize the car as the one in which he'd been slugged. Only the driver was in it and apparently cruising about so as to be ready for a fast takeoff when they got Martha.

Loring ran down a side street, crouched behind a trash can, and waited. When the sedan rolled by, he leaped out and sprinted toward it. Before the driver could either step on the gas or pull a gun, Loring had the door open. He beat half a dozen short, chopping blows to the driver's face, stunned him, and took over the wheel. With the car stopped at the curb, Loring finished the job on the driver and dumped him into a doorway.

There were no people on the street at this hour and it was unlikely he'd be discovered. Loring got behind the wheel, yanked down the brim of his hat, and began cruising around the block just as Morey's driver had quite obviously had orders to do.

He was turning right, beyond Firth's house, when he noticed the cab slide to the curb in front of the brownstone. Martha got out and Loring was quite help-

less to prevent what was bound to happen. Morey's men wouldn't know her by sight, but they'd rightly reason that any young woman coming to this house at such an hour would be Martha.

Loring speeded up a little. He finally turned into the street where the snatch would already have taken place. There wasn't a soul around and the cab had disappeared. He braked the car a little. Then a man popped out waving his arms. Loring pulled over.

TWO more men appeared and they held a struggling, kicking figure between them. One of the men opened the sedan door. Martha was lifted and hurled bodily into the rear seat. Loring stepped on it then, leaving Morey's men so amazed that they didn't even think of shooting until it was too late.

"Martha," Loring said. "Are you okay?"

"So far. Thanks! But who are you, and why did you save my neck?"

"Close the car door." Loring said, "before it gets knocked off. I'm the man who met you at Grand Central. Now wait—I'm not one of Hartnick's boys. That was a lie. My name is Clint Loring. I'm a private detective hired by your uncle."

"To protect me?" she snorted. Then she laughed a little and her voice relented. "I guess Greg knew what he was doing at that. You did get me away from those men."

"I wasn't hired to protect you, but to keep you from killing Morey Hartnick," Loring explained. "That's what you intend to do, isn't it?"

He turned into a park, selected a very dark spot, and came to a stop. Martha got into the front seat beside him then.

"At first, yes, I suppose I did intend killing him," she confessed. "But when the time came—when I finally had Uncle Greg's gun in my purse. I began to realize killing Hartnick wouldn't solve any problems."

"Did you go to his headquarters? The uptown cafe where he keeps his offices?"

"No." Martha shook her dark head. "Frankly, I was unable to find a soul who even knew Hartnick. I just wandered around, cooling off and trying to use my head instead of my emotions."

"Somebody went there—and tried to

cool off Hartnick with a bullet. It wounded him, but he won't die. I've had a feeling about this. You're being used as a fall guy. Someone to throw to the cops. Or maybe get killed so that Hartnick can be blamed for your murder. That fat uncle of yours set the stage. Would he get rich if you died?"

"No," she said promptly, "and he is fully aware of the fact. He got nothing out of Phil's death. He would get nothing out of mine. Nor from my cousin, Emery Castle. Uncle Greg has no reason to want any of us dead."

"How about Emery then?"

She took a cigarette case from her purse and extended it to Loring. He supplied a match. When they had lighted up, she lay back on the seat, puffed a few times, and seemed to be thinking deeply.

"Emery has enough money," she said finally. "We support Greg. After all, he is the brother of my mother and Emery's. They were sisters, as you can probably figure out. Greg may have had my welfare in mind when he hired you to stop me from killing Hartnick. I still intend to see that the crooked gambler is punished."

"For what? Hartnick didn't kill your brother."

The tip of her cigarette glowed for several seconds as she took a very long, steadying puff.

"Why are you so certain of that?" she asked. "Phil wrote me that Hartnick would murder him."

"Yes, I know. I saw the letter," Loring said. "In fact, I've got it in my pocket right now. But I talked to Hartnick and I believe him. He's had men killed before and staged beautiful alibis. He's got one for the time of Phil's death, but even the cops don't seem to doubt this one."

"But who could have killed him then? And why? He had no enemies."

"I don't know. However, right now I'm more concerned with earning my fee. I've succeeded in getting you off Hartnick's trail and I hope I've squelched all your determination to kill him. Only, of course, Hartnick doesn't know this. Until he does, your life is in danger. We've got to go see him."

"But won't that be dangerous?" Martha asked.

"No more so than having his gorillas

looking all over town for us. I'm in this now, too. Hartnick had me snatched and I got away from him. I know where he is. Want to face the music?"

Martha was enthusiastic about the idea and she showed no fear at all. "Maybe he'll even help us. His life is also in danger, with somebody apparently trying to kill him."

"I've thought of that." Loring started the car, tossed his cigarette butt away and headed uptown toward Hartnick's penthouse. "It looks to me like some sort of a plan to get Hartnick killed so you can take the blame. Now—why is Hartnick the target? That's our problem. And we still have to consider your uncle and your cousin. Have either of them alibis for the time when Phil was taken for that ride and shot to death?"

"Greg was in Philadelphia that night," she said. "I know that's a fact. Furthermore, he has no motive. As for Emery—I suppose he was with Natalie Wilson. Of the ultra-ultra Wilson clan, you know. Reformists, philanthropists, and what-not. He's going to marry her."

LORING didn't say much, but his heart was pounding excitedly when he helped Martha out of the car in front of Hartnick's apartment building. This could end in an abrupt tragedy. Hartnick was wounded and probably sore about the whole thing. He might not give them a chance to talk. Loring wished he had a gun. Then he thought of the one Martha was supposed to have taken. He asked for it.

She opened her purse and surrendered it. Loring broke the breech. All six bullets were intact. He sniffed of the muzzle. The gun had been fired recently. He slid the weapon into his pocket, wondering if Martha were making a complete fool of him. She could have been hidden across the street, fired at Hartnick, and gotten away. It was an easy matter to replace an exploded bullet.

They rode the elevator to the penthouse floor. When the elevator doors opened, Loring knew their coming had already been announced. Three men were waiting.

"Now take it easy, boys," Loring said. "Before you start ripping us apart, we've something to tell Morey which is im-

portant and interesting. It may save his life."

"Yeah," one man grunted heavily, "you're a great little lifesaver, ain't you, Loring? The other time you saved him, he got shot. But Morey says he wants to talk to you anyway. Lift your arms for a frisk. You too, beautiful."

Martha instantly backed up against the wall and her eyes were shooting sparks. One of the men advanced toward her.

"Hey—don't try it!" Loring warned hastily.

The man wasn't listening. He put a hand on Martha's shoulder. She kicked his shins and when he bent over in pain, she slugged him twice.

Loring groaned. "I tried to stop him," he said.

Martha stepped over the fallen man, marched past the amazed pair who were still on their feet, and walked directly to the apartment door. She opened it and went inside. Loring followed.

Hartnick, still pale from the loss of blood and from the pain of his wound, sat in a big chair. Behind him stood two men ready for business. Loring moved up to Hartnick and drew Martha beside him.

"Morey, we came here of our own free will," he said. "That ought to prove we're on the level. Martha says she didn't shoot at you. I believe her. Someone is out to kill you and have her take the blame. We felt you ought to know that."

"I know it already," Hartnick said tightly. "I know who's trying it, too. And don't give me any stuff about being responsible for the murder of Phil Vinion. Because Phil isn't dead."

"He's alive?" Martha cried eagerly.

"Yes. He was in that gambling place of mine tonight. Two of my men saw him and they don't make mistakes. He reneged on paying up his losses. He knew what that meant, so I figure he knocked off somebody who looked like him, switched clothes and identification, and hoped I'd get blamed for the job. When that didn't happen, he took more definite steps in trying to kill me. Now—where would I find him?"

Loring rubbed his chin. "But Phil is dead. I'm certain of it. There could be a double, of course, though things like that seldom happen in real life."

Hartnick raised a hand and one of his

men stepped forward. Hartnick asked the man how many times he'd seen Phil Vinion before the supposed murder.

"He used to show up at least three or four times a week," the man said. "Played heavy and won a lot of times. Got a losing streak just before all this started, though. Anyway, I guess I saw and talked to him a hundred times. I saw him again tonight—twice. The last time he was heading for the private stairway to the second floor. I figured he was going to see the boss."

Loring snapped his fingers. "He was on his way up to a room from which he could shoot you, Morey. You were at an angle when the shot was fired. It was hard to tell where it came from, but I faced the buildings across the street and I saw no gun flash. Because it was behind me."

"So what?" Hartnick asked. "I die whether I'm shot at from the front or the back. All I want to know is where Phil Vinion could be holed up. I take care of my own affairs."

NEVER had Loring put so much pleading into his voice. "Morey, I think I know what this is all about. Only I haven't got the proof. Give me one hour. If I don't produce, you can do whatever you like with me."

Hartnick shrugged. "You can have a couple of hours, only this girl stays right here. I figure Phil will hear about it sooner or later and come after her. That's what I want."

Loring moved over to Martha. "It has to be that way," he said. "Hartnick won't harm you. Not as long as I'm loose and can say you were here. And I'll be back. It won't take long."

Loring hurried out of the place and hailed a taxi. He rode straight to Greg Firth's home and rang the bell. Both Firth and Emery came to let him in.

"Have you heard anything from her?" Loring asked.

"Not a word," Emery said. "Haven't you?"

Loring nodded. "I have. I warned Hartnick and suggested he go into hiding. On the way out of his place, Martha took a shot at him. Hartnick didn't seem to be badly wounded, but the bullet severed an artery. He bled to death before they could get a doctor."

"I tried," Greg Firth sighed, closing his

heavily lidded eyes. "I did all I could, but it was no use. Martha's always had a violent temper. Loring—" the eyes opened and were slightly narrowed, "you haven't earned a dime of that five hundred, but you can. Get Martha away."

"Martha escaped by going down the back trellis," Emery Castle broke in. "She could get in the same way. Maybe she's returned. All her things are here. I've got to go find out."

He rushed up the stairs. Loring followed, and Greg waddled far behind. When Loring entered the room, Emery stood there regarding Martha's opened and ransacked suitcases.

"I was right," he said. "She came back to get some of her things before she ran for a hiding place."

Loring didn't comment, but started searching the room. The bed covers seemed a trifle disarrayed. He stripped them off, raised the mattress, and pulled out a gun. It was a replica of the one which he'd taken from Martha's handbag and which she had originally borrowed from Greg. The gun had been fired.

"This must be the gun that killed Hartnick," Loring said. "We can easily tell."

Greg waddled over and looked at the weapon. "It's the one she took all right."

"Or a reasonable facsimile," Loring said, and his voice grew tight. "Martha never came back here. She tried to, but Hartnick's men snatched her and I, in turn, took her away from them. We went to Hartnick's place and Martha is there right now. Furthermore, Hartnick isn't dead and in no danger of dying. And—I might add that Hartnick's men swear they saw Phil Vinion in one of the gambling houses tonight."

"No!" Greg shouted. "That's a lie! Phil is dead. Don't you think I know that? Emery saw him dead, too. So did a lot of people."

Loring nodded. "I fully agree. Hartnick didn't kill Phil. But neither had Phil been a frequenter of Hartnick's gambling places. Somebody took his identity. You, for instance, Emery. You liked to gamble, but you were marrying into an extremely respectable family and if they found that out, you were finished. The night you lost so heavily, you paid by check, signing Phil's name. But the bank questioned the signatures and called Phil down. He

guessed what had happened.

"Phil accused you directly. Maybe you'd issued other checks on his account and gotten away with it. Maybe you're not as wealthy as everyone seems to think. Yet Phil could have broken up your intended marriage and likely put you in jail. Hartnick, at any rate, would probably have you worked over badly when he learned the truth. So you killed Phil. You wrote Martha a letter, again copying Phil's hand writing sufficiently well to get away with it. In shock and sorrow at Phil's death, Martha would never question the writing."

"Now, now," Greg put in mildly. "Of course you are wrong, Loring. Utterly wrong."

Loring shook his head. "This is once when I'm not wrong," he snapped. And you're in it, too. You came to me to build up the illusion that when Hartnick died, Martha would be the killer. Because Hartnick had to die. When he discovered that Emery wasn't Phil Vinion, he'd have Emery over a barrel and take full advantage of it. Just as you intended to do, Greg.

"You meant to help Emery out of this spot. Then you'd have him as a nice subject for polite blackmail. So long as you lived he'd have to keep you. This gun, a double for the one Martha took, was planted by Emery who used it to shoot Hartnick. If Martha returned, you planned to get the other gun off her, but you saw to it that that gun had been fired in case Martha was picked up and the murder bullet couldn't be found to compare with the gun's rifling."

Emery was white-faced. "We can settle this, Loring. Every man is open to a proper approach when it is backed up with enough money."

Loring hit him then. He advanced on Greg who squealed in alarm and backed away. Loring lowered his fist. He couldn't hit a man who was unable to fight back.

Later, after Greg and Emery were locked up, each trying to lay the blame on the other, Loring went to Hartnick's penthouse apartment and told Martha and the gambler the full story. It was immediately confirmed through Hartnick's grapevine and Loring and the girl were detained no longer.

THE next day, Loring took Martha to Grand Central and saw her to the gate of the Twentieth Century.

"I wish you could stick around," he said. "You'd be an asset to my business. Different, too—I never heard of a female bodyguard."

She smiled at him. "I'm only half as tough as I act, Clint. But I must go back."

"Well, I'll be seeing you on some movie screen then," he said. "That's better than not seeing you at all."

"You won't see any more than the back of my head." Martha held his hand tightly. "That's all they show of a double. But you might come out—or maybe I'll return here."

"I need a vacation," Loring said. "And I wouldn't go for just the back of your head on some movie screen. I'll be out."

"And I'll be waiting," Martha said, smiling warmly.



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The library door opened and the ex-con came out

THE NECESSARY CORPSE

By NORMAN A. DANIELS

Detective Marvin works a full year to prove Robert Arnold is guilty, then faces the problem of saving him from the chair!

THE LAKE water was colder than it looked. To Hank Marvin's eyes, it looked as if it had a thin film of ice across its surface. He was stripped down to his shorts. There wasn't anybody around this lake during early Spring.

He lowered himself off the small dock, winced as the frigid water gripped him, and then let go. He grasped the support-

ing dock pillars and ducked under water. The sun's rays were slanted squarely on the most likely spot now, making visibility fair, even beneath the surface.

Hank Marvin finally saw it, after about ten minutes of diving. There wasn't much left save bones, but there was a piece of wire around the neck and this was, in

turn, attached to a large piece of metal. The furnace grate. That was the clue which had sent Hank Marvin hurrying to the lakeside.

