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The **PHANTOM DETECTIVE**

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THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE



A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

THE CASE OF THE **BURNING ROCKS**

A Full-Length Mystery Novel
By **ROBERT WALLACE**

Rudolph Belloc

NOV. 1947

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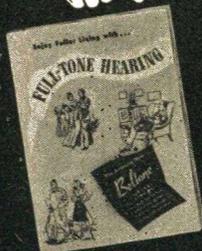


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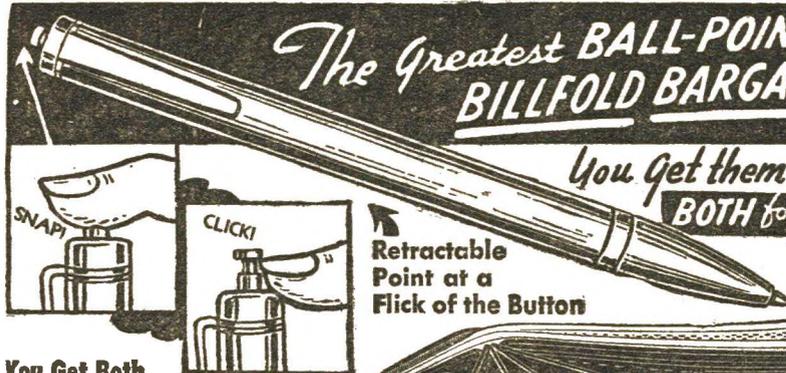
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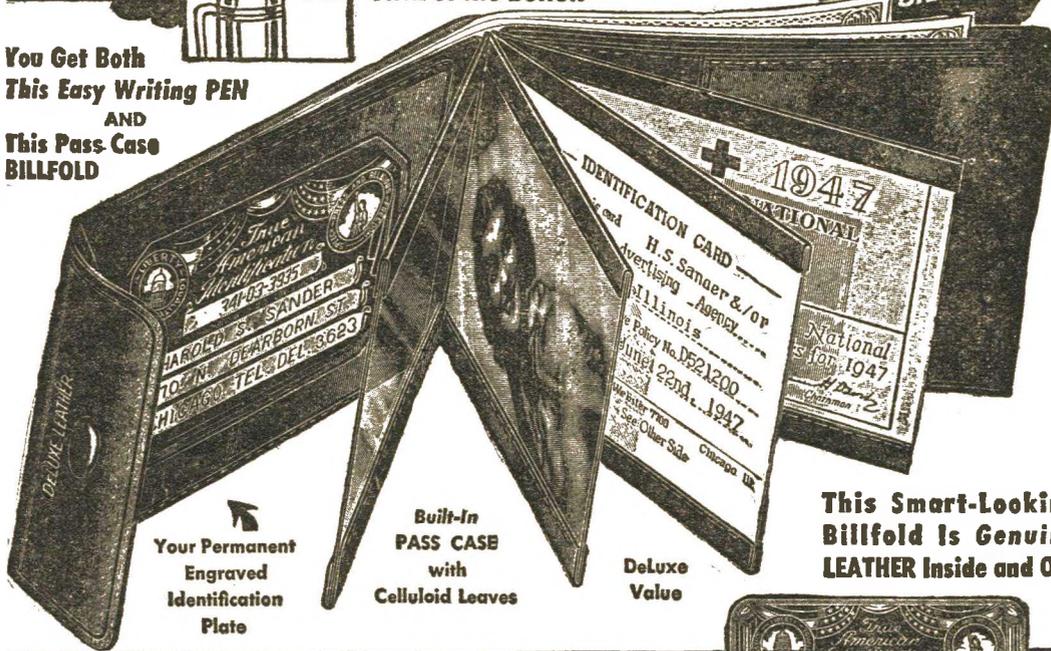
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The PHANTOM DETECTIVE

Vol. L, No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

November, 1947

A COMPLETE NOVEL

The Case of the Burning Rocks

by Robert Wallace



Photographer Jim Darrel's sudden murder is only the first blow struck by criminals who conspire to gain millions in loot! Follow the Phantom, world's greatest detective, as he pits himself against a sinister, elusive crime mogul who plays for gigantic stakes! 11

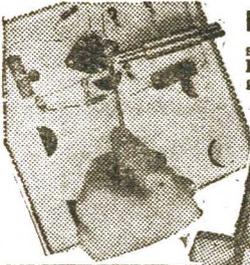
SHORT STORIES

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Larry Drake plans his heinous crime with fiendish and evil cleverness
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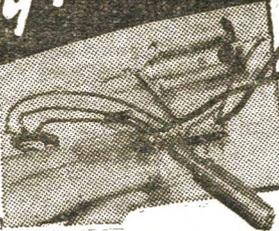


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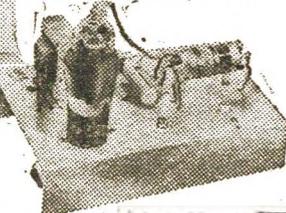
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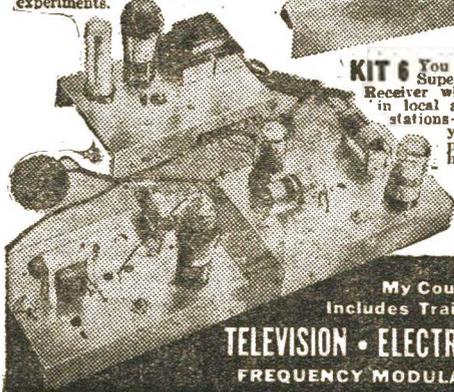
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IT ALL started at a small vacation resort in the foothills of the Catskills about one hundred miles from New York City. I was spending a week-end there with my good friend Frank Havens and his attractive daughter, Muriel. They went fishing one morning long before breakfast and on the way back decided to take a short cut through the Rockledge place. It was there that Muriel stooped to pick a beautiful red flower and found the murdered corpse of a famous Swiss scientist.

The local sheriff took charge of the first part of the investigation together with the county coroner, but their attention was almost immediately directed to a local man-of-all-work who was interested in the young granddaughter of the Swiss. Washington got in touch with Frank Havens and advised him that Professor Selgard, the scientist, was in the United States on a highly secret mission and was doing research work for a project that would eventually be taken over by the new Government laboratory in Bluefield, West Virginia.