He came up for air, and realized he couldn't stay in that icy water much longer. Yet he was obliged to make a final trip down. This time he came up with a strip of now colorless cloth. Sewed to it was a brass button with an eagle stamped on it. He clambered onto the dock, paused only long enough to gather his clothes and then sprinted for the cabin.

He'd previously broken the lock to get inside. All he had to do now was push the door open. He found a towel and dried himself, then stood in front of the fireplace in which he had papers burning fiercely. The heat completed the drying job and he got back into his clothes.

He slid the .38 into its sling holster, glanced around the neat little cabin for the last time and then went to his car. An hour later he supervised the bringing up of the bones and watched the local Medical Examiner go over them.

"Been dead for months," the doctor said. "Hard to give any exact time, of course. I'd say, roughly, this woman died early last summer or maybe late in the spring."

"Early summer will do," Marvin said. "You're certain it's the skeleton of a woman?"

The doctor was about seventy but spry enough. "Well, it would take a blind man to mistake a feminine skeleton for that of a male," he protested. "Especially when all the bone structure is present, as it is here. Of course this was a woman. I'd judge she was five feet six, medium build most likely."

"Any idea how she was killed, Doc?"

THE physician shook his head. "No—not yet—and maybe never. Don't see any trace of bullet wounds and if a knife was used, it didn't scrape any bones. Yet it could have been a knife or—a pair of strong hands around her throat. Skull is okay—no fractures. Death could have been caused in any number of ways. If you want proof of murder—medical proof—bring me bodies that haven't been dead and immersed in the water about a year."

"Thanks, Doc," Marvin said. "I'll be

seeing you in town. I'll hang around until you complete your work on these bones."

Two hours later the doctor came into his office and sat down. Marvin was waiting there for him, but the doctor had nothing further to report.

"Can't say as to cause of death. Nothing to go by. You know who this woman was?"

"Yes. I also know who killed her, Doc."

"Well—that's it then."

"Can I use your phone, Doc? I'll reverse the charges." Marvin picked up the phone and called a number. Then he said, "Give me the D.A. This is Sergeant Marvin of Homicide." There was a brief wait.

"Hello, Mr. Nolan," Marvin went on. "I found her. Mrs. Janis Arnold, I mean. Yes sir—in the lake. Not much left except bones. I want a warrant for the arrest of Robert Arnold. I'll get the next train back to town now and pick it up."

The old doctor cocked his head to one side as Marvin hung up. "So—it's one of those husband-wife things, eh? Why did he kill her?"

"The usual reason. Insurance—ten grand worth, Doc. Some people think ten grand is all the money in the world. In a way I hate to make the pinch. Janis Arnold married Bob simply to have somebody support her. She was divorced. First husband was in prison doing eight to ten on a robbery with violence rap. Janis never was much good. A handsome woman all right. The kind some sap like Bob Arnold would fall on his face for. Only she was just good looking on the outside. Within she was a devil."

"What's the husband like, Sergeant?"

"Quiet sort. Has a nice job and the steadiest nerves I've ever seen and I've been in this business for darn near eighteen years. He never cracked once and we really put him through some fancy questioning. Figured we'd never find the body and without it he was perfectly safe."

"Umm," the doctor mused with a wise look. "But even though you have a corpse, you have to do a lot more identifying of it than to merely say it's a woman. There's no power on earth could tell you exactly what the skeleton looked like when it was ambulating around. Oh—height, weight—yes. Facial characteristics—rarely."

Sergeant Marvin flipped the brass but-

ton into the air and caught it smoothly. He grinned. "This will help. It came off a coat she wore when last seen. The only coat missing from her home. Thanks, Doc. I'll have the *corpus delicti* sent for."

On the train back, Sergeant Marvin stared out of the window and hated more and more to make the pinch. It would have been different if Janis Arnold had been a sweet girl, but Janis had been anything but that. Marvin suspected she'd helped her first husband on more than one of his crime jobs. Not long after he was sent away, she divorced him and married Bob Arnold.

Marvin had wired ahead so there was a police car waiting at the station. He drove it to the D.A.'s office and picked up the warrant after giving the D.A. all details of the case. The D.A. was perfectly satisfied with the evidence.

Marvin drove to the suburban section where Bob Arnold still lived in the house he'd shared with the woman he'd murdered. There were lights in the living room. Marvin rang the bell and Bob Arnold let him in. Arnold was thirty, built like a fullback and handsome enough to cause flutters. He looked at Marvin and groaned.

"You again! Sergeant, don't you ever give up?"

Marvin closed the door. "Yep—I'm giving up right now. When a case is ended, it's ended."

"Good." Arnold managed a wide grin. "Come on in and have a drink. I don't possess the slightest bit of ill feeling, Sergeant. In fact, despite all the trouble you've given me, I like you."

Marvin sat down. "Let's have the story once more. The whole thing."

Arnold's grin faded. "I don't like the tone of voice you're using, Sarge. There's no bluster in it. Just a quiet certainty. But if you like the story so well, I'll tell it.

"I married Janis three years ago. We bought this house. Soon after we were married, I found out she was a spend-thrift, morally bankrupt and lazy. I began to dislike her at first. Then I hated her. Last March—the twenty-ninth—I came home from work. She wasn't here. I never saw her again."

"Check," Marvin said. "And when last seen she was wearing a blue print dress

and a light blue topper with brass buttons that had eagles on 'em. Like this one."

MARVIN dropped the button on a table. Arnold looked at it. His lower lip curved in until he grasped it between his teeth for an instant. Then he reached out for the button and got his hand slapped away.

"Uh-uh." Marvin swept the button up and put it into his pocket. "Mustn't touch the evidence. Why didn't you tell me you bought a cabin up at Lake Toharee?"

"Cabin—Toharee?" Arnold was very white. "But I didn't. I don't know a thing."

"Well, Janis bought it. At least the title was in her name, but Janis had no dough, Bob. There was nowhere she could get a grand and a half down-payment except from you. So you knew about the cabin. You took her up there, had an especially rough scrap and you killed her. Then you twisted wire around her neck and hooked the other end to the furnace grate. That's what made me look in the lake. It was a nice new furnace and should have had a grate. When it didn't, I figured the grate must have been used for something more important."

"You—found—her," Arnold said wearily. "Of course. The body was bound to be discovered some day. If she was dead. But I never really believed that she was. I thought she just got sick of me and everything and went off. Has the body been identified?"

Marvin brought out the warrant. "Enough so the D.A. gave me this. Bob—this is it. The pinch. A year ago I'd have given my right arm to pin this on you. Six months ago I still wanted to make the arrest, but its prospects had lost some savor. Today—well, except that I'm a cop with a sworn duty, I'd never do it. Get your hat and coat."

"Mur-murder?" Arnold didn't move.

"What else? Look, Bob, take some advice from an old hand in the business. You hated Janis. For good reason, maybe, but no reason condones murder. You took out a ten thousand dollar insurance policy on her and then she disappears. Two motives.

"The old biddy who lives next door told us about the fights you and Janis had.

She said that Janis told her you had threatened to kill her. Janis also told that to another neighbor so the old biddy didn't have it exclusive.

"The day she vanished, you weren't around. You didn't show up until late the following day. Just about the time it would have taken you to get back from the lake. And your only alibi was that you'd been driving around for ten hours. It jibes, man. It all falls into place."

"Hank—believe me, I didn't kill her," Arnold pleaded. "I don't know what happened to her. I didn't care much, that's true, but—I couldn't have killed her. She was too beautiful and she'd meant too much to me at one time. Don't you see?"

Marvin shook his head. "Nope, I don't. Let's go, Bob."

Marvin booked him, bought a carton of cigarettes and two fistfuls of candy bars which he brought to Arnold's cell. Then Marvin went back to his office and wrote a complete report. He also checked through the voluminous files he'd accumulated on Bob Arnold. Nothing in those papers lent any help to the case.

Marvin had interviewed everybody Arnold had ever known. There was one unique agreement which all of those people held to. Arnold wasn't a killer and never could be.

Marvin had seen reports like these before. Made in favor of a killer whose guilt was pronounced and evident. People were rotten judges of character. Average people were, at any rate. A cop got more training and experience. Marvin hesitated as he crossed the room to return those files. Well, he thought, if I'm such a good judge of character, why can't I be positive Bob knocked her off? Because I'm not sure.

He went home, to the double room suite in a modest hotel. He didn't sleep. He sat by the window winking back at the neon signs advertising Steve's Bar & Grill downstairs. Marvin could have used some of the stuff Steve served.

He was sure Arnold had killed her. He'd always been sure of it. That's why he'd spent a year on the case. Now he had Arnold behind bars and yet—he also had doubts. Black, realistic doubts. They pounded inside his head. Banged away in conflict with the urge to convince himself that Bob wasn't guilty.

THE next day, in an absurdly sleepy fashion, Marvin went to the morgue where the skeleton had been brought. He talked to the D.A.'s medical assistant. He and other doctors had already drawn up a chart of what the dead woman had probably looked like. They'd found tiny fragments of hair. Blond—the kind Janis had. The teeth were fairly intact but, according to Bob Arnold, Janis had never gone to a local dentist. There were half a dozen small fillings though. Without a dental chart they didn't become very important items of identification.

"We'll need help in establishing identification," the medical aide said.

"Yeah, I know." Marvin went to a phone in the next room. He called the prison, upstate, and learned that Mark Connor, who had been Janis' first husband, had been released three days ago.

Finding him was easy. The Parole Officer had his address and his place of occupation. Marvin went there after seven that night. Mark Connor was a big man and prison life had made him flabby. He was lying beneath a sun lamp when Marvin walked in. Connor removed his dark glasses and sat up.

"Don't coppers knock any more?" he asked tightly. "Or has etiquette changed while I was in stir?"

"Hello, Connor." Marvin sat down. "This is official business. You know your ex-wife vanished a year ago."

"Yeah—so I was told. I didn't care then and I don't now. A wife is supposed to share a guy's tough luck. She certainly shared the dough I worked for. But when I got it in the neck, she dropped me cold. Am I supposed to feel sorry for her?"

"She's dead, Connor."

Connor whistled softly and his puffy lips remained pursed after the last notes of the whistle died away. He sat there, just staring at Marvin for a full two minutes.

Then he said, "So what? She's dead—well, she's dead. I'm not going to cry about it."

"Somebody knocked her off and dropped the body into a lake. A year ago, Connor. There isn't too much left. I want you to come down to the morgue for a look."

"Okay. I don't mind doing that," Connor said dully. "But remember. it's an

awful long time since I saw her last. More than six years."

"She was in the water a year. She doesn't look much like the girl you knew," Marvin said quietly. "Just the same there are certain things which might serve as identification."

"You got the guy who did it?" Connor demanded.

"He's locked up. She was married to him. Connor, what dentist attended Janis' teeth?"

"What dentist—? How do I know? She never went to one while she was married to me. We were on the move all the time. Copper, has this dame you found got a busted finger? And a busted left leg?"

"Which finger?" Marvin asked.

"Middle—left hand. She got it caught in a train gate once. She busted her left leg when she was a kid. Skiing, she told me. It used to bother her sometimes and she could never skate or do anything like that."

CASUALLY, Marvin nodded, showing none of the despair in his heart. "Yes, the middle finger of the left hand had been broken. The left leg showed an old fracture. I guess that does it, but you'd better have a look anyhow."

Connor made an identification which would stack up in front of a jury. Marvin's work was done. Arnold was a murderer and deserved no more sympathy than any of the other killers Marvin had sent speeding to the chair.

Connor repeated his identification in court. There wasn't much to the case. A pair of nosy neighbors testified to the fights and to Janis' statement that Bob had threatened to kill her and she believed him. Marvin told of the fact that Arnold's story about his wife simply leaving him, was as shallow as a basin.

Nobody had seen her leave. She'd purchased no railroad, bus or plane ticket so far as he could ascertain. She'd been at home one night and gone the next day. Bob Arnold was also unaccounted for on the day Janis disappeared.

Arnold's defense was miserably weak. His attorney got nowhere, though he put up an eloquent plea. But there'd been a wave of wife and husband murders lately. The D.A. laid it on thick. The jury had read too many of those stories. There was

the ten thousand dollar policy Bob had taken out on Janis' life. That was the clincher. They sent Bob Arnold to the chair after a forty minute deliberation during which Marvin thought they'd played a few hands of gin rummy. Even the judge sadly shook his head when he heard the verdict.

Marvin stayed out of the way when Arnold was removed to prison. He went to work on other things. More missing people, more fights, more robberies and—more murder. But he couldn't get his mind off Bob Arnold. Nights, he saw a panorama in which Arnold was being led to the chair and Marvin awoke in a chilly sweat.

A WEEK before Arnold was slated to take a seat in that very special chair, Sergeant Marvin had a visitor to his office. It was just about the time he'd made up his mind to talk to the D.A. and to the Governor, if necessary, about Arnold.

His visitor was young, five feet three and cute as a doll. All except her eyes. They were red from weeping. She said her name was Pauline Guilford.

"It's about Bob," she went on. "He and I were to be—to be married."

Marvin exhaled slowly. "Married! You mean he asked you to marry him?"

"Yes," she whimpered. "The night his wife disappeared he drove to Winton where I live. That's why he couldn't say where he'd been. Nobody was home. He drove back again, but if he claimed he'd done this, he couldn't have proven it and then—then—"

"Yeah," Marvin broke in heavily. "Then you'd come into the picture and we'd have pinned him harder than ever to the wall. So he asked you to marry him while his wife was alive—so far as Bob knew. Or did he know she was dead and he was safe in asking you?"

"No," she said. "No, Sergeant. He told me the whole story. He was going to wait until he could sue her for divorce on grounds of desertion. But he didn't kill her. Bob isn't a killer. Don't you think I'd have sensed it if he murdered his wife?"

Marvin tugged at the lobe of his ear. "Smarter women than you have been deceived. Notably those women whose husbands murdered them. They didn't

sense it coming or they'd have taken a powder fast. What you have just told me doesn't help Bob at all. In fact, it makes things a darn sight worse for him."

"That's why I didn't come forward before," she said bitterly. "But now I just had to. I know you've been kind to Bob. As kind as a detective could be to the man he had to arrest. I've got to do something to help Bob."

"Then stay out of the way," Marvin urged. "Listen—until you showed up, I'd about made up my mind to intercede for Bob. Now I can't. You've supplied a stronger motive than ever."

"But we can't just let him die!" Her pretty face screwed up and Marvin winced. He hated to see women cry. It was a soft spot in him. He put an arm around her shoulders.

"No, we can't," he acknowledged, "and we aren't going to. I don't know what can be done. But we'll try everything. Did Janis know about you?"

"Y-yes. She suspected Bob, I guess. She followed him one night and made an awful scene. Bob wasn't in love with her. She just tricked him into marriage."

"I can imagine," Marvin said dully. "Every time you open your mouth, you push Bob closer and closer to the chair. Now look—go home and stay there. Don't mention Bob's name to a soul. Not even if they carry out his sentence. I'm going to do what I can. Let you know."

SHE kissed him on the cheek and Marvin wondered how he'd have reacted fifteen years ago. He'd never thought of forty-five as being old before. He called the D.A. and got a flat rejection and a warning that if he went to see the Governor, Homicide was going to lose a man and some outlying precinct would gain a sergeant—in uniform, pounding a beat.

Marvin bit his cigar in half, slammed down the phone and got madder than he'd ever been in his life. He threw aside everything else and went to work on the Janis Arnold murder case harder than he'd ever worked on it.

He discovered that it was Janis who had applied for the ten thousand dollar insurance policy three months before she was reported missing. It was possible Bob hadn't even known about the policy deal until it had been completed. Then he had

paid the premiums, as most husbands do. Janis had bought the cabin at the lake on her own too. The agent who handled the deal had never laid eyes on Bob.

It was all hopeful, but had come to light too late. Marvin discovered that these things had always existed, but he'd been looking for the items which would convict a man, not alibi or free him. And there was always that skeleton, still at the morgue so far as he knew.

He went back to Bob's house and smashed a window to get inside. Janis had maintained a separate bedroom which was half fitted up as a living room as well. It contained an ivory colored desk which Marvin proceeded to rifle thoroughly. There wasn't much of anything. Some receipts, mostly, and he skimmed through these realizing only that Janis knew how to spend money if nothing else.

Then he found a receipt that made him frown a bit. It was from the Alliance Employment Agency and indicated Janis had hired a servant and paid the agency fee.

Marvin got up and walked around the little house. A maid here? There simply wasn't room enough for one and no necessity for one, not even if Janis had been extremely lazy. The place was compact, quite new and needed very little care. Yet, Janis had paid out good money to hire a maid.

It was an interesting proposition. Marvin tried to call the employment agency, but they were closed. He put the receipt in his pocket. Then he phoned the Missing Person's Bureau. From old Pop Delaney, who ran it nights, he learned that a hundred servants were on the files. An even dozen reported missing about the time of Janis' disappearance. Marvin took down their names and descriptions.

He studied the list intently, crossing out eight names. The four who were left had been decided blondes. He felt pretty good about this. If only Thursday was six months away instead of a mere three days. Thursday was Bob Arnold's last evening. The chair worked on Thursday night.

The time limit put Marvin into action at once. He checked and discovered who owned the employment agency, drove to the man's house and introduced himself.

"Why, yes," the owner said, after Marvin told the facts. "I recall the client.

A woman dropped in one day and wanted a maid. She looked over a few, interviewed them and said none would do. She came back the next day and I had about a dozen on hand. She selected one of them. Rose Swanson by name—paid us our fee and took the girl away with her."

"You didn't investigate?" Marvin demanded. "It's my recollection that the laws governing employment agencies—"

"Yes, we did check," the owner snapped. "The address she gave us was non-existent. How could we do anything more? Naturally we took her at face value."

"Speaking of faces," Marvin took out a picture of Janis Arnold, "does that one look like anybody you knew?"

"No. No—I'm certain it does not." The owner held the picture up to the light, studying Janis' heavily made up features.

"That isn't the woman who hired one of your maids?"

"Certainly not." He handed the picture back. "She wasn't a blonde, was much older looking and—well, if you saw the woman who posed for that picture, you wouldn't be apt to forget her. She's a—." He looked around to be sure his wife wasn't within earshot. Then he winked. "She's a honey, that one."

"Yeah," Marvin sighed. "A honey is right. Let's have the name and address of that maid. Even if I have to drive you to your office to find out."

THAT was necessary, though Marvin hated to lose the time. Armed with the address in a cheap rooming house section, he drove there at once. The landlady was a myopic, rapier-nosed character who wasn't much impressed by Marvin's badge.

"Yes," she said, squinting down her glasses, "I reported Rose Swanson as missing a year ago. It took you people a long time to come around to see whether or not she came back."

"Did she?" Marvin braced himself.

"Of course she did. You can talk to her tomorrow if you like. She's working now. For me. Making up the rooms of my people who work at night."

"I'll talk to her now," Marvin said. "Right now, lady, and I'm in no mood to argue."

The landlady apparently decided he wasn't fooling and stepped aside. She even unbent sufficiently to tell him Miss Swanson was on the third floor. Marvin found her swabbing a kitchenette linoleum. He stepped inside the door and coughed to get her attention.

She stood up, wiping her sweat-covered face with the back of a grimy and soap-sudsy hand. "Yes?" she asked.

Marvin showed his badge. "A year ago you were hired at an agency office by a woman with dark hair—"

"Yes, I remember. That was a funny one."

"Tell me just what happened," Marvin urged.

"Well this woman, she comes to the agency and takes me. She knew a good worker when she saw one. Offered to pay me good too. She took me to a lake. I forget the name, but it's in the country, about forty miles or so to the north. I cleaned up the cabin. I had a room in back.

"I went to bed good and tired that night. Around ten I woke up. The woman was carrying on something awful. With a man. I heard things break. Then everything got quiet. I knew she was married. I saw her rings, so I figured her husband came up."

"And the next morning?" Marvin asked.

"Well, I got up early and started cleaning the kitchen. Then this man walks in and pays me off. He gave me fifty dollars extra and says they ain't going to use the cabin after all and I ain't needed. So I just got my things and started for home."

"You didn't see the woman?"

"No—not that morning. The man said she was sleeping late."

"But if you came right back home, your landlady must have told you she'd listed you as missing. You see, I'm from the Missing Person's Bureau. Your name is on file. We've got to close the case."

"Oh, that." She primped some loose strands of coarse straw colored hair under the bandanna she wore. "I figured you just closed the case anyhow. I didn't come right home. I got a job at a hotel on the other side of the lake. I didn't come back here until last October."

"Okay," Marvin snapped. "We'll take your name off the list. Next time report

to the Bureau, will you?"

He stalked out, more than ever convinced of Bob Arnold's guilt. Here was a witness who'd actually seen Bob at the cabin, heard the fight and was paid to leave quickly. Marvin hadn't asked her for a description of Janis or Bob. He was working for them now, not against them.

He started his car, pulled away from the curb and then stopped again. He got out, ran back to the house and climbed the two flights of stairs once more. Miss Swanson was still in the kitchenette, shampooing the sink now. She seemed a trifle irritated when he came back.

"I forget to tell you," Marvin said, "before the files can be closed, you must report to the Bureau and sign a withdrawal of the complaint. Can we expect you tomorrow? Fine. That's all. Say, mind if I have a drink of water?"

He took a glass from its nickel-plated holder beside the sink, turned quickly and his elbow struck the partly open door. The glass fell and broke into quite a few pieces.

Miss Swanson murmured something under her breath and started picking up the bits of glass. Marvin ran into the room, found an old newspaper and helped her.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I know how you girls have to work to make a living."

He carried the newspaper laden with glass to a waste basket and seemed to dump the whole thing into it. Then he put a hand into his pocket and took out a dollar bill.

"This is for your trouble. I'm sorry all over again."

▲ VIDLY she took the bill and went back to her work. This time Marvin really drove away from the place. He went to Headquarters and stayed there for about an hour. At nine-thirty he pulled up in front of Mark Connor's rooming house and went in.

Connor wasn't home. Marvin went looking for him, on the theory he wouldn't be very far away. A parolee isn't supposed to do much in the way of amusement. He saw the cop on the beat and learned that Connor had gone to a cheap movie around the corner. But he wasn't there either. Marvin finally spotted him

in a barroom and the detective smiled as he barged into the place.

It was a smoke filled joint and the stuff on the bar looked like the smoky atmosphere. Connor was bending over the bar with a couple of cronies on either side of him. Marvin tapped the ex-convict's shoulder.

"Let's go, Connor," he said curtly.

Connor turned around. "Go where, copper? What have you got on me?"

"A little matter of violating parole. You're not supposed to frequent barrooms, gambling places, racetracks. You'll be sorry you started hanging around with these hoods. That's on the banned list too. And you'll have four more years to do."

There was a gun drilling into Marvin's spine when he finished talking.

"You ain't pulling me in for just that," Connor insisted. "You're a Homicide dick. I'm not buying, Copper. Okay, boys, do this very quietly. Move him through the back room—"

"That wouldn't be so good," Marvin said as he grinned. "Take a look over the window display. You'll see a harness bull planted out there. He knows I came in. He knows what for and one blast of his whistle will bring down the Marines. Who is taking who where, Connor?"

Connor saw the patrolman. He tossed down what was left of his drink. "Hold him right where he is," he instructed his two friends. "Do it with a gun butt if you must, but keep him here. I've got to powder fast."

He moved away, went around the end of the bar and vanished through a door. Marvin leaned against the bar as if this were an everyday occurrence. Fifteen minutes went by.

"How about it boys?" Marvin said at last. "Has Connor got enough of a start?"

Both men backed away from him, guns concealed now. So far, nobody in the barroom suspected a thing was wrong. They went to the same door behind the end of the bar. Marvin let them disappear. Then he rushed for the front door.

Ten minutes later, he pulled up in front of the boarding house where Rose Swanson worked. He glanced around. There were detectives planted to cover the whole place. One of them stepped from the shelter of a dark doorway and shook

his head to indicate nothing had happened. Marvin did a couple of practise draws from his shoulder sling, marched up to the door and rang the bell.

The startled landlady was pushed aside and warned to keep quiet. Marvin climbed the stairs softly. He knew, of course, which was Rose Swanson's room. He stepped up to the door, grasped the knob hard and turned it. The door was locked. He let go and beat on the panels with his fist.

Instantly Rose Swanson's voice told him to wait a minute. Finally the door opened and Marvin walked in. She wore a cheap cotton housecoat and looked more slovenly than ever. There was a stack of Swedish language newspapers on a table, an opened letter beside its envelope, all lying on the cheap writing table.

"The letter is from your mother," Marvin said. "I thought you had no relatives."

"I didn't say that," Rose snapped. "And I'm sick of being bothered by cops. What do you want now?"

"You," Marvin grinned. "You, Janis. I'm taking the letter too. I imagine you've been taking Rose Swanson's place so well that you have also been answering her mother's letters. That's fine. The return address on the envelope will give us a nice lead. To Rose Swanson's home town where we can find out if she ever broke the middle finger of her left hand and fractured her left leg."

The girl stepped back quickly as if alarmed. "The man is crazy," she said and started to scream. Marvin still grinned at her. He drew his gun and pointed it at the closet door. "Rose Swanson," he said, "wouldn't be apt to have a man hiding in there. Now Janis Connor Arnold would. She's that kind of a girl. So if you aren't Janis, you've nothing to fear if I riddle the door with lead. How about it? Rose—or Janis?"

"Go on and shoot," she challenged. "I don't know what all this talk is about—"

Marvin fired one shot through the door. The girl paled, but she didn't break.

"Come to think of it, if you are Janis, I'd do you a favor by plugging Connor," the detective-sergeant said. "He's nothing but a millstone around your neck now. You can carry the ball from here on. What's in it for me, baby, if I load him with slugs?"

The closet door opened then and Connor came out, a gun in his fist. Marvin shot him through the shoulder and through the side. The girl raced for the door. Two burly detectives blocked it. She started screaming at the top of her lungs and Connor added to the din with his raucous cursing.

SERGEANT MARVIN glanced at the pretty, elated girl beside him as he drove to the prison.

"You're so doggone excited you never even asked me how I tumbled or what it's all about," he said.

"Afterward," she murmured. "Later, Sergeant. When Bob is beside me."

Marvin laughed. "It will take us a couple of hours to get there, a couple of more to free him. You just listen.

"Sure, Rose Swanson was the girl whose skeleton I found in the lake. Janis hired her because they were built a good deal alike and had reasonably similar features. Janis always used lots of make-up.

"Nobody ever knew what she really looked like, I guess. Without all the goo on her face, she was an entirely different looking person. Add cheap clothes, plenty of sweat on her forehead and doing hard work, you just didn't have the glamorous Janis at all. The reason why the employment office manager couldn't recognize Janis' picture was because she wore a dark wig and little or no makeup when she went there."

"Is she very pretty?" Pauline Guilford asked.

"Well—no. As Janis, she was too hard boiled. As Swanson, too frowzy. She killed Swanson, of course. A corpse was very necessary. First though, she quietly left home. Probably in a car she'd bought somewhere under a phony name. She told nobody where she was headed. With Swanson strangled and put beneath the water, Janis then assumed Swanson's identity. She got a job at a nearby hotel, wearing Swanson's clothes. She kept the job for a long time. It must have nearly killed Janis to do that sort of work.

"So, in time, she went back as Rose Swanson. The landlady took her at face value. She can't see past her nose anyhow. Janis probably told her she filled out a bit from the good food at the hotel

where she'd worked. She adopted Swanson's identity, but didn't dare go out much and made an arrangement to pay for her room by serving as maid in the rooming house.

"Now I figured if Janis wasn't dead, Swanson was. I didn't have enough to make a pinch on or even gain a stay of execution for Bob. So I broke a glass on the kitchenette floor. I think Janis suspected what I was up to all right, but in order to stay in character she had to pick up the pieces of glass. Doing so, she got her prints over many of them and I slipped one bit into my pocket. We had Janis' prints, taken from stuff in her house. They checked."

"But, Sergeant," Pauline asked, "what in the world was she after? Did she hate Bob so much she wanted him killed—that way?"

"No. Bob meant nothing at all to her. Just a means to an end. That's what made her idea so easy. No motive at all. She laid the groundwork by telling neighbors Bob had threatened to kill her. She took out an insurance policy with Bob as beneficiary. She quarrelled often and loudly with him. She bought the cabin at

the lake. Then she killed Swanson and sat back to let things happen. They did, just as she expected.

"When I questioned her—as Rose Swanson—she cooked up a story about hearing a terrible fight between Janis and an unknown man in the lake cabin. That, of course, was a complete lie," Marvin said.

Pauline shuddered. "She must be thoroughly evil."