This was the kind of a case that I like to sink my teeth into, and I went into action at Crooked Mile River to pick up the first threads of the murder investigation that I hoped would ultimately lead to the killer of Professor Selgard.

Steve Huston got the tip-off on the killing from the news wires and was on the job almost as soon as I was. He brought me some pleasant news in the information that Chip Dorlan, the young lad I had helped through his formative years in a San Francisco slum district, was back in New York after a hitch in the Army. Chip was always a big help to me, and I was glad to have him in on this case.

The Curious Swiss Watch

Before very many hours had gone by I was able to reassure the big brass in Washington that the death of the professor was not related in any way to his scientific secrets.

They were all safely filed in cabinets I located at Rockledge.

Strangely enough the line of investigation hinged more particularly upon a curious Swiss watch with a quaint mountain scene painted in glowing colors on its face. Professor Selgard had brought the watch to America as a favor for a friend in France, and was going to place it on sale in New York.

The course of the criminal chase shuttled back and forth between Crooked Mile River and New York City. It turned up a number of clues that appeared to be extremely baffling at the outset, but when I lined them up and broke them down by careful scientific scrutiny, they revealed some interesting information.

First there were the bloodstains that told me that Professor Selgard, although found dead in the summer house on his estate, had not been killed there. Then there was the broken bottle that pointed its own explanation of the mysterious disappearance of Danny Brayden, the local man-of-all-work.

Crime's Challenge

This whole series of events is woven into a dramatic and forceful narrative by Robert Wallace in the next story from the case book of Richard Curtis Van Loan which he has titled "The Crooked Mile River Murders." It is a tale that is going to provide a good many interesting hours of challenge against the machinations of a criminal brain just as it offered me a good many days of hard and careful investigation.

The crime overlord who put his gunmen on the trail of innocent people who happened to cross his path was one of the most cold-blooded individuals I've ever come into contact with, and his very ruthlessness was a challenge that had to be met and scotched without delay to make certain that vivacious young people and settled older folks did not fall victim to his quest for monetary gain.

(Continued on page 8)

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THE PHANTOM SPEAKS

(Continued from page 6)

You're going to like the way this criminal giant was finally caught in the tangled web of his own weaving, and the manner in which his path of murder and robbery was finally cut short. It's all presented dramatically in "The Crooked Mile River Murders" in the next issue of THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE.

It was a pleasure to me to have Chip Dorlan back in action—a more mature Chip Dorlan—and I know you old-timers are going to be glad to renew acquaintance with him. I'm expecting big things of Chip in the future, and he's a swell little gent to have around!

Look forward to "The Crooked Mile River Murders"—it's a real baffler!

Are You A FRIEND OF THE PHANTOM?

MY secretary brought me in a batch of applications for membership in our organization, FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM, the other day, and called my attention to the fact that they were from a group of young folks in the high school years who were eager to join with us in our never-ending campaign for law-enforcement and respect for our legally-constituted authorities.

I was rather pleased with this expression, because if you have been looking over the criminal statistics as I do from time to time, you'll know that juvenile delinquency is a real problem—and in a good many cases the juvenile delinquent graduates into more sinister criminal pursuits. It seems to be the age-group between 16 and 22 that supplies us with the largest number of potential criminals, largely because these young people are groping for the path to a future, and often stumble along the way.

Perhaps if we can get more FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM in this age group we'll have less worry about juvenile delinquents. Of course we'd like to also welcome the mothers and fathers and the younger brothers and sisters, too. For more than fifteen years now, FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM has been doing its part as a strong moral force backing up the uniformed police forces of our Cities, States and the Nation. Our readers have been proud to display their membership cards as a tangible sign of their

(Continued on page 110)

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TALKS CHEAP, BUT I'M CERTAINLY GRATEFUL...

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OKAY, DAD. BETTER SET ANOTHER PLACE. WE HAVE COMPANY.



HERE'S DRY DUDS AND A RAZOR, TOO

THANKS A LOT



WHAT AN EASY SHAVE! I EXPECTED TROUBLE WITH TWO DAYS' WHISKERS

THIN GILLETTES ALWAYS SKIM OFF WHISKERS QUICK AND EASY



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FISHIN'S GOOD HERE AND WE LIKE COMPANY. WHY NOT STAY A FEW DAYS?

I HOPE HE DOES. HE'S HANDSOME



WHILE YOU'RE SHOPPING, I'LL WIRE MY FOLKS

TELL THEM YOU DON'T KNOW WHEN YOU'LL BE BACK

NEXT MORNING

YOUR FACE LOOKS WELL GROOMED AND FEELS SWELL AFTER A SMOOTH, REFRESHING **THIN GILLETTE SHAVE**. MEN, THIS BLADE IS THE KEENEST AND LONGEST LASTING 'LOW-PRICED BLADE YOU EVER TRIED. THEN, TOO, IT FITS YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR ACCURATELY AND THUS PROTECTS YOU FROM THE IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR **THIN GILLETTES**

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As the blackjack struck Daniel—he pitched forward and fell face-down (CHAPTER I).

The Case of the BURNING ROCKS

By ROBERT WALLACE

The sudden murder of photographer Jim Darrel is only the first blow struck by criminals who conspire to gain millions in loot!

CHAPTER I

DEATH CALLS

THE tall, tanned young man in the loose gray coat and well-weathered felt hat picked up his two bags. The Philadelphia express was pulling into the

Pennsylvania Terminal. Jim Darrel went down the aisle of the coach toward the closed door to the platform.

In one hand he held his camera case, careful that no one struck against it. The shabby bag containing his haberdashery and weekend necessities didn't make so much difference. Darrel, a free lance

An Exciting Book-Length Phantom Novel

The World's Greatest Detective Pits Himself

news photographer, had to guard his stock in trade. The camera he carried was the key to his livelihood. If anything happened to it, he knew, he would be out of business until he could have it repaired.

The train stopped, air brakes hissing. Darrel was part of the procession that marched toward the exit gates. A few minutes later he was out and under the Manhattan stars.

"Taxi, boss?"