"That she is," Marvin agreed. "Her whole motive was one nobody could guess. Revenge—with a nice profit angle.

"Now after we'd electrocuted Bob, she'd have come back. Yes, sir, right from the dead. And be awful sore that the State had made such a terrible mistake. She'd sue—and collect plenty. I think Connor gave her the idea. She must have visited him in prison. It sounds like something thought up in stir. Connor must have learned from her about the fractured leg and the finger Rose Swanson had. All the little holes were well plugged, you see. But when I scared Connor, he ran to her, just as I expected. The rest was easy."

"It's going to be wonderful," Pauline breathed. "I'll try to make up to Bob for all he's been through."



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Yates fired a single barrel of his shotgun and saw his enemy fold up and drop among the reeds

WHEN IN DOUBT, DUCK!

By ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

Detective Yates knew too much about the killing of Johnny Pike—and that's why he was slated for a sudden rub-out!

DETEKTIVE SERGEANT IZZY YATES rattled the newspaper in annoyance, and made a familiar sound through his pursed lips. At his desk, Lieutenant Corbin looked up from some paper work and cocked an eyebrow.

"Yeah, Izzy?"

"The things people will listen to a guy say!" Yates gave a snort. "Get a load of this. In his talk yesterday Professor Cald-

well stated that rumors of a marked increase in crime since the end of the war are entirely erroneous. American youths received too fine a training in the armed forces to take the lawless path now that they are civilians again. Today's criminals are simply those unfortunates who have known nothing but crime all their lives and— Aw, horses!"

"Check," Corbin grunted. "Why do you read that junk?"

"I did it by mistake," Yates replied. "Burns me up, though. Rot! Army life was okay, but a lot of guys were drafted before they had time to pay off on other guys. Guys with records, I mean. Don't tell me that the Army made them forget! Why—"

The jangle of the phone bell interrupted Yates. Lieutenant Corbin scooped up the instrument and grunted into it. He grunted into it a couple of more times, then hung up and shot Yates a funny look.

"You got a newspaper there, or a crystal ball?" he asked.

Yates sat up a little straighter, and let the newspaper slide from his fingers to the floor.

"Oh-oh!" he said softly.

"Yeah. Johnny Pike is over on the corner of Main and Wall, waiting for somebody to pick him up. He can't do it by himself because he's dead. That call was from Dooley, of Prowl Seven. Says a chopper spoke its piece. Let's go, Izzy."

In six minutes flat they reached the corner of Main and Wall. A lot of rubber-neckers had gathered, but the prowl-car boys were holding them well back. Corbin ran perfect interference and rubber-neckers were jolted back on their heels left and right. Johnny Pike was a limp heap in the angle formed by the corner building wall and the sidewalk. There was a lot of blood because Pike had been practically chewed in half at the belt line. His face was untouched, except by death, and it held a very surprised look. Almost one of reproachful surprise.

A PROWL-CAR sergeant came over and touched a finger to his cap.

"Mike and I were only a block and a half up, Lieutenant," he said. "We heard the chopper bark but traffic had us pinned. Got here as soon as we could. Seems Pike was just standing here, and a car slid around, and the mug behind the chopper let him have it. Must have known Pike would be waiting here because it was timed, but good. No citizens even nicked. Just Pike."

"What kind of a car?" Corbin asked. "Somebody must have seen it."

The prowl-car sergeant grimaced and jerked a head at the goggling crowd.

"Yeah, Mike and I asked around," he grunted. "You name a make, Lieutenant, and the model, and color. There's one of them there that seen it! Just a car with four wheels is our best bet."

Corbin grinned faintly, and nodded.

"I know, Joe," he said. "Okay. Help Mike to clear the curb. The wagon will be along."

As the prowl-car sergeant moved away, Corbin turned to Yates. Izzy seemed not to have heard a word. Standing with feet spread a little, and hands sunk in his pockets, he was staring fixedly down at the remains of Johnny Pike. But it was quite evident he wasn't seeing the dead man.

"So?" Corbin grunted. "Could you boil the list down to maybe an even dozen guys, Izzy? Johnny had his finger in a lot of pies."

Yates grunted, and nodded, but he didn't say anything for a moment. Presently, though, he grunted again, and turned thoughtful eyes toward Corbin.

"Three, I make it," he said. "Chick Link. Just before Uncle Whiskers sent Chick his greetings, Johnny was cutting in heavy on his numbers racket. Then there's Whitey Ryan. He and Johnny were once like that, you know, but they split. From what I heard, Johnny got ninety per cent of that deal. And lastly, Toes Tobbin.

"Just before the Navy told Toes he was now going to wear tight pants, Johnny was bribing a lot of his race-tip runners and collecting heavy for his own clients. Yeah, those three must have thought a lot about Johnny staying civilian while Uncle Whiskers had them tied up."

"Any one of the three, eh?" Corbin murmured. "Off-hand, which one?"

Yates shook his head, and frowned.

"That would take some thinking, and a look around," he said. "I could be wrong, too."

"Sure, sure," Corbin said patiently. "Well, what are you going to do?"

Yates gave that a moment's thought while he rubbed two fingers across his lips.

"I think I'll go have a beer," he said. "I always think best with a beer in my hand. Besides, it's time for lunch."

A superior who didn't know Izzy Yates would have blown up sky high, but Lieutenant Corbin knew Yates and his ways. He knew also that Yates had more underworld names, figures, data, and such at his fingertips than any other man in the Department. So he simply nodded.

"Okay, do that, Izzy," he said. "If you find anything give me a buzz. I always get curious when somebody gets shot in my precinct."

Yates looked at him and smiled blandly.

"Yeah, don't we all?" he echoed. "Sure,

"I'll do that, Lieutenant."

It was the second beer that Izzy Yates held in his hand, and the crumbs on the plate were visual memory of his second cheese on rye. He took another sip of his beer, let it linger in his mouth a moment before it went sliding down his throat, and stared fixedly at the plate glass tavern window that revealed little of the busy street beyond because of the many stuck up menu cards and special blue-plate come-ons.

Izzy lifted the glass for another sip but stopped it short in mid air. His eyes almost became glazed over, his stare at nothing at all was so intense that the bartender watching him started a little.

"You feel all right, Izzy?" he demanded from the other side of the mahogany.

YATES relaxed, pushed the glaze out of his eyes, and nodded to him.

"Sure," he said. "I just happened to think of a very nice dish. A very nice one."

"We don't serve them, Izzy," the bartender told him. "Just beer and sandwiches."

Yates drained his glass and stood up. "Not that kind of a dish," he said going toward the door. "This one walks, and other things. S'long."

The bartender grunted, and watched the door swing shut. "Screwy dick!" he muttered, and went back to wiping glass.

Out on the sidewalk Yates paused to light a cigarette, and make a decision. He decided that his well stuffed expense account could stand another taxi. So he flagged one and gave the driver an uptown address. It was a section of the city that wasn't too good, nor too bad, either. He paid off and went in through a six-story apartment building entrance without glancing at the row of bell buttons, and name cards. He went straight to the work-it-yourself elevator and rode it to the top floor. He got out, turned right, and went to the door at the far end of the hall. He thumbed the bell button in and held it there a couple of extra seconds.

A moment later there was the sound of hurried footsteps inside. An appealing blonde, wearing a bright eager smile and little else, opened the door. When she saw Yates her face froze for an instant and then slipped into a puzzled grimace.

Yates grinned, and calmly walked in and shut the door for her. She backed up a few steps, turned and grabbed up a dressing gown flung over a chair. When she had it

wrapped about her she faced him still puzzled, but also a little angry in the eyes.

"You've got your nerve, Izzy!" she finally said. "What do you want?"

Still grinning, Yates dropped his hat onto a nearby table, and his one hundred and ninety-five pounds into a nearby chair.

"Relax, Pearl," he said and dug out a cigarette and a lighter. "Nothing special. Seen Johnny Pike around? He put ten for me on Day Dream in the fourth yesterday. I could use that dough tonight. The lady is the expensive type."

The girl's face twitched, and fear seemed to battle with jealousy. Or perhaps it was contempt.

"I haven't seen Johnny in weeks!" she snapped. Then a sneer dragged at her full lips. "I just bet she's the expensive type, letting a copper take her out!"

Izzy Yates chuckled, let smoke roll out of his mouth, and roamed his eyes about the room. When they reached a framed picture on the corner table they stopped. The blonde seemed to start a sudden movement but checked herself. Yates let his eyes come around to her again.

"What happened, Pearl?" he asked

"What do you mean, what happened?" she demanded her voice rising.

"You and Johnny—what else?" Izzy Yates grunted, and gestured with his hands, palms up. "Being a guy's dame all during the war should kind of make it permanent, shouldn't it? So what did Johnny do?"

"Aw, Izzy!" she flung at him. "I even ditched you once, didn't I? Well, I'm just a girl who likes a change."

Yates studied the glowing end of his cigarette and nodded understandingly. He finished with a heavy sigh.

"Yeah, I should know," he murmured. "Off with the old and on with the new. That's our Pearl. Don't know where I can find Johnny, do you?"

"No," she told him. Then with a little laugh, she added, "You might try the jail. Or better, the alcoholic ward. He's hitting the stuff bad, so I heard."

Yates pinched out his cigarette, got his feet, and reached for his hat. "Johnny, Pearl," he said. "But that leads to thought. I think I'll try the morgue. Keep 'em happy, baby."

With a grin and a half salute, Yates put on his hat and went out the door. He closed it softly, took half a dozen heavy steps

toward the elevator, and then swung around and tip-toed quickly back.

The sound that came through the door into his pressed ear was that of somebody dialing a phone number. He grinned and went all the way to the elevator this time, and took it down to the street level.

Out on the sidewalk, he glanced at his watch, and then turned left and walked a couple of blocks. There he turned into a beer tavern, went straight to the bar and ordered a small one.

HE MADE two small ones last for well over an hour. Then he went outside and caught a cab. The cab took him back down to the theater district and a little over east to a place that boasted a very flashy marquee. Neon lights told the uninformed that it was Link's Sports Palace. Inside it was just an average pool and billiard parlor. A few pin-ball machines, though, were against the walls on either side.

All ten tables were busy when Yates entered the place. Instantly a hushed silence fell, but he pretended to ignore it. He lighted a cigarette and stood watching at the first table. Play and chatter was started again, but at the first table the playing was very uneven. Yates could guess why, and sauntered on to the next table. Eventually, in ten minutes or so, he was at the rear of the place and headed toward a door marked, *Private*. Just as he was reaching out to grasp the knob a loitering big fellow slid in between and put a thick forefinger on Izzy's chest.

"Looking for somebody, bud?" the big fellow asked.

"Yeah," Yates said.

And as he said it he moved his right fist twice, like a couple of short streaks of blue lightning. The first to the abdomen that doubled the big fellow over. The second to the chin that lifted him an inch off the floor made him fall down like a ton of coal. The third stepped over him, opened the door and went inside.

Two men were playing gin rummy at an expensive desk. Everything else in the room looked expensive, too. Everything but the two men playing gin. They tried to look it, but they didn't. One of them was "Chick" Link. He was average build, average looks, and for the last several years better than average smart. The other player was "Deacon" Nolon. He looked like a preacher,

save for his typical gangster eyes. He was Link's emergency brain when Link needed one. He was also exceptionally good behind the wheel of a car.

Chick Link lifted his head, and cornered his cigar so that the smoke didn't go into his eye. He smiled with the other side of his mouth.

"I heard a noise, Izzy," he said pleasantly. "My new boy stop you?"

"Just tried, Chick," Yates smiled back at him. "I waited long enough for you to get the word. Why didn't you tell him?"

Link chuckled and tossed his hand of cards onto the table. "A test, Izzy," he said easily. "He was blowing about knowing everybody. A drink?"

Yates put a finger to his chest, heart high.

"Maybe later, when this beer gets settled," he said, and fished out a cigarette.

Link and Deacon Nolon watched him light it, and sink down into a convenient chair. They watched, and waited. Finally, Link didn't like it.

"Social, or what, Izzy?" he demanded.

"Half and half," Yates said. "Three days off, starting this morning. Think I'll do me a little duck hunting. You seen Johnny Pike around, Chick?"

"No," quickly. "Why?"

"He put a sawbuck on Day Dream for me," Yates said. "I'm broke and I could use that dough on my three days off."

"You got a nice package coming, Izzy," Link said, his eyes lighting up a little. "But I haven't seen Johnny in a week. And he wouldn't be coming in here, of course. Matter of fact, though, I just got back from doing a deal with Spikes Regan over in Newton. He mentioned something about not seeing Johnny for some time. You think Johnny's welshing on you?"

Izzy Yates shrugged, sighed, and mashed out his cigarette.

"Johnny wouldn't be that batty," he said, and stood up. "Well, I'll hunt around for him a little longer. Then me for the Compo Marsh and a bag of ducks. You want a duck, Chick?"

"If you bring it to me cooked, sure," Link chuckled. "I'll tell Johnny, if I see him. S'long."

"Do that," Yates said and took a tug at his coat lapels. "Be seeing you, Chick."

With a half salute he walked out of the room and closed the door. The big fellow

was back on his feet again, and he wasn't smiling. Yates grinned faintly.

"You shouldn't have boasted so much, Tarzan," he chided.

THE big fellow's eyes glowed and shot off sparks, but he didn't move. He was also very careful to keep both of his hands at his sides, unclenched. Yates walked by him, down the length of the again silent pool hall, and through the front door. He paused under the marquee and thoughtfully scratched the back of his right ear with his right forefinger.

"What was it I said to the Lieutenant?" he murmured to himself. "Oh, yeah. That I could be wrong, too. Well, could be."

With a half nod, and a little grunt, he turned and went walking up the street.

An hour or so later Yates had made a couple of other visits about town but at neither place had anybody been able to tell him the whereabouts of Johnny Pike. At both places he spoke about having placed the winning horse bet with Johnny, and of how he could use the money during his three days off. He received sympathy, but nothing else.

Right after the last call he went into a cigar store and bought a pack of cigarettes. After he had lighted one, he stepped into the phone booth and called Lieutenant Corbin at headquarters.

"Izzy, Lieutenant," he said when his connection was made. "Do something for me. Send a couple of boys up to the Half Moon Apartments. Number Sixty-four. A blonde by the name of Pearl Ames. Have them bring her down for questioning. Keep her an hour or so and then let her go. Got it?"

"So far," the voice in the receiver crackled. "But just what do we question her about, Izzy?"

Yates sucked his lower lip and thought a moment.

"Well, you might ask her what she knows about Link not liking Johnny," he said presently. "And about Whitey Ryan and Toes Tobbin not liking him either."

"Would she know?" Lieutenant Corbin demanded. "Just where does she fit in?"

"Both I wouldn't know," Izzy said. "Maybe if you ask you can find out." There was a moment of silence, and then Corbin's voice came over the wire, a little tight lipped.

"Okay, okay, Izzy. I love mysteries. What have you smoked out? Give!"

Yates grinned and shook his head at the booth telephone. "Oh, I'm just trying out this and that, Lieutenant," he said. "Something might come of it."

"It had better!" his superior snapped. "And what do you plan to try next?"

"Well, maybe I'll go try to shoot me some ducks," Yates told him.

The receiver to his ear seemed to sort of explode.

"Some what?"

"Ducks," Izzy repeated. "Would you like a duck, Lieutenant?"

"Why you cluck! Listen to me, Yates—"

But Izzy Yates wasn't listening. He had hung up and was walking out of the cigar store. A quick furtive glance across the street showed him that the tail he had spotted a short while back was still with him. At the moment the tail was very busy setting his watch with a jewelry store window clock.

Grinning inwardly Yates started walking along the store lined street.

"Okay, bub," he murmured as the man across the street started walking, too. "If you want to come along with me—come ahead!"

Taking his time, and making no effort at all to be cute or secretive about it, he strolled about the shopping section of town. He went into one store and bought a cheap sou'wester oilskin hat. He stopped in a drug store and made a phone call. And he went into two sporting goods stores. In one of them he bought a box of shotgun shells. And in the other he bought one of those little rainproof cases that take a pack of cigarettes.

Finally he boarded a bus that went to the end of town where he lived. As he paid his fare, he saw his tail hail a cab and jump into it. He grinned, found a seat and sat down with his packages.

He left the bus at the end of the block in which he lived, and walked back to his own front door. He lived with a spinster sister, but she was out when he shouted her name in the front hall. He nodded with satisfaction and went upstairs to his room. A half hour later he came down looking like a bum, with a shotgun in his hands. Propping the gun against the hall wall he dialed police headquarters on the phone and got put through to Lieutenant Corbin.

"I want you to do something for me, Lieutenant," he said. "Listen carefully."

HE BARKED down the interruption at the other end of the line and talked for about a minute.

"Don't be a fool, Izzy!" the Lieutenant finally got a chance to say. "You report in right now and tell me the whole story. I know blasted well you've left most of it out."

"No, I haven't," Yates said. "It's just that I've got my doubts, and I want to make sure. Do as I say, will you?"

After a moment's hesitation Lieutenant Corbin swore at him, but not unkindly, and hung up. Yates hung up and, as he reached for his shotgun, he saw his own reflection in the hall mirror. He grinned at himself, but it was a lopsided effort.

"Maybe now you know how a duck feels," he said, and went out the front door, and around to the garage where he kept his car. . . .

The sun was down below the tops of the hills that bordered the western side of Compo Marsh, but there was still a lot of light in the heavens, and at least an hour more of it on the ground. Comfortably settled behind a perfect nature-made duckblind right at the edge of a stretch of clear water, Izzy Yates squinted his eyes at the heavens for signs of ducks, and kept both ears tuned for sounds of anything else.

For a good three quarters of an hour now he had been looking skyward, and listening earthward. But he had seen nothing he expected to see, and heard nothing he'd thought maybe he might hear. By and large he was in a little world of his own, and as the minutes ticked by he liked it less and less. More minutes ticked by and a little voice tapped on his brain for attention.

"Look," it said, "a very clever guy can also be a very dumb one, too. A fellow wanting to kill somebody else never takes a brass band along with him. Know what I mean?"

He shook his head doggedly to squelch the little voice. But not without a parting crack.

"Okay, okay," it said resignedly. "But, the Lieutenant could meet with troubles, too, you know!"

He didn't shake his head again. Instead, he ignored the little voice and fixed his eyes on a V-formation of five moving dots coming toward him from the left, and very high. Much, much too high for a shot, but at that moment he heard a very distant sound. Perhaps his imagination, but it had sounded

like the few words of a voice suddenly cut off. Perhaps some other hunters.

He hesitated a moment, and then reached a decision. The duck V was almost directly over him. He got to his feet, threw his shotgun to his shoulder and fired both barrels, but not together. Standing up straight for a moment he watched the V of ducks continue to wing along undisturbed and disappear.

When they did he sat down quickly and reloaded his gun. The palms of both hands were clammy-moist, but seeing and missing the ducks hadn't caused it.

With the sound of his two shots lost to the echo, silence settled down over Compo Marsh again, and the minutes ticked on by. Each one took longer and longer to fade into the history of time. And presently the clammy-moist on his palms spread to the backs of his knees, and his chest, and his neck, and his face. It became almost a torture not to give vent to a curse just to hear the sound of something.

He knew, of course, that he wouldn't hear anything, and he didn't expect to, but he wanted to hear something just the same. It would be real dark soon, and then what? He shivered, and tried not to think about that.

Ducks. Ducks! For heaven's sake, some ducks. Izzy Yates will settle for just one duck. Just one lone, solitary, single duck!

And then when there was less than ten minutes of seeing light left, ducks came. Three of them, and low. Coming straight at him from out of where the sun had long since disappeared. When he spotted them he forgot for one brief instant. A perfect set-up shot. If he didn't get two of them he would bite his gun in two. The barrel part!

Then the brief moment of forgetting was gone, and both brain and body snapped to the alert. His heart hammered against his ribs, and his mouth and throat went bone dry. He wished very much that he was in any one of a thousand other places. He silently cursed himself for wishing any such wish and kept his eyes fixed on the ducks.

WHEN they were just about fair gun shot away, the ducks seemed to sense his presence. Or maybe it was something else. The trio veered sharply toward the north, and Izzy Yates blessed them with all his heart. They couldn't have cooperated better if he had trained them personally.

"This is it!"

As the whisper left his lips he got to his feet, and threw his gun to his shoulder. But he didn't shoot. Like a hunter who suddenly decides to wait he ducked down, but as he did he slid the sou'wester off his head and onto the muzzle end of his up slanted gun so that it showed just above the rim of the duck-blind.

No doubt it was at least three seconds later, but it seemed to Yates as though his hat was still on his head when the sound of a shot gun blasted the air off to the right in the reeds. And at the same instant countless invisible fingers poked holes in his oilskin hat, and made sounds like hail on slate against the double barrel of his gun.

From flat on his back he saw and felt all that. Then he let his gun fall over, caught it and went rolling to the other side of the blind. Three full rolls and another shotgun let go. This time from behind him. The top of the blind he had just rolled from shook violently, and there was a sound like a handful of gravel hitting a pile of dry leaves.

"Drop it! Don't move! You're covered!"

The bellowing voice sounded too far away, but it had unquestionably come from the lips of Lieutenant Corbin. Yates released the air from his aching lungs, but he didn't make any noise doing it, though. Nor did he move a single muscle, save his eyes. He saw nothing but the now motionless reeds that formed the irregular walls of the duck-blind. Then, suddenly, Lieutenant Corbin's voice rang out again, but much closer.

"You, halt! Spread out, men. Get him!"

A rifle cracked, and a shrill scream went along with the echo. The rifle cracked again, but there was no second scream. Only a brief moment of silence, and then Lieutenant Corbin's voice.

"Izzy! Are you okay, Izzy? We got him!"

Yates started to open his mouth, and started to push up onto his feet. But at that exact instant there came to him that thing that makes lots of people live longer. The sixth sense. He froze stiff for a moment and he rose slowly as there came reed-bush brushing sounds dead in front of him. He took one step, and then froze again as a running figure with a shotgun materialized out of nowhere.

Stark terror made Chick Link's face a distorted mask as he plunged into the duck-blind. He stopped dead at the sight of Yates crouched there, and his glazed popping eyes showed plainly the realization in his brain

that he'd taken a wrong path of escape. And then he flung the shotgun to his shoulder.

It was Chick Link's final mistake on earth. Izzy Yates didn't throw his gun to his shoulder. He simply fired a single barrel. He saw Link sort of cave in at the stomach, but he saw it through a sea of spinning stars and comets.

The kick of the shotgun slammed the butt into his ribs, and knocked him over like a tenpin.

The up-swiping double barrel missed the side of his head by a scant hairsbreadth. He hit the ground hard, lost his grip on the gun, and didn't move for the whole ten years it took to get air back into his lungs and make them work again.

By that time three other figures had come bursting into the blind. They were Lieutenant Corbin, and two other of the boys from headquarters. Each one carried a police rifle. Lieutenant Corbin's face went a little white as he looked down at the middle blown out of the dead Link.

"My gosh!" the police officer got out in a shaky voice. "I just saw Deacon Nolon, and got him. I didn't know that Link—Izzy!"

Yates was up on his feet, but none too steady. But he shook his head as the white-faced Corbin reached out a helping hand.

"Nothing, Lieutenant," he said. "Just knocked my own wind out. Okay, now. Well, well! So it was Link and Deacon Nolon, huh?"

LIEUTENANT CORBIN gaped at him. So did the other two from headquarters.

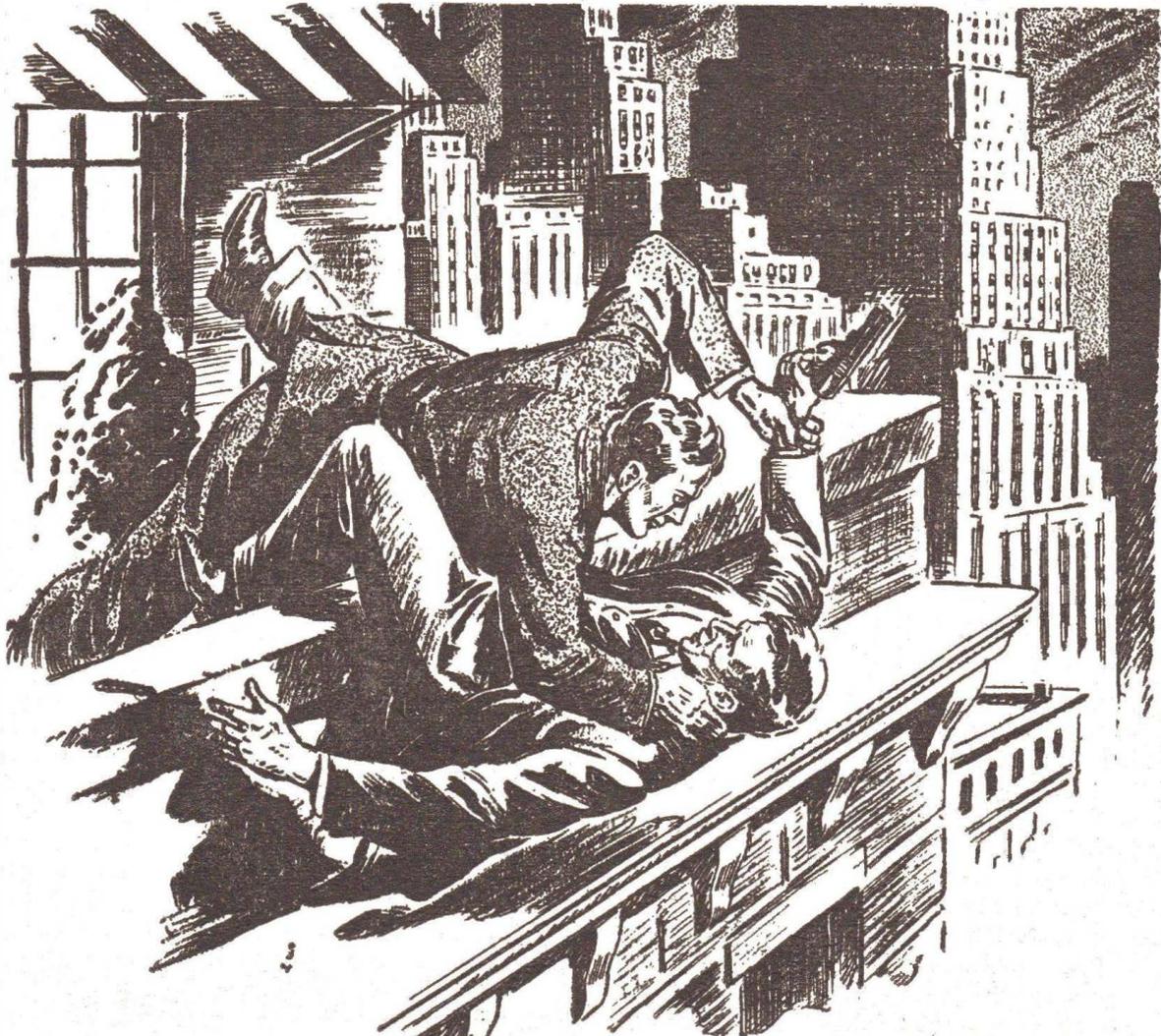
"What?" the senior officer finally got out. "You really didn't know?"

"I could guess, but there was still the doubt, Lieutenant," Yates replied. "That's why I asked you to get a couple of the boys and drift down this way. My two signal shots would show you where I was, and the next time ducks came over you were to nail whoever let go at me. I didn't bother mentioning my hat on the gun muzzle stunt. That was only my part of the act. But—you made it kind of close, Lieutenant. All's well that ends well, though."

As Corbin glanced down at the dead Link again a flush drove away the whiteness in his face. When he looked at Izzy Yates again his eyes were snapping.