A sleek new cab slid up to the curb where Darrel hesitated. Usually he didn't ride in style. The subway or a bus was good enough. But tonight he felt he owed himself a treat. Folded in his wallet was a sizable check from a Philadelphia concern for which he had done some special work. It was more money than he had made since the time he had taken on a photographic assignment for the *Clarion*, pictures that had illustrated a feature story written by Steve Huston, the paper's ace crime reporter, for the Sunday magazine section.

Thinking of the *Clarion*, Darrel climbed into the cab.

"Clarion Building."

The taxi pulled out into the evening's traffic stream. Jim Darrel relaxed on the shiny upholstery. The events of the past two days, some of them cryptic and mysterious, began to crowd through his mind. Things he couldn't understand. Things that were apparently unexplainable. He shook his head, smiling thinly, when he remembered the telephone call he had made to Washington before he had left his hotel.

Some people, Darrel thought, had no imagination. The man he had talked to, who had hung up on him. The smile faded. He had been a "big man," an important person. A Senator.

Darrel's eyes narrowed. Tomorrow he would either wire or write the matter out in full. Then, he told himself, Senator Future Selden wouldn't be able to cut him off. The senator would be sorry he hadn't listened, when he learned what it was all about.

The streets slid past. Broadway, a carnival of light, was a momentary rainbow. A few more minutes and the taxi was stopping in front of the Clarion Building.

"Wait," Darrel said to his driver.

HE WAS gone no more than ten minutes. When he returned to the cab his tanned face mirrored a satisfied expression. He got in with a brief, "West Thirty-ninth," adding a number, and relaxed again.

The taxi's second stop before Darrel dismissed it was in front of an old-fashioned five-story apartment building. One of those structures that had been built in the early 1900's, before elevators were a necessity rather than a luxury. When gas had been the sole means of illumination.

Now electricity had replaced the ancient gaslight, but leg power still remained the method of transportation to the upper floors. Jim Darrel's three rooms were on the second floor. Not a long climb, fortunately. He went up the steps two at a time, set his camera case carefully on the board floor while he searched for his keys and opened his front door.

The light switch was to the left. He clicked that on, breathing in dry, musty air. He had been away only a few days, yet the apartment, from the dust on the furniture and the aroma of staleness in the place, suggested that it had been shut up for months.

Darrel walked into his living room. It was a fair size. Most of the furniture he had bought second hand, adding new pieces whenever he happened to make a little extra cash. The check in his pocket, he decided, would buy something he had always wanted—a steel filing cabinet for his negatives, more equipment for the darkroom where he did his developing.

Darrel went on to the bedroom. He stowed away the contents of his worn leather bag, tossed it up on the shelf of a closet, stashed his camera carefully on the same shelf and, with a cigarette, wandered back to the living room and threw himself down in an easy chair.

For a long while he mused, his eyes half closed. Once more the happenings that had accompanied the photographic assignment he had just ended whirled through his mind. The fantastic side of it all still awed him.

He had actually seen burning rocks! Bare, gray stone glowing with ruddy fire, smoking!

Against a Sinister, Elusive Mogul of Crime!

He had told Bob Clancy about it. Clancy had laughed at him. But Tucker, the man who had paid him for the job, had listened with interest to everything Darrel had told him.

His thoughts switched from Tucker to the Washington telephone call he had made. After a minute Darrel reached in his pocket. He took out a small memo book, turned its pages until he found a



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clean one. Reaching for a pencil, he jotted down the date. Under it, he scribbled a few words and was about to slip the book back in his pocket when the bell buzzed.

Darrel got up. He tossed the little memo book over to a littered desk, mashed out his cigarette and went down the short hall that led to the front door. He couldn't imagine who would be calling on him at that hour. Unless, of course, it was Steve Huston of the *Clarion*. Sometimes Steve dropped in for a chat and a bottle of beer. But it wasn't his reporter friend.

When Darrel opened the door, two men confronted him. In the murky hall light their faces were unfamiliar. One was tall,

gray-haired under the brim of his smartly styled felt hat. He had a long, high-cheek-boned face, deep-set eyes, and a sort of distinguished look.

The other man was short, slim, dapper in a tweed topcoat, so British in texture and cut that it might have just come off the boat. His face was square, decorated with a small, threadlike black mustache. His eyes were heavy-lidded, his nose had a spread about the nostrils and his mouth was full and loose.

"Darrel, James Darrel?" the taller of the pair asked. His voice, deep and full, had a cultured tone.

"I'm Darrel."

"My name is Johnson," the man went on. "This is my associate and partner, Neal Waterman. I wonder if we could come in and talk to you—about doing some work for us."

Darrel opened the door wider. "Sure, come on in."

He led the way back to the living room. The man who called himself Johnson shook his head at Darrel's invitation to sit down. He made no move to take off his hat, his gaze slowly roaming the room while the other man rested a shoulder against the doorway.

"I understand you're just back from a special job," Johnson said.

"That's right." Curiosity made Darrel add, "How'd you hear about it?"

"We hear a lot of things," Waterman said from the doorway.

PUZZLED, Darrel looked from one to the other. Johnson had said something about a job. But now that they were in, nothing more was said about it. Oddly, their attitudes, the fact they kept their hats on and remained standing, made Darrel begin to wonder about them.

Something in Waterman's tone made him stare.

"What did you have in mind?" he asked the tall man.

For a moment Johnson didn't answer. Darrel glanced back at the short, slender man. Somehow he had the impression that Waterman had planted himself in the doorway as a barricade. Johnson moved forward and Darrel found himself in between them, with his back to Waterman.

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"About those pictures you took," the tall man began, his voice smooth and soft. "I'd like to have a look at them."

Darrel's mouth tightened. So that was it! He shook his head.

"Sorry, but you can't see them."

"Why not?"

"I haven't got them."

Johnson's deep-set eyes narrowed. They bored into Darrel with a piercing intensity. But his tone remained quiet.

"I wouldn't try that line. We know you have the pictures. We want them. Hand them over."

Darrel drew a short, quick breath. Behind him he could hear Waterman breathing—waiting. The burning, hypnotic gaze of the tall man before him was like a knife. Darrel shook his head again.

"I haven't got the pictures!" he repeated.