"You didn't give me any idea there would be two, Izzy!" he bit off. "In fact, you gave

(Continued on page 109)



Tommy Dolan gripped the gunman's right wrist

FIGHT FOR

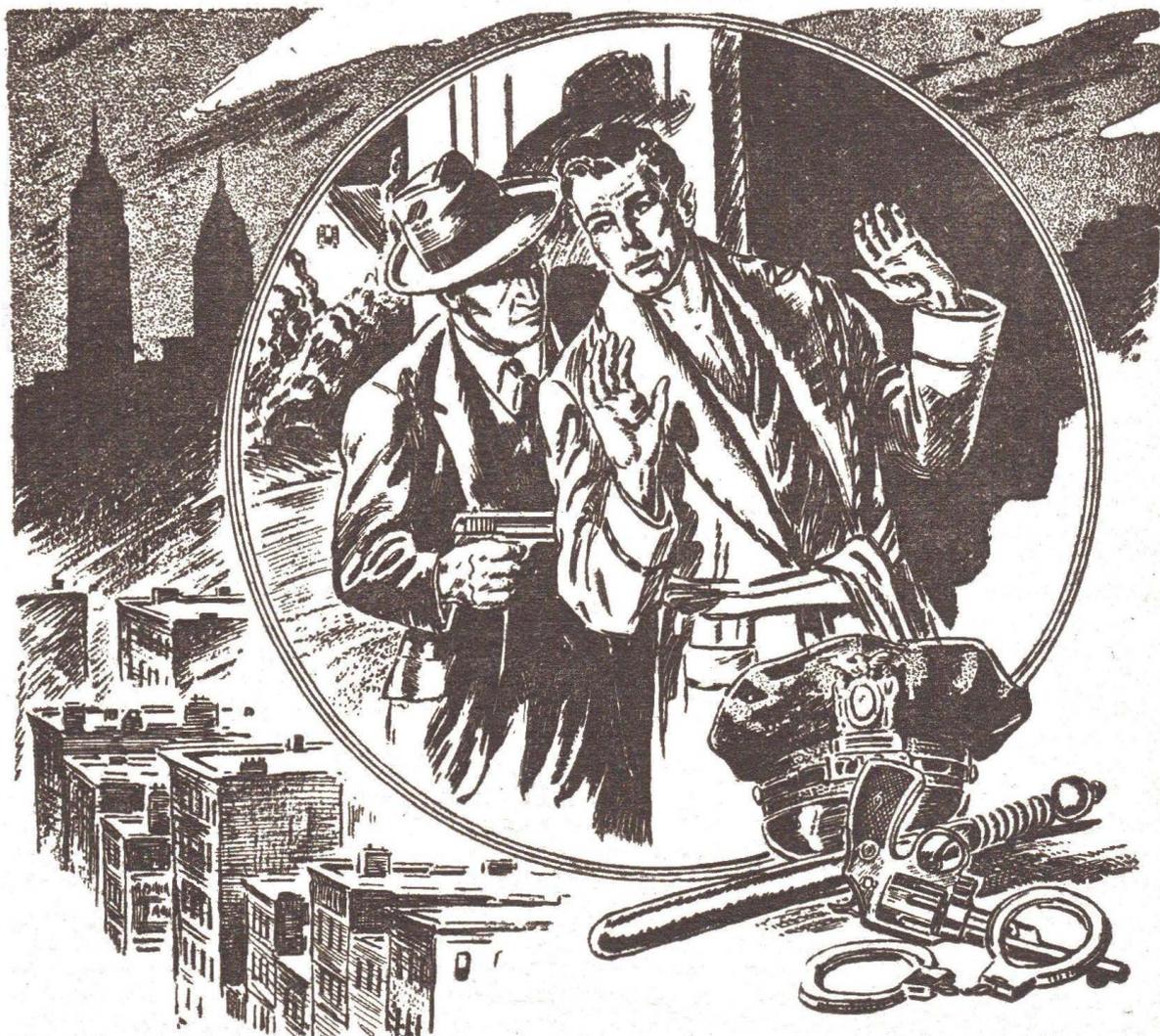
By JOHN

THOMAS DOLAN groaned and tossed. That infernal jangle in his ears couldn't be the alarm clock because it was still daylight and he never awakened until after dark. It couldn't be a part of his dream, nor the telephone either. Persistently, aggravatingly, it clamored on and on until he sat up with

a jerk that awakened him. It was the doorbell.

Dolan grumbled, sought his slippers with bare toes and seized the lounging robe flung across the foot of the bed. The doorbell stopped ringing only for intervals of a fraction of a second. Dolan stepped into the hallway of his one story

When Tom Dolan Digs Up an Unsolved Murder of



"Listen," the gunman said, "your father sent a pal of mine to the chair"

A MEMORY

L. BENTON

cottage and yanked the door open. He was ready and willing to skin his visitor alive, but he just stood there, blankly staring at the muzzle of a very large automatic and trying to convince himself that he wasn't still asleep.

"I'm looking for Dolan, the cop," his visitor growled. "Go get him and I'll be

right back of you, pal. So will the gun."

Dolan studied the man intently. He was memorizing that face so he'd never forget it. He doubted even a lapse of several years would have an effect on his memory so far as this man was concerned. The visitor was of normal height, but bulky, with that deceptive weight which

the Past, He Finds Some Unexpected Corpses!

looks like fat and isn't. Shoulders were wide and muscles strained at the seams of his dark suit. He had a short neck, a wide face and a pair of the ugliest eyes Dolan had ever looked into.

Dolan was thinking fast. Mostly about how he could get at the service pistol in his belt which was now draped around a bedroom chair. The automatic poked him painfully hard in the middle.

"Get going," the gunman snapped. "Take me to that cop. Quick!"

"I don't have to take you any place," Dolan said. "My name is Dolan, and I'm a cop."

The man squinted closely at him. "What kind of a sap do you think I am? The guy I want is older."

"Then you must mean my father," Dolan said softly. "He's dead. He died almost a year ago. Suppose you put down that gun and talk it over."

The visitor backed away a pace. "So he's dead, eh? Too bad, in a way, because I meant to rub him out. But good, too, because it saves me the trouble. I hope he died hard."

DOLAN'S fingers curled into fists. He rocked gently on the balls of his feet and studied the man even more closely. No, he decided, jumping that gun would be absolute suicide. This man knew how to use one and he was in the mood for murder.

"So you'd like to talk it over?" the gunman said thoughtfully. "Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad idea. Turn around and lift your hands a little higher. If we're going to talk, we'll just talk. I don't want you making a swipe at this gun. Go on—turn around."

Dolan rotated slowly and elevated his hands a little more. The gunman didn't prod him with the weapon, but Dolan could almost feel the muzzle of it pointing at the back of his head.

"So he's dead!" the gunman said. "Well, well, I ain't been keeping up on things. Listen, your father sent a pal of mine to the electric chair."

"He sent a lot of men to the chair," Dolan replied. "Every last one of them deserved it."

"Sure—so did my pal," the gunman agreed surprisingly. "Only your father blamed him for another kill he didn't

commit. A kill that a pal of your father pulled—and got away with, thanks to your father's help. You'll hear all about it one of these days. Right now you can take this for your old man."

Dolan felt the gun butt explode against the back of his skull. He pitched forward and fell. His hands grabbed at a chair, and he tried to pull himself erect. The gunman stepped up and began slashing at Dolan's face with the gun barrel. He raked it across Dolan's forehead and cheeks a dozen times.

Dolan tasted blood—his own. There was a veil of blackness closing around him. He tried to fight it. He'd never tried to do anything so hard in his life. There wasn't much of a battle. The gunman hit him once more and that ended it.

When Dolan awakened, he was lying on the hallway floor. The small house was silent as a tomb and dark as pitch. Dolan sat up, groggily got to his feet, and reeled in the direction of the telephone. He dialed the nearest precinct and made a full report of the affair, including an excellent description of the gunman.

He cleaned the scalp wounds and found them more or less superficial, although painful, and he had a headache that felt like one accumulated over a dozen hangovers. Dolan fixed something to eat. It still seemed lonesome in this house. True, his mother had been dead for years, but he and his father had maintained the place and enjoyed it.

Dolan's father had been a Deputy Inspector, in charge of detectives. He'd risen to that post from the very bottom and held the job for eight years until a bad heart cut him down suddenly. So far as the gunman's mission of vengeance was concerned, Dolan thought little of it beyond the rather mysterious fact that this man must have been far away for the past year not to have heard of Inspector Dolan's death.

During his almost forty years as an officer, Dolan's father had made many enemies, some of them extremely dangerous. His life had been threatened a score of times, so it was no amazing surprise that his life should be threatened even after he was dead.

Dolan put on his uniform some hours later, gave the badge an extra polish and, as he strapped his gun-belt around him,

he silently prayed that he'd meet the gunman again—under more even conditions. He reported to his precinct half an hour early. He was on a midnight to eight A. M. shift. He didn't like the hours, but he was barely beyond the rookie stage and willing to take any assignment.

The desk lieutenant returned Dolan's salute and called him over.

"You in trouble?" he asked. "Inspector Ferris just phoned and said I was to put you in a prowler car and deliver you to his office at Headquarters pronto."

"Ferris?" Dolan frowned. "It must be trouble then, because I've an idea he hates me as much as he hated Dad."

The lieutenant nodded. "Just what I was thinking. Watch yourself now. Ferris and your father joined the force on the same day. Your father was smarter and got ahead faster. Ferris always stayed one rank behind. He wanted that Deputy Inspectorship more than anything else in the world and your father took it away from him. Ferris never forgot. He may try to take it out on you, now that your father's death finally got him the promotion he wanted."

"I know," Dolan said. "That's what worries me. Dad used to rub it in a bit, I guess. Ferris never could take it. Well, he's the Inspector and I'm a plain flatfoot, so I'd better obey orders."

FIRST, Dolan reported to the sergeant in Ferris' front office. Two minutes later he was led into the same room where his father had worked.

Dolan looked around. Not much had been changed. Only the man behind the desk. Ferris was a thin-faced, hard-eyed type. Some people said that when he was created, any element of mercy or kindness had been omitted as an experiment to see just how objectionable a man could be made.

Ferris gave a lazy nod in answer to Dolan's salute. Dolan noticed that there were a lot of pictures strewn across the Inspector's desk.

"Sit down, Dolan," Ferris said. "What I have to tell you isn't pleasant. Not even for me, though there will be some who'll say I revel in it. First of all, your report about a gunman visiting your home, has come to my attention. You should have nailed him. Your father would have."

"Yes, sir," Dolan said. "Maybe, in about twenty-five years, I'll be half as good as my father."

Ferris waved a hand toward the pictures on the desk. "Look through those, Dolan. See if any of them resemble the man who visited you."

Dolan flipped them through his fingers. After glancing at about a score, he saw that ugly face of the gunman pop up. He placed this picture directly in front of Ferris.

"That's him, sir."

Ferris didn't even touch the picture. "I thought so. I mixed that photo with the others to see if you were really observing. You made no mistake. Sit down now and relax. I'm going to tell you a story."

Dolan sat, but he didn't relax. Something big was in the wind. Something that had to do with his father. Ferris lit a thin cigar, leaned back and squinted at the glowing tip.

"Two years ago the Security Trust Company was stuck up. There was a gun fight. The bank guard was killed. As it happened, your father was in the vicinity. He nailed that holdup man as neat at anything you ever saw. Without firing a shot either. Do you recall?"

Dolan nodded. "Yes, sir. That holdup man killed someone else too, didn't he?"

"Man named Sheldon. This holdup artist was shooting wild toward the last. One slug passed through a window a story above the bank's quarters. It hit Sheldon between the eyes. He'd been looking out at the fight. This holdup man was tried and convicted of the murder of the bank guard only. The records show that he also murdered Sheldon, but he went to the chair only for the other kill."

"Yes, sir," Dolan said. "I recall all of it."

"Good. Makes things easier for me," Ferris went on. "Now this Sheldon was in business—some manufacturing enterprise—with a fellow named Paul Curtis. Curtis was one of your father's best friends. As a result of his partner's death, Curtis came into the business—all of it. Now, it appears there were two men involved in the stickup and one got away. Well, this second man is back. He's the one whose picture you just selected and who visited your house."

"What's he looking for, revenge?" Dolan asked.

"Perhaps. He claims the electrocuted gunman never fired the shot which killed Sheldon. He says he was posted across the street with a tommy-gun to cover the first robber's escape. He claims he saw this friend of your father—Paul Curtis—shoot down Sheldon, his business partner. And your father covered up for him. The gunman claims he was so astounded that he forgot to start shooting until it was too late."

"Inspector," Dolan gasped, "what sort of nonsense is that? Dad wouldn't have covered for anybody."

"This crook says he did. He saw the whole thing. Apparently, Paul Curtis had been planning to kill Sheldon. When the holdup occurred and the shooting took place, Curtis took advantage of the situation."

"But Dad—how could he cover up when he was on the street battling that killer?" Dolan wanted to know.

"It was done later. Your father dug several of the robber's bullets out of the bank wall. He also dug the bullet which killed Sheldon out of the wall in that office above the bank. Your father had no help. He could have substituted one of the bullets fired by the robber for the one that killed Sheldon and in that way insured the fact that an already condemned man would be blamed for Sheldon's death."

"I don't believe it," Dolan said curtly.

Ferris shrugged. "Neither do I, but the facts are there. True, the man who can swear to all this is a wanted criminal who's been in hiding ever since the stickup. Now, however, he has gone to Sheldon's heirs and told his story. They retained a shrewd attorney and they intend to fight Paul Curtis to get back the factory which he took over."

Dolan slowly rotated the nightstick lying across his lap and spoke without looking up.

"I don't know what you intend to do about this, sir," he said, "but I'm going to get that crook who says my father abetted a murder. I'm going to make him tell the truth. Even if it means I resign from the force as of this instant."

Ferris shook his head. "I won't demand that. Suppose I transfer you to a plain-

clothes squad and put you on an open assignment. Bring that man in. Go ahead and make him tell the truth. You owe your father that much."

"I'll fight for him," Dolan said savagely. "For his memory. Thanks for the opportunity, sir. I know you and Dad never got along and I didn't really expect this of you. That's why I'm twice as grateful."

FERRIS eyed him keenly. "Maybe I'm doing this to see if you'll fall on your face, Dolan. Maybe not. Your father always thought he was a better man than me. He rose faster than I did, but he's dead now. We worked together even if we weren't exactly pals. Furthermore, he was a policeman just like you and I. Cops stick together, Dolan. Go out and see what you can do."

Dolan reported back to his precinct, shed his uniform and borrowed a prowler car. He drove straight to Paul Curtis' penthouse apartment atop one of the fashionable midtown residences.

Curtis was about the age of Dolan's father, a white-haired, stocky figure, built along the same lines as the gunman who had started all this. Curtis had a firm handclasp and a smile that dominated his whole face.

"Tommy," he shook hands, "it's almost like old times, seeing you again. Of course I knew you were coming."

"Inspector Ferris called then?"

"Yes. What do you think of it? Do I look like a murderer?"

"Nonsense," Dolan grunted. "If you'd packed a gun and waited for an opportunity to shoot Sheldon, Dad would have known about it. He could smell a gun at sixty paces. The whole thing is preposterous."

Curtis wagged his head. "The trouble is that people will believe everything that crook claims. Naturally he can't prove his case without any evidence, but we can't disprove his statements either. It works either way. He has nothing to lose. I have everything."

"In what way, Paul?" Dolan asked. "That's what I'm most interested in. Who would profit either financially or by personal satisfaction if you were dragged through all this slime?"