"So that's the way you're going to play it?" Johnson shrugged. "You leave me no other alternative. We'll have to get them ourselves." He said over his shoulder to the man in the doorway, "All right. Let's have a look!"

Darrel, his heart suddenly pounding, swung around. He was a fraction of a second too late. Waterman, stepping in from the door, had something in his right hand. Something Darrel saw, that was raised and ready to go to work!

He tried to duck its downward sweep. He fell back a step or two. The tall man, behind him, reached out and pushed him forward—directly into Waterman's path.

Darrel's left arm flew up to ward off the blackjack blow. But he was off balance. Johnson's swift shove had made him stumble. For one dizzy, fleeting pulsebeat he saw what was in Waterman's square face, in the man's gaze.

Abruptly, like a sun slipping behind a black, scudding cloud, the lights in the room went out. Jim Darrel's knees buckled. Without a sound he pitched forward and fell face-down on the floor.

"Look him over," the man who had called himself Johnson directed. "Turn out his pockets. They're here somewhere."

Waterman went swiftly to work. Crouched on one knee beside Darrel's prone figure, he finally looked up.

"Nothing here."

"He's put them somewhere. Find them!"

While the short, slender man started in on a systematic search of the apartment, Johnson took a small leather-covered box from his pocket. He used its contents,

closed its lid and was about to put it away when Waterman came in from the bedroom.

"Nothing in there either!"

Johnson put the little box he carried on the second shelf of a small bookcase, his long face flushing.

"They've got to be here! You've got to find them!"

Waterman shrugged. "Suppose you take a look with me. Maybe you'll have better luck and—"

While he spoke his gaze had been directed at Darrel. He broke off and walked over to the figure on the floor. Johnson saw him get down on one knee. The tall man's brows drew together when he noticed what Waterman was doing.

Waterman's fingers came away from Darrel's wrist. He slid a hand under Darrel's shirt before he twisted around.

"I guess I socked too hard." His voice was low and muffled.

"What do you mean?" Johnson asked sharply.

Slowly, the other man got to his feet. He drew a deep breath. His loose mouth curved into a queer grimace.

"I mean this guy is dead!" Waterman's fingers twitched. "Come on, I don't like this! Let's get out of here!"

CHAPTER II

WANTED—THE PHANTOM



STEVE HUSTON, stepping out of the elevator in the Clarion Building that had taken him to the floor on which Frank Havens, the newspaper's owner and publisher, had his lofty office, hurried through to the anteroom.

Havens' secretary, a middle-aged woman who had served him for years, looked up as the reporter entered.

"You can go right in, Steve," she said, frowning slightly as she observed what was in Huston's freckled face. It wasn't often that he displayed his inner emotions so openly.

Huston thanked her and went through a rear door. He shut it behind him. He was in a pleasant, sun-filled room that looked more like the library or study in a private home than it did a business office.

The furniture was simple, richly elegant. Leather, for the most part. Dra-

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peries at the windows fluttered in the mild breeze, allowing glimpses of the tall tops of adjoining skyscrapers. The rug underfoot was deep-piled, a colorful Oriental that Havens had brought from the Orient. The newspaper owner had a penchant for flowers. A huge Chinese bowl held a brilliant mass of hothouse blooms.

Havens sat before a glass-topped desk of wide proportions. Convenient to his reach were a battery of telephones. Before him were the flimsies of some front page material sent up by his managing editor, ready for the first evening edition.

For all of his wealth and social renown, Frank Havens was still the brain behind the *Clarion*. Keen and shrewd, he managed its affairs with a firm, experienced hand. He was probably, Huston knew, one of the most dynamic figures in the world of the Fourth Estate.

The *Clarion* was only one of the chain of newspapers Havens owned. These stretched from Coast to Coast. The *Clarion*, the reporter was aware, was his employer's favorite sheet. This, published for the millions of New Yorkers, represented Frank Havens' dream of honest and fearless news gathering. The *Clarion*, under his leadership, had come to be a powerful instrument in the service of justice, in the never-ending war against crime. A warfare Havens waged unceasingly.

He looked up as Huston came toward him. Havens was genuinely fond of Steve. He had given him his first chance as a cub reporter, had recognized Huston's flair for writing and his reportorial talent. Havens had encouraged him, had watched him with an almost fatherly interest, and had seen Steve develop into a top reporter.

A glance was enough to show Havens the troubled expression on Huston's young face.

"Something the matter, Steve?"

Huston stopped at the desk. He seemed to have some difficulty finding words. Finally he said, in a choked voice:

"Do you remember Jim Darrel, Mr. Havens?"

"The news photographer?" Havens nodded. "Very well. What about him?"

"He was murdered last night!"

Havens jerked his head up. Shocked, he looked at Steve questioningly. "Murdered?"

"I got it as a routine from Headquarters. It didn't mean much at first. Some

people in an apartment on West Thirtieth Street had seen blood on their ceiling. The superintendent used a passkey on the door of the rooms upstairs over them and found a dead man. Even that didn't make too much sense—until I went up there. It was Darrel. His skull had been fractured, he'd been dead for nine or ten hours!"

Frank Havens shook his head. He remembered Jim Darrel well. A clever news photographer, a likable young man. Once he had thought of offering Darrel a berth on the *Clarion*. He had broached the matter, but Darrel had said he preferred being on his own.

"What did the police find?" Havens asked.

"Not a thing! No clues—nothing." Huston swallowed. "From what I learned there is nothing for them to go on, either. Jim didn't have an enemy in the world. I knew him well. I used to drop in and see him once in awhile. I can't think of any reason why anyone would want to—"

He broke off. Havens understood and nodded.

"Tell Inspector Gregg to do everything possible," he said slowly. "I know he will, but I want extra attention given it. And let me hear what develops."

Steve hesitated. "Jim's rooms were pretty well torn apart," he said. "Gregg seemed to think the killer was looking for money. But I know that couldn't have been it. Jim didn't have much."

Huston left him and Havens sat deep in thought. He couldn't get his mind back on his work. He could see Darrel in fancy. Attractive, smiling, rakish, with his camera in hand and his hat on the back of his head.

Later that afternoon he called Steve. But Huston had nothing new to report. The police, according to the reporter, hadn't made an inch of progress. . . .