Curtis sat down. "You remind me of that old man of yours. The way you get

your teeth into a case. Mike was like that. No preliminaries. Just questions that hit the bull's eye every time. The fact is, Tommy, if Sheldon's heirs could prove I killed him, they could take my factory back. They could bankrupt me."

"Are they the type?" Dolan asked.

"I'd say—yes. Sheldon and I quarrelled. His business ethics were bad, to say the least. I wanted to get rid of him, but we were tied up with our partnership agreement. He wouldn't sell and neither would I. So there we were, running a business and hating one another. His hatred for me must have been transmitted to his people. Wife, son, and a brother or two. They'd get me if they could."

"Your agreement with Sheldon then, was that if either of you died, the survivor took over the whole business?"

"That's right. It was iron clad. Of course, if Sheldon's relatives could prove fraud, that would be different. I didn't kill Sheldon, Tommy. Your father arrived on the scene three or four minutes after Sheldon was hit. That fool Sheldon, standing in the window when there was a gun battle on the street. I watched your father get the bullet. I was present when it was compared to the ones fired in the bank. They matched. The bandit's slug had killed Sheldon."

"Were you carrying a gun at the time?"

"Yes. I showed it to your father. It hadn't been fired and you'll find that fact in the case history."

Dolan shrugged. "They'll say Dad cleaned it, or gave you a chance to. I wonder why that crook who escaped has come back now, so long after it all happened? What does he get out of it? And he gets something. His kind never makes

a move unless there is money in it for them."

"The Sheldon family's attorney has already talked to me," Paul Curtis said. "He's coming back here tonight. So is the bandit. Now, wait. I can see the gleam in your eye. If you arrest the bandit, he'll tell this story publicly. For myself, I don't care much, but I'm thinking of your father's memory. That golden reputation he built up for himself. Tommy, if you remain, it is as a private citizen. Your badge has no authority here."

"I'm staying," Dolan said curtly. "I'm beginning to see what this is about too. The Sheldons found this bandit somehow and with the help of a shyster attorney, convinced him he could make some easy money. They're putting the bee on you, Paul, and they don't care what happens to a dead man's reputation. They haven't got a case, but the publicity would hurt."

CURTIS arose and mixed himself a drink. Dolan refused one. Curtis spoke around the rim of his glass.

"Oddly enough, Tommy," he said, "they may have some sort of case. I told Sheldon I'd like to kill him. In front of witnesses. I was carrying a gun. The bullet passed through Sheldon's head so nobody could tell which bullet killed him. One from my gun or from the bandit's. The bullet took an upward course and came out the back of his head. It could have been fired from the street, or by someone in the same room with Sheldon, who merely bent over and adjusted his aim to correspond with the trajectory of a bullet from the street."

"But there is no case, Paul," Dolan

[Turn page]

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objected. "Their only witness is a man who is wanted for complicity in the bank holdup. That bandit will never let them take him into court."

Curtis sighed. "Hinkley, who is the lawyer for the Sheldon family, indicated what course they'd take. It would be a civil action to recover the business, not a criminal action against me. In a civil suit, this bandit could file depositions. Maybe his story would be that of a man proven dishonest, but just the same I can't refute it. Frankly, I'd hate to go through this business."

"What sort of people are the Sheldons?" Dolan asked.

"Greedy. Like he was. They want that business and they intend to get it. What's more, maybe they will. If I'm pushed too far, I'll pull out, Tommy. As much for the respect of your father's memory as for my own peace of mind."

Curtis' phone buzzed. He answered, spoke briefly and ordered someone sent up. He turned to face Dolan.

"It's the bandit," he announced. "His name is Willis—"

"Beeker," Dolan interjected. "I know. Paul, I ought to arrest him. For carrying a gun, slugging me and for being an assist in that bank robbery."

"Don't," Curtis implored. "Please don't. That man can wreck me and the reputation your father built up. If he does, he'll wreck you too, Tommy. Take it easy. Use your head. Attorney Hinkley will bluff. He'll say Beeker is willing to risk his freedom by going into court. Maybe he would take a chance. Hinkley intends to let me ask him any questions I choose, to satisfy myself that I'm licked. They actually believe I killed Sheldon, you know."

"What shall I do? Sit here and listen to a wanted criminal brag?"

Curtis finished what was left of his drink. "Frankly, I think you ought to go out on the terrace and stay there. Just listen. Perhaps I can trap him, but if you're here, he'll watch his step. Please, Tommy. I know the Dolan brand of temper. You'd wreck things."

"All right." Dolan arose. "I'll do as you say—for now. Only that guy has a beating coming, and I'll give it to him sometime. Where will I wait?"

Curtis led him onto the wide terrace and indicated a reed chair just to one side

of some french windows. Curtis opened one of the curtained and draped windows.

"Sit there. You won't be able to see anything, but Beeker can't see you either. Just listen. Maybe he'll proposition me. You know, highest bidder stuff. Perhaps nothing more lies behind it. Just remember, I did not murder Sheldon. If I had, your father would have arrested me. We were friends, but friendship stopped with murder, or any other crime, so far as your father was concerned."

Dolan nodded miserably. Just sitting and listening galled. He wanted to seize that guerrilla by the scruff of the neck and shake the truth out of him. But Curtis would suffer then, and the whole flaming story would become public.

TOMMY DOLAN heard Curtis greet someone. The voice grew louder, and he recognized it as that of Beeker. He seemed to have come alone, a fact born out by his words a moment later.

"Look, Curtis," he said. "I gave that lawyer the slip. You and me can do business, if you feel that way. The Sheldons offered me something to tell my story, and they promised me protection too. Now what I'll tell will make a lot of trouble. My pal got blamed for something you did. Sure, he was burned for another crime, but the murder you did is pinned on him. You're in the clear. I could queer the whole set-up and it ought to be worth a lot of dough to you."

Curtis had a temper too. "I'm not certain whether I should simply turn you over to the police, or kill you. Maybe the latter would be the easiest. Don't pull a gun on me. Don't, you fool—"

As Dolan got to his feet, he heard a scuffle, a solid blow and then Curtis' voice, strident with alarm.

"Get him—Tommy. Get him—"

The voice was cut off by the sound of a another blow. A man suddenly appeared on the terrace. A shadow of a man it was, because inside only one weak lamp was lit and the terrace was shrouded in darkness. Tommy Dolan made a dive for the man.

His quarry let out a bleat of alarm and started running. He had a gun in his hand. Dolan didn't reach for his own. The temptation would have been too great, and he wanted this man alive.

He lunged at him. The man's back was against the parapet. Dolan closed with him. There was a tangle of arms and legs. He gripped the gunman's right wrist and pinned it down. Then a mighty blow collided with his head. He fell, arms still clinging to the man's form.

Dolan guessed he'd been out no more than a minute or two. He woke and memory returned with a crash. He found his gun intact, and drew it. Then he hurried into the apartment. Curtis lay across the floor, groaning, and slowly recovering consciousness. There were no signs of the bandit. Dolan heard sirens far below.

He hurried back onto the terrace, approached the parapet and leaned over. What he saw made him gasp. Far below, in the middle of the sidewalk, lay a crushed form. Tiny figures were milling around it, and one, in white, came hurriedly to kneel beside the form. Dolan felt ill. He staggered away from the parapet.

Someone was banging on the apartment door. He opened it. A tall, sour-faced man stalked in, followed by a slim, undersized individual who clutched a briefcase against his puny chest. Dolan guessed who they were. One was one of the Sheldon brothers and the other was the family attorney named Hinkley.

Then Inspector Ferris arrived and a horde of police. Tommy Dolan told his story quietly. Curtis backed him up.

"I sent Tommy onto the terrace," Curtis explained. "This crook offered to sell out to me. I got sore and made a pass at him. He had a gun. He slugged me. I called to Tommy. I was slugged again. That's all I recall until Tommy woke me up and told me the—the crook was—dead."

Sheldon eyed Tommy Dolan malevolently. "Well, it's easy to guess what happened. Like father, like son. This—this policeman, or whatever he is, threw that man off the terrace. Why? Because he alone could have testified that Inspector Dolan had abetted the murder of my brother."

"Take it easy," Tommy Dolan warned.

Inspector Ferris stepped between the two men. "It's our job to determine what happened, Mr. Sheldon. I know you're sore because you think Curtis killed your brother and that Tommy's father helped him get away with it. But remember, there isn't a shred of proof. Whatever

proof there was died with that crook when he landed on the pavement below. Whether he accidentally fell, intentionally jumped, or was pushed, is something we have to decide."

"I didn't push him," Tommy Dolan said. "His back was against the parapet while we fought, but somehow he managed to raise the gun he held and slugged me with it. I dropped. When I woke up—it was all over."

SHELDON sneered openly. "That's a likely story. I think he and Curtis had the whole thing cooked up. I insist upon the arrest of both."

Curtis arose quickly. "Now wait a minute. Sheldon, all you are after is the estate your brother should have left, if he hadn't had an agreement with me that I'd take over everything. You and your family want the firm. Attorney Hinkley practically said as much when he talked to me earlier. I have a proposition."

"I don't have to listen," Sheldon began.

"But you will," Curtis snapped. "I'll agree to turn over the factory, lock, stock and barrel, for a waiver to the effect that you will never make any trouble for me or for Tommy Dolan. You think I killed your brother to get possession of the business. I didn't—and I believe my offer is proof enough of my innocence."

Sheldon made him repeat the offer more slowly while his eyes lighted up in greedy enthusiasm. He wanted to make the deal. He was so eager to close it that he ordered Attorney Hinkley to get right to work on the papers. Hinkley was provided with a typewriter.

Curtis dictated his release of the factory, transferring all its assets and debts to the Sheldon family. In turn, Sheldon signed an agreement that he never had any suspicions that the death of his brother was anything except that which Inspector Dolan had claimed it to be. Namely, the accidental result of a bank bandit's wild shooting.

It was all over in half an hour. Sheldon, clutching his document, fled as if he thought Curtis might change his mind. Curtis, in turn, put his document in his wall safe."

"That finishes it," he said pleasantly. "Little enough for me to do. I was sick of the business anyhow. Well, Inspector.

that's about all. If Tommy did push that killer over the parapet, he was only doing his duty. The man was armed, primed to kill. I think Tommy deserves a medal, not censure."

Inspector Ferris put on his hat. "Fortunately," he said, "it's my decision which counts. I don't know exactly what happened. I prefer to believe Tommy killed the man in self defense. However, the looks of things do not satisfy me. Tommy, I'll consider your resignation from the force any time you wish to give it to me. Within a reasonable time. Say—twenty-four hours."

Tommy Dolan sat down slowly. Curtis tried to comfort him, but it didn't work. One thing Dolan knew. His father had been framed, and now he was framed. By whom? The Sheldons and their attorney seemed the only likely prospects. They'd got what they wanted out of Curtis. They could have entered the apartment with a key, found Dolan and Curtis unconscious and the crook weaving about dizzily. It would have been simple to toss him over the parapet, beat a hasty retreat and return very innocent of the whole affair.

Possession of that business was the only motive in sight, and it pointed nowhere except in the direction of the Sheldons. Dolan looked up at Curtis.

"That was a noble thing you did, Paul. I know why. You didn't want Dad's reputation blackened. For the sake of his memory you were willing to give up the whole thing."

Curtis walked over and put a hand on Dolan's shoulder. "Suppose we just let it go that I was glad to get rid of the business. Frankly, the Sheldons won't get much. It was the easiest way out. If they insisted on carrying the case further, you'd have been involved, and put down as a murderer too. No, Tommy, the factory wasn't worth it. Now, go on home, rest awhile, and we'll see what we can do about Ferris."

"Ferris?" Tommy Dolan groaned. "If I don't resign in the allotted time, he'll fire me. I know how he works. I'm washed up, Paul. It's tough to take, but it could have been worse, I suppose. The only reason Ferris didn't arrest me was the utter lack of evidence."

"But, Tommy," Curtis argued, "you did

toss him over, didn't you? I mean, just in the course of the fight, without any other motive than your own self-protection?"

"I don't know what I did," Tommy Dolan sighed. "It was over so darn fast. I'm going to do as you suggest. Rest a bit, and then try to find out what really happened. Thanks for everything. I'll see you tomorrow."

BUT Tommy Dolan didn't go home. He proceeded to Headquarters and straight to the identification room. There, nobody knew of his trouble, and he was permitted to study the records on Willis Beeker, the man who'd fallen to his death after trying to blackmail Curtis.

Beeker's record was that of a cheap crook. He'd served several sentences for rolling drunks, and sundry days for assault, picking pockets, and vagrancy. His last known address was listed and Dolan went there. He found Beeker's sister, dry-eyed and not antagonistic when Dolan explained who he was.

"Willis," she said, "had such an end coming to him ever since he was a boy. We tried and tried to reform him. It was no use."

"He never got into the big time then?" Dolan asked. "I mean by that, he never was associated with any important crooks?"

"Him," she sniffed contemptuously. "If he'd even been a good crook, a daring one, we might have thought more of him. Rolling drunks was his peak."

"And he was at home during the past year? He didn't go away for any extended period?"

"He never had the carfare," she replied.

"Did you know my father—Inspector Dolan? Did Willis know him?"

"Yes. It happened that your father gave Willis his first break. That was long ago, when we lived on a beat your father patrolled as a sergeant. Willis got into trouble and your father brought him home instead of locking him up as he should have done."

"Willis knew then that my father died a year ago?" Dolan asked quickly.

"Of course he did. At the time he said a square cop had died. I agreed with him. The only time we ever agreed, I guess."

"Thank you," Dolan said. "Thank you very much."

Willis Beeker's sister checked his departure for a moment. "What sort of crime was Willis up to this time? I sensed something had happened, or would happen. He had plenty of money. Too much. I don't know where he got it except that it couldn't have been honest money."

Dolan practically fled from the cheap apartment and drove to the residence of Hinkley, the Sheldon attorney. Hinkley occupied two rooms in a moderately priced hotel. Dolan used the influence of his badge and secured a key from the sleepy night clerk. It was getting on toward dawn. Dolan realized he didn't have much time left.

He entered Hinkley's rooms and searched them. He made a phone call to a probation officer he knew well enough

"It was pretty late," the operator said. "I forgot Curtis had other visitors and I figured maybe he wouldn't let those two in. So I waited rather than make the trip all the way up again. I saw them knock. I saw you let them in. No, sir, they couldn't have walked up before, and then down again to pretend they'd just come in. Heck, man, this building has thirty-three stories."