ABOUT the same time the owner of the *Clarion* was talking with Steve, a low-slung, trim convertible was part of the traffic stream flowing across the majestic stretch of the Queensboro Bridge.

The car was black, with sparkling chromium trim and dull red leather upholstery. At its wheel, Richard Curtis Van Loan skimmed it along with careless but expert skill. Van, as he was known to his friends in the Social Register, was rolling back to the City of Restless Millions after an afternoon spent in

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no more serious pursuit than eighteen holes of gold at the Sunny Brook Country Club on Long Island's aristocratic North Shore.

He had played his usual brilliant game. He smiled faintly as he remembered. He had taken on a bank president who fancied himself a mature edition of Byron Nelson. Van had trimmed him without difficulty and the locker-room at the clubhouse had rung with the bank president's alibis and excuses.

According to him, nothing had been right. His timing was off, the sun had bothered him, the grass was too long, he had a new caddy who made him nervous, and his feet hurt. He loudly challenged Van Loan to a return engagement—when the sun wouldn't shine so bright and his feet would be in better condition. Van, pocketing the substantial wager for which they had played, had told him he would be pleased to cross clubs with him at any given time.

The black convertible left the bridge and went south through the tangle of Manhattan. Van glanced at the electric clock on the enameled dash. There was no particular rush. He had a dinner date at eight with the Craig Blakelys. He knew about what that meant. An elaborate meal, served with all the sumptuous elegance of Sutton Place, and a dreary evening of small talk, or cards, until the guests made a yawning exit and another social function had been written for Dolly Gotham's social column on Page Seven in the *Clarion*.

Van's quarters were tucked away high in a Park Avenue apartment building. For his own convenience and privacy, he had a special entrance and elevator. None of his friends, however, were aware of them, and it was only on certain occasions that Van Loan used them. And these occasions, also unknown to his acquaintances, oddly enough were cloaked in mystery.

His suite was what might be expected of a wealthy young bachelor who had decorating ideas of his own and the means to gratify a cultured and almost esthetic taste. Here in the lofty apartment where Van for good reasons of his own lived without benefit of servants, there was no casual blending of furniture or appointments. Each individual piece, exquisite in itself, had a definite position in the color motif and decorating scheme.

Rugs, moss-soft, sprawled across the

polished floors. Paintings by European masters graced the walls. Crystal and silver sparkled. And over all the peaceful quiet of the apartment's remoteness seemed to fold gentle wings.

The late afternoon edition of the *Clarion* was wedged in the brass mail-clip at the door. Van took it into the lounge, shook it open and sank down into a comfortable chair. Strangely, he had the habit of reading the crime news first. An odd custom for one whose gilded existence seemed poles apart from the rugged, sordid undercurrents of crime.

Van's glance slid from headline to headline. It stopped on the caption:

CAMERAMAN MYSTERIOUSLY MURDERED

He read the short item that followed and turned the page to the editorials. Then, discarding the paper, he stretched out on an opposite sofa, pushed a pillow under his head and a minute later was asleep. . . .

Almost the first person Van saw that night when the Craig Blakely butler took his coat and ushered him into a room where an appalling number of people stood around in groups, was Frank Havens.

Van's lean, handsome face lighted with a gleam of pleasure. The publisher was one of his oldest friends. Havens had known Van Loan's father, too. As long as he could remember Van had admired and respected Havens who had been like a second father to him after the death of his own.

His first glance showed him there was something on the publisher's mind. Havens looked worried, troubled. Van, all of his well-known charm working overtime, spoke with his host and hostess, before he engineered his way from group to group and over to where Havens stood.

"Van!" The publisher's expression brightened. "I didn't expect to find you here tonight."

They shook hands.

"Or I, you." Van laughed under his breath. "You're frankly a drifting spar in an awfully dull sea."

Havens looked cautiously around. "I telephoned you this afternoon," he said. "No answer."

"I was toying with the intricacies of golf." Van laughed. "I took Henry Jessup Taylor for three hundred dollars and considerable of his conceit. Strictly comedy



The Phantom tripped over a footstool, and the butt of the gun in the man's hand came arcing down (CHAPTER IV)

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from the first tee-off to the last hole. Sorry I missed your call. Important?"

HAVENS led the way to a bay, out of earshot of the nearest group. There was a bond between the two, a link both secret and so carefully concealed that the most observant was totally unaware of it. This confidential association was, in part, responsible for the private entrance and elevator in the Park Avenue apartment building where Van Loan had his rooms.

More than that, it reached cryptically into the same dark pool of crime concerning which Van had searched the evening newspaper. The fact that Frank Havens had called him might, or might not, have a direct bearing on the hidden significance of that bond between them.

Certain that no one could listen in, Havens lost no time in coming to the point. Rapidly he gave Van a brief word picture of what Steve Huston had told him about Jim Darrel's murder. Van's expression didn't change while Havens talked. Without comment he heard the details, realizing that whoever this Darrel was, his death had preyed upon his friend's mind. He had seldom seen Havens so concerned about a person's death.

"I read something about it," Van murmured. "From what I gathered the police haven't made much headway."

"No clues, nothing tangible. Steve said he was sure Darrel had no enemies. And yet—"

"A news photographer." Van spoke musingly. "A ransacked apartment. The thing looks fairly obvious."

"How do you mean?"

"Photographers take pictures. You say Darrel didn't have much money. Robbery for cash then isn't plausible. What is? A search for something that was part of Darrel's profession? Which brings us back to photography?"

Frank Havens stared. "That must be it!"

"It's possible, but not entirely definite."

Invariably," Van Loan added, "death by violence can be traced to five specific motives—gain, revenge, jealousy, error or insanity. Gain, meaning profit, is the most usual. The motive, most likely, for the killing you mention."

He spoke casually, like one well-versed in the subject under discussion. Those who knew Dick Van Loan would have been amazed at his seriousness. To them, as to Henry Jessup Taylor, the banker of the afternoon, Van was an indolent, attractive idler whose chief concern in life was the pursuit of pleasure.

Only Frank Havens, considering Van quizzically, realized that the man with whom he was talking had another side to his nature. A side so totally different that he, Havens, was the one person in the world who knew about it.

"I told Steve," Havens continued, "to have Homicide do everything possible to crack Darrel's case."

"It appears routine." Van shrugged.

"It must have been something of extreme value," Havens insisted. "Otherwise, why would anyone have gone to the trouble of killing Jim and turning his place inside out?"

Van's shoulders moved again. "That isn't too tough to figure. Darrel wouldn't hand over, or divulge the whereabouts of whatever the murderer wanted. So he was silenced—permanently—to make a search possible. All the police have to do now is find out what the killer was after, use that as a pivotal point and work back from it."

He seemed to dismiss the matter with another shrug of his broad shoulders, but Havens was not to be put off. He waited until a servant, wheeling a small cart loaded with filled cocktail glasses, had moved on before turning directly back to Van.

"I intend to ask the Phantom to look into this case!" Havens said vibrantly. "I want him to start on it tonight—at the earliest possible moment! What do you think the chances are of his cooperating with me?"

Van Loan frowned, his gaze wandering across the room, past the animated, talkative knots of people, and into the spacious dining room where the Craig Blakely's portly butler had thrown wide the heavily carved double doors and was announcing dinner.

"I think," Van said, "your chances are excellent!"

NEXT ISSUE

THE CROOKED MILE RIVER MURDERS

A Phantom Novel

—bv ROBERT WALLACE

THE CASE OF THE BURNING ROCKS

CHAPTER III

DEAD MAN'S HOME



DICK VAN LOAN returned to his sky high room a little after eleven o'clock. A light rain diamonded the windows, made the terrace flagstones glisten in the reflected glow of the lights in the living room beyond the French doors opening out on the terrace.

Van snapped off the lights and went on into his bedroom, which was as luxurious as his living room. Done in the fashion of the Empire, its furnishings had come intact from an old French chateau in the Marne Valley. He reached around the carved headboard of his Napoleonic bed, let his finger find a concealed button and pressed it.

Equally as remarkable as the Van Loan discourse on crime in the reception room of the Craig Blakely house, was the quiet whirr of mechanism which, electrically controlled, rolled a portion of the bedroom wall back. That made an aperture large enough to permit entry into the windowless room which had been built in behind the movable wall.

A small room, but crowded with the paraphernalia of a research laboratory in miniature. Confronting Van, grouped on a long porcelain table, on white shelves and in glass-fronted cabinets, were graduated, ten millimeter cylinders, a centrifuge machine of the most advanced type, a porcelain eight-pot plate.

There were also capillary pipettes, crucibles, beakers, ring stands. A Bunsen burner beside a quantity of asbestos wire gauzes and stirring rods was to the left of a test tube and beaker holder. Various types of ray machines and microscopes. All in all, the small room was such that any scientist would have been delighted with its equipment.

To Van Loan it was a familiar and much used place. Here, that other side of his nature was revealed, his other personality explained. This was not the workshop of Van, the idler. This was the quiet, hidden room in which the celebrated Phantom Detective busied himself with scientific deductions that helped him in the solution of baffling crime cases!

Incredible to anyone who had met, or who knew Dick Van Loan, the fact remained that he was the same Phantom



FRANK HAVENS

Detective to whom Havens had appealed in the matter of Jim Darrel's killing. This was the bond that linked the publisher of the *Clarion* with the socialite of the Park Avenue apartment!

It was through Frank Havens that the Phantom had been created. Havens, using his paper as a weapon in his crusade against crime, had discovered he needed more than words to win his battles. He needed more than the ordinary police department detective, the private eye publicized in fiction, or the amateur sleuth.

Havens needed someone with extraordinary talents, someone gifted with keen intelligence, unquestioned courage, imagination, and a mentality surpassing that of the best criminal brain. In Van Loan, Havens had found all these requirements and qualifications. And under his guidance, cloaked in the mystery necessary for a dual rôle, the man known as the Phantom had come brilliantly to life.

From the first, Van's scientific deductions, his oblique analyzation and treatment of cases had been in sharp contrast to the slow, ordinary police methods so long in use. His was the application of the law wrought in a geniuslike manner, untrammled and distinctly his own. Havens had never regretted the inspiration that had turned him to Van Loan when he had first seen in the son of his old friend the potentialities he wanted and needed so urgently. That was after he had suggested to the young man, bred

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with a playboy existence, that he try his hand at a case which had baffled the police—and Van had been eminently successful.

The Phantom was never seen as Dick Van Loan. He appeared always in some clever and ingenious characterization. But this matter of disguise was never overdone. It never was played up to obstruct the Phantom's course of action. Disguise, as he had so often told Havens, was not a matter of wigs and clothing, phony props and fantastic scenery. Because a change of face was vital, the Phantom, who had made an intensive study of the subject, achieved, by a light touch of make-up, only slightly different from that used by stage artists, the required effect.

There was more to an eye-shadow or wrinkle, a slight twist to the mouth, a change of nose, the altering of a hair line than there was to a plastic surgeon's facial lift. As the Phantom did it, there was nothing unnaturally strange or bizarre about the faces he conjured into brief existence.

OUT of his dinner clothes now, and seated before his make-up table, Van proceeded to blot away his familiar features with one of the Phantom's faces. To that end he used a foundation skin cream, some color pencils, a denture. His strong, artistic fingers worked like those of an artist on a canvas. In a surprisingly short time Van Loan's reflection in the full length mirror was that of a stranger.

The man in a blue flannel suit who stared back at him was apparently only a few years older than he was. A pleasant looking individual whose face contours might have been more regular, whose eyes were cornered with a tiny network of wrinkles and whose mouth was wide and amused. He had brushed his hair in a different way, his comb and an application from a handy bottle giving it a straightness that was not naturally there. It was a disguise that would stand up anywhere. Complete enough to fool the most critical observer.

With each change of face and clothing went the same necessities, the tools of the Phantom's trade.

Into a hidden waistband trouser recess went the most important requisite of all—a small, jeweled plate in the form of a mask. That was the Phantom's own personal means of identification, known to the police everywhere. Uncounted times it had opened closed doors, brought the

law to his aid when, in tight corners, he had needed such assistance.