Dolan walked out of the building, crossed the street and sat down in a small park. He didn't even know when daylight came and the streets began to hum. He thought he'd dozed some, but wasn't even certain of that.

AT NINE o'clock, however, he wasn't dozing. He walked into the lobby of a very big bank and sought out the cashier. He showed his badge and asked

The Phantom Detective is at His Sleuthing Best in THE CASE OF THE MURDERED WITNESS, by Robert Wallace, Next Issue!

to roust out of bed without creating too much of a fuss. He learned from him that Attorney Hinkley had twice represented Willis Beeker and got him off both times without appearing in court.

Dolan sat down to do some thinking. Of course the Sheldons were behind it. This Willis Beeker had never worked with the bandit who held up the bank that day. Beeker was just a stooge through whom Curtis could be intimidated. Dolan thought back hard. Beeker acted tough and looked tough but wasn't. In fact, before Dolan had been slugged, he'd had Beeker literally on the ropes.

And memory also told Dolan that when he was struck on the head, he'd been holding Beeker's gun-hand. Holding it against the crook's side hard, so he couldn't elevate the muzzle and open fire. But a gun had struck him. Beeker couldn't possibly have wielded it. Who did? Sheldon or that lawyer of his?

Dolan hurried back to Curtis' apartment building and talked to the lone elevator operator. From him he got only a story that confused the issue and practically cleared Sheldon and Hinkley. They had ridden all the way up to Curtis' penthouse.

questions. Then he made several other visits and asked more. They all concerned the factory which Curtis had given away the night before.

At noon, Dolan was admitted to Curtis' penthouse. Curtis looked chipper. He wore a neat bit of adhesive on his head, but didn't look as if he'd put in the exciting evening Dolan knew he had.

"First, Paul," Tommy Dolan said, "I want you to know I'm still a cop. I haven't resigned. Today's important. Secondly, Beeker never fell off the parapet. He was thrown. I see it this way. He was hired to fake that story about Dad and you. The Sheldons didn't hire him, but their attorney did. Furthermore, the same attorney also works for you. Shall I go on, Paul?"

"By all means," Curtis got himself a drink. A very stiff one.

"When Beeker and I fought," Tommy Dolan continued, "he had a gun. I pinned it to his side, and yet I was struck with something that felt like a gun or another piece of metal. Beeker didn't do it. Sheldon and his attorney weren't even in the building yet. The only other person here was—you. Paul, you rigged it all. The whole business. I even know why. That

factory was a bust. Mortgaged to the hilt, and a liability instead of an asset. You couldn't get rid of it. Bankruptcy would have involved your personal affairs because you'd been taking profits and concealing them. You had to get rid of it.

"But sell? Any prospective buyer would have checked. Sheldon, under the circumstances that existed last night, wouldn't have even thought of such a thing. Being greedy, as you once described him, he'd snatch at it. And he got it, liabilities and all. You were out from under. He'd have to face things because you were careful enough to plainly include the fact that Sheldon assumed all liabilities. More—your factory is all washed up because the article you manufacture is passe. It was rendered obsolete by new developments made during the war. And you couldn't buy into anything else. You had to get out fast, and this was the way to do it."

Paul Curtis sipped his drink. "You're as smart as your father, Tommy. I should have known that. Hinkley talked, didn't he. He was the one weak spot, but I couldn't get a smart attorney to work with me."

"Hinkley didn't talk—yet," Tommy Dolan said. "But he will. He'll tell how you bamboozled Beeker into this mess with some very phony yarn which sounded plausible enough to his dumb brain. Then you killed him, so he'd never talk, and you tried to blame it on me. In the resulting confusion, you foisted that business onto Sheldon, making a grand gesture of sacrifice in doing it."

"What are you going to do about it, Tommy?"

"Arrest you for murder. What else?"

Curtis nodded. "Of course. I knew you would, but I had to take the chance. My best alibi lay in convincing you and any other policeman that my giving in to Sheldon was for the sake of your father's memory. Sheldon, the fool, won't realize what sort of an egg he's hatched. Shall we get started, Tommy?"

Later, Inspector Ferris read Tommy Dolan's report. He slowly placed it in his desk drawer. He measured each word as he spoke.

"I wouldn't accept your resignation now. But I wish you'd decided to become a doctor or an engineer. Anything but a cop."

"Could I ask why, sir?" Tommy Dolan grinned.

Ferris nodded heavily. "Your father was always one jump ahead of me. I want the Chief Inspector's appointment some day, but the Chief is a healthy man. He'll last a long time and, meanwhile, you'll be coming up. Tommy, if you ever rank me, like your father did—" He chuckled. "Maybe you will. If it happens, the reason will be that you're smart and I'm dumb. Just between us, I'd never have been this high if your father hadn't coached me. We were friends, Tommy. Never enemies. We argued and battled, but we respected one another and nobody ever had to tell me he was the better man. Now get out of here. You'll be around Headquarters soon enough."



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WHEN IN DOUBT, DUCK!

(Continued from page 97)

me mighty little. So let's have it now—briefly.”

“And brief enough it was, too,” Yates grinned. “Well, it came to me that when the boys were overseas, Johnny Pike and the Pearl Ames kid were just like that. But also, that now they weren't like that any more. So I went to see Pearl. There was a nice picture of Chick Link in her apartment. She saw me spot it too late for her to put it out of sight. So first I went to see Chick, after giving Pearl a chance to phone somebody. My guess was Chick, but there was still the doubt. So I played it safe.

“I saw Chick, and Toes Tobbin, and Whitey Ryan. To each I made it look like I was hunting Johnny to collect a race bet on my day off. All three knew darn well I knew Johnny had got his in the morning. It worried them, and they each came up with a dropped word or two where they were round about the killing time.”

“So?” Lieutenant Corbin demanded as Yates paused for breath.

“So I played along on the doubt angle,” Izzy replied. “Particularly when I caught a lad I didn't know tailing me. I figured one of those boys wanted to be sure I was going duck hunting. And that's what I wanted. For one of them to be sure.”

“But if you didn't have anything cold on them?” Corbin began but cut it off at Yates' gesture.

“That was their doubt,” Izzy grinned. “They didn't know for sure either. And their kind of boys like to be sure. So to one of them it was a perfect set-up. See what I mean? Just tail me to my duck hunting, and spot where I am. Next time I rise to bag something he bags me. Very simple. To be extra sure, his second shot rips my chest and face off. Who says I didn't fall on my

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own gun by accident, and do it myself? Some dumb dope usually does it once a season. And there you are."

"Not quite," Corbin said with a frown. "Do you think that Ames girl fingered Pike for Link and Nolon? Maybe made a date to meet him on Main and Wall? If they used to be that close, isn't it possible?"

When Corbin didn't go on Yates shrugged, bent over and picked up his gun.

"Could be," he said straightening up. "And of course you could try to get Pearl to admit it. But considering this and that, does it matter much, now?"

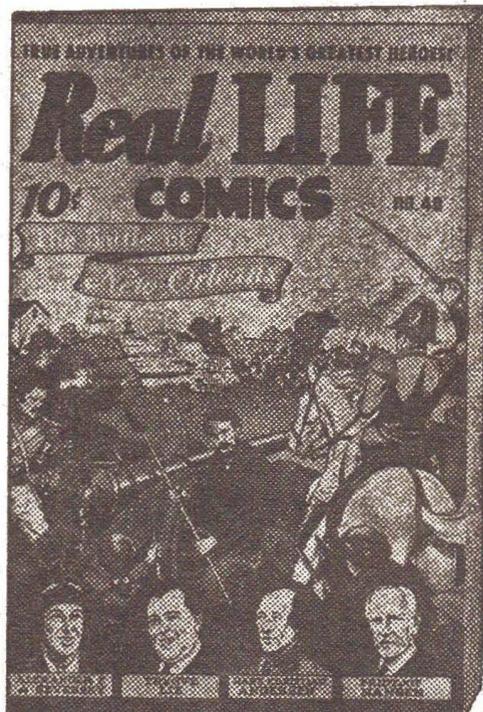
"No, I suppose not," Corbin grunted. "However— Hey! What the devil?"

The last was drowned out by the roar of Yates' second barrel. A lone duck going some place was suddenly stopped short in midair and sent toppling to the marsh ground about forty yards away. Izzy Yates patted his gun and beamed at Corbin.

"Would you like a duck, Lieutenant?" he asked.

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THE PHANTOM SPEAKS

(Continued from page 9)

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Out of the Mailbag

AS I'VE already mentioned, there are a good many letters from readers received by this magazine. Many of them bring us criticisms and suggestions that prove very helpful in planning future issues of this magazine. We're glad to have your comments, whether they are bouquets or brickbats!

This month we have made a sampling of the more interesting letters and they are

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offered for your attention. First of these comes from Down East.

Dear Phantom: I've been reading your magazine for some time now, and I've enjoyed the Phantom Detective novels very much. With the March, 1947 issue, however, I notice that besides the usual novel and short stories you are publishing a very interesting novelet. Is this going to be a regular feature of the magazine. I hope so.—*Mae L. Garson, Newburyport, Mass.*

As you've probably noticed with the past few issues, Miss Garson, we are giving you more pages in the magazine now, and this makes it possible to include the novelet or several more short stories in each issue. Many other readers are glad to have this additional reading matter. We're glad to be able to supply it for them.

Next we hear from a reader out in the Middle West.

Dear Phantom: Now that we are coming out of one of the snowiest winters we've had in Ohio for a good many years, I'd like to say that there has been one pleasant factor. I'm the sort of a fellow who lives on a farm, and each time I go to town I pick up my favorite magazine. Unfortunately, however, except in bad weather, I don't have as much time to read **THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE** as I would like to. This year has been a pleasant exception and I've shore gotten a big kick out of following the exploits of Richard Curtis Van Loan. More power to you.—*Gene Fernwebber, R.F.D. #1, Massilon, Ohio.*

Thanks, Gene. We're certainly glad you've been able to forget the blizzards with a couple of copies of **THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE.**

Our next letter is from out on the Pacific Coast, and we know that it reflects the feelings of a cross-section of the folks who live out there.

Dear Phantom: What has become of Muriel Havens? Is she married, or has she gone overseas to attend to some of the welfare work that must be done there? I haven't seen her mentioned in one of your stories for some time. I think she does a lot of good work, and she is so unaffected about her part in the solution of these crimes, that she sounds like an ideal companion to me.—*Lorraine Mason, Vancouver, Washington.*

Muriel Havens is still heart-whole and

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fancy free. You don't find her taking part in all of the criminal investigations featured in the Phantom Detective stories for several reasons. As you point out, Muriel is a sensible girl, and completely unaffected, and she knows there are times when her father and I do not want to place her in dangerous situations which may come up during these murder cases. I prefer to take all the chances that are to be taken when it's a case of coming to grips with the underworld or battling clever industrial criminals. I think this is a wise procedure. But Muriel Havens will continue to serve the cause of justice when needed, and I'm sure you'll be reading about her soon again.

Thanks again for all the letters and post-cards! They mean a lot to folks who are sitting behind an editorial desk. If you have any comments, ideas, suggestions or criticisms, by all means send them along. Please address all correspondence to The Editor, THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

So long for now, everybody. Let's all get together here again in the next issue.

—THE PHANTOM.

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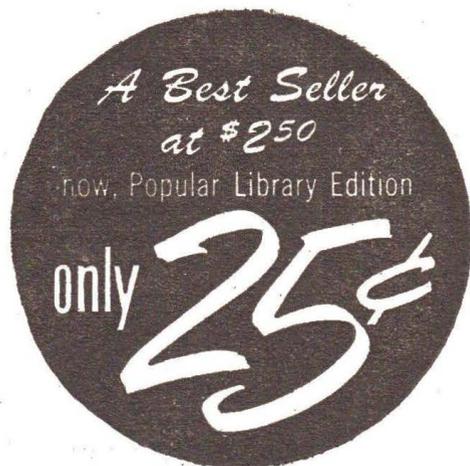
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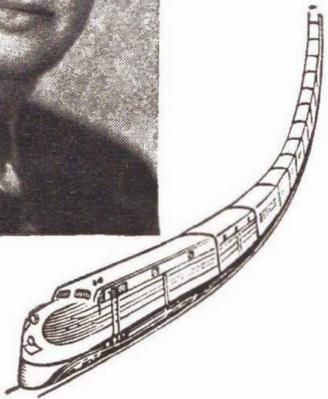
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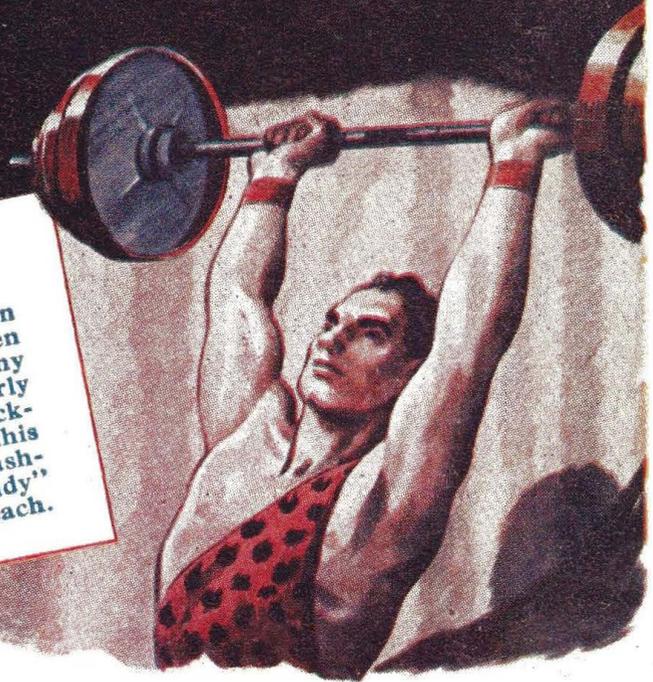
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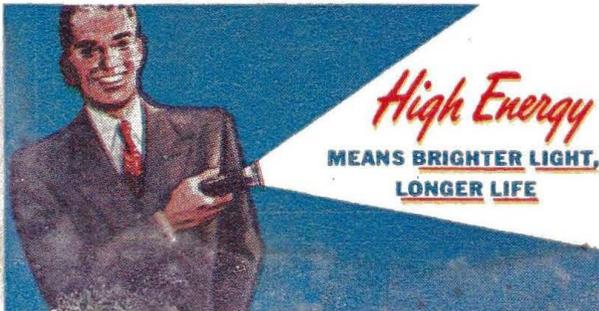
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