His other accessories were his master-key, a clever contrivance invented by a Viennese locksmith, capable of manipulation so that it could turn the lock behind any keyhole into which it was inserted. Also, there was his tightly rolled black felt mask, which he didn't use much but which he took along as a precautionary measure, his pocket flashlight, wallet with money and his gun.

He selected that from a well-stocked arsenal where lethal weapons, loaded, oiled and ready for use, were racked according to size and shape. He had only to slide back a panel in one of the cabinets and there they were, in neat array. Guns small enough to decorate a woman's purse, large enough to bring down a mountain lion. Guns of all manufacture, all calibers, all handiwork.

Tonight, the Phantom selected an ordinary automatic. He tucked that into a leather-strap holster he wore snugged under his waistcoat. That put away, he picked out a hat to go with the blue suit, let the bedroom wall section move back into place. Using his private elevator, he descended to the street floor and the entrance that was entirely his own.

Rain sifted down, cool and thin. Only a few umbrellas bobbed along Park Avenue when Van crossed it and continued on to Madison. Taxis, as usual when the weather was inclement, were at a premium, and he had gone almost a half dozen blocks before a cab stopped at his signal. He got in, giving an address on West Thirty-ninth Street as his destination.

The building in which Jim Darrel had been killed stood gaunt and unprepossessing in the rain. The Phantom paid and dismissed his hackie. Slowly, with a glance up and down the street that showed him there were no pedestrians on either pavement, he went into the building.

From Havens he had learned that Darrel's body had long since been removed. The autopsy was in, skull fracture having been given as the cause of death. The usual police guard, left at a murder scene, had been called off.

The Phantom went up to the second floor, found Darrel's door. The night sounds of a Manhattan apartment drifted down the well of the stairs. The rumble of radios, muffled conversation, someone playing a piano, a child crying.

THE CASE OF THE BURNING ROCKS

The Phantom's master key turned the lock of the front door. He stepped into velvety darkness.

The shades were down in the living room. He found the light switch and clicked on a lamp. It gave a shaded glow, enough illumination for him without revealing to the tenants in the building that someone was in the apartment of the man who had been murdered the previous night.

The Phantom's observant gaze moved systematically around Darrel's living room. Evidences of the law's visit were all over the place, in discarded flash bulbs, cigar ashes, furniture moved out of position, prints of large shoes in the dust of the floor boards around the rug. A pretty good going over, Van decided, when his glance had completed a circle of the room.

Yet he knew from experience a police investigation didn't necessarily mean that all clues had been found and destroyed.

of what? From what he had learned Jim Darrel had been a news camera man. As such it was possible he had come across something unusual. But it had to be a snap of more than ordinary interest. It had to be something either valuable to the killer or incriminating.

Which?

Van went to work. He started with the floor, but found nothing there. The big feet of Homicide had obliterated any possible clues. He straightened and sat down before Darrel's desk. Its drawers were packed with negatives in envelopes, each numbered and dated. There were literally hundreds of pictures. To wade through them meant hours of work, and the killer had evidently passed them in his own search.

Shutting the last drawer, the Phantom looked at the litter on the desk. Newspaper clippings, bills, circular advertisements, old magazines, a book from a near-

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Many times he had turned up what to Homicide had appeared too trivial to bother with and which, in the final analysis, had developed into an important lead.

HE DIDN'T blame the police. They did their job well, but there were times when more was required than men who were well trained in departmental routine. There were times when it was necessary for imagination to enter into an investigator's calculations. And, Van knew, that was some of the part of the equipment of many metropolitan first grade detectives who were sharp-witted, smart operators. It was not, however, often to be found among the rank and file.

The Phantom stood in the center of the room, his face shadowed. Almost at his feet, stains on the rug showed him where Jim Darrel had lain. His mind went back over the particulars Frank Havens had furnished. They made a simple pattern, probably more complex than usual, because of their very simplicity.

Darrel had something someone wanted—badly. He had refused to give it up, had died trying to retain it. When the Phantom had first listened to Havens' account of the crime, he had assumed that photographs probably had been wanted. He had believed that because of Darrel's profession.

But what kind of photographs? Pictures

by penny-a-day library, automobile road maps and other miscellany. He sifted through it, hunting for something that might represent a frail thread, a faint clue to why Darrel had been struck down.

He picked up a small memo book, a pocket-sized notebook with ruled pages and an index. It was small enough to be tucked in a vest pocket. Under a bunch of newspaper clippings, it evidently had been pushed aside when the police had pawed over the stuff. The Phantom opened it.

Most of its pages seemed to contain itemized expenses. Money used on various business trips. The figures were neat, orderly. They told Van the man who had jotted them down had had a methodical mind. But they didn't offer much. He reached one of the rear pages and was about to shut and discard the book when he noticed some hastily scribbled words.

The Phantom held the book to the slanting lamplight. Darrel had put down yesterday's date. Under it, he had written:

If anything happens to me notify Senator Future Selden. Tell him the pictures will explain everything.

Darrel had made the notation in haste. There was no doubt of the speed with which he had scrawled the message. It was expressed in each letter, each word.

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CHAPTER IV

VISITOR



THOUGHTFULLY, the Phantom dropped the book in his pocket. Finding it was lucky. He was sure it would be important to him, to the promise he had made Havens to look into Jim Darrel's passing.

A minute later he came across something else that quickened his interest.

He had gone into the bedroom but had come out, having drawn a blank in there. He had half-decided to turn out the light and leave when his glance, moving idly about, rested on one of the shelves in a small open bookcase. Dust filmed them, lying on top of the books grayly.

From the second shelf the Phantom picked up a small, leather-covered box. What caught his attention was the fact it was free from dust. That meant it had been placed there recently. He opened it, frowned at its contents, and slipped it into a pocket of his topcoat. The box, too, might come in handy.

He snapped the light switch and started down the short hall to the front door. His hand reached out for the knob, but his fingers didn't grip and turn it. Instead, his hand dropped. He drew back, moving silently and swiftly toward the thick dark of the bedroom he had just left.

In the quiet, the slide of a key into Darrel's front door made a thin, rasping sound. The door opened, closed softly. The round, yellow eye of a torch sliced the gloom.

Someone walked into the living room!

The Phantom, in Darrel's bedroom, drew back against the wall behind the protection of the open door.

Through an inch or more crack he had a ringside view of the living room. The darkness in there was streaked with the zigzag of the unknown intruder's flashlight. It focused on the desk before which the Phantom had been sitting, roving over the drawers. Another minute and the man with the flashlight had dropped down in the chair before the desk, had propped his light up on its edge, and was opening the top drawer.

The Phantom's face hardened. Darrel's murderer coming back for a more leisurely inspection of the premises? The killer still searching for the mysterious pic-

tures? Stone stiff, the Phantom watched, his narrowed gaze fixed speculatively on the gloom-blurred figure in the chair.

It was impossible to see the man with any degree of clearness. He sat hunched over, a shape of shadow in a loose topcoat. The Phantom hoped he would lean close to one of the drawers, close enough for the light to fall on his face. But he didn't. Only his hands were in the beam of the torch—slender, well-cared-for hands that began to riffle through the envelopes containing the negatives.

So he thought that possibly Jim Darrel had stashed what he was after in among his films? The Phantom knew better than that. The envelopes made a poor hiding place. Anything as valuable as the wanted pictures must be would hardly be hidden away in a place so obvious.

The fact the man at the desk sorted through them, however, indicated that no stone was being left unturned. Last night there probably hadn't been enough time. Now, with the apartment empty and the police removed, there was nothing to hinder a prolonged visit.

The Phantom's thought ranged further.

How had the man been able to get the key to Darrel's apartment? That wasn't too difficult to figure. He had probably helped himself to it from the murder victim's pockets. Another question puzzled the Phantom. Why should the man imagine that what he was looking for was still in the rooms after the police had given them a complete going-over? But probably the visitor reasoned that even if the police had found the pictures, they had not realized their significance and had not confiscated them.

The hands in the light went on with their work.

The Phantom's face hardened. His fingers slid toward the gun in his holster. He wanted the man who sat hunched at Darrel's desk. But he wanted him alive—able to talk!

Inch by inch, the Phantom moved around the bedroom door. He had to be cautious and he had to be quiet. He didn't discount the menace of the man in the other room. He knew the type he was dealing with. That man was a killer who would stop at nothing to gain his own ends.

The Phantom moved forward a little more. He reached the threshold. He poised himself, the cold steel of the automatic in his hand ready for instant use.

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But he didn't use it.

Suddenly the flashlight winked out, leaving the room in total darkness. Blackness so complete that the stygian waves of it beat against the Phantom's eyes.

HE HEARD a faint, sliding sound. The desk chair on the worn rug. He realized the danger of using his own pencil flash. The minute he turned it on he made himself an easy target. Whatever was to be done had to be accomplished under the cloak of darkness.

Another sound reached his strained ears. That came in the form of a quick, light footstep from the opposite side of the room. The Phantom knew its significance. In some way he had telegraphed his presence. The intruder was in the act of making a fast exit, gliding toward the hall passage and the front door—another evidence of his intelligence.

The man wasn't risking a gun battle, shots to arouse the tenants of the house and bring them crowding down to the landing outside. He preferred a silent fadeout, biding his time for another visit to the rooms.

The Phantom cut swiftly to the left. By then his eyes had become more accustomed to the velvety waves of the staring black around him. He was able to see a darker shape of shadow in the entrance to the passage. He knew he didn't have much time. Half a dozen steps and the man would be through the front door, down the stairs and on his way out.

The Phantom sprang forward. He had a fleeting impression that his quarry was in the hall, waiting for him. He reversed the gun in his hand. Winding his fingers around its blue-steel barrel he darted across the room.

But whatever success his lunge might have chalked up was spoiled by two things. One was a footstool to the left of the door which got in his way and tripped him. The other was the butt of a gun in the man's hand. That slithered through the darkness, coming down in a swift, deadly arc.

Stumbling, the Phantom had a piece of belated luck. The gun missed his head and struck his shoulder. He moaned realistically and reeled to his knees. He hoped the ruse would bring the man over to see what damage he had done.

But his assailant didn't take the bait. Even the thud the Phantom made when he sagged to the floor was not enough to



The Phantom faded down the stairs, and heard the crack of a silenced gun as he ran toward the waiting car (CHAPTER XI)

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bring the man within his reach. On quick feet the fellow hurried to the door, opened it, closed it quietly behind him and was gone.

The Phantom shoved the automatic back in its holster and swiftly followed. Out on the landing he heard the man's steps dwindling on the stairs. Then he heard the front door below opening and closing.

In less than a minute the Phantom was down the stairs and at the building's main entrance. Out in the street, he saw the man who had left Jim Darrel's apartment turning west. The Phantom raced after him.

There was a dull ache in his shoulder, but he paid no attention to it. The enemy had scored the first trick, but the Phantom was not too concerned with that temporary victory. The thing now was to follow through. If luck was still good, the night might yet prove his first investigations fruitful.

Expert in the art of tailing a suspect, he used this superior skill to good advantage. Keeping the right distance, he stuck relentlessly to the trail.

The man he was following didn't bother to look back. No doubt he thought the bludgeon blow of his gun had knocked out his adversary. The thin moan and the thud of the fall he had heard had been convincing.

On the avenue, the Phantom saw his prey stop the first taxi that came along. The rain had ended and cabs were now available. Quickly Van sighted another taxi coming around the corner. He hailed it, satisfied momentarily because the vehicle his quarry had taken had braked for a red light down the street.

"That blue cab ahead," the Phantom ordered. "I want you to keep it in view!"

The cab driver turned halfway around to get a good look at him. He seemed about to say, "What's the big idea?" or something similar, but thought better of it when he glimpsed the bill being pushed through the open glass partition.

"Okay, boss," he said, instead.

The lights changed. The blue taxi ahead rattled away, the Phantom sitting on the edge of his seat, his gaze glued to the vehicle. It went south. Unfortunately, the traffic thinned as they went along, and the Phantom's chauffeur was a trifle too eager, and nervous for fear he would lose the car ahead. He kept pressing too closely, despite his fare's words of caution.

"Take it easy. I don't want them to

know we're tailing them."

TEN more streets and the leading taxi turned sharply east. The Phantom's cab just made the light, swinging around after it. The block they were in was half-business, half-residential, a place of warehouses and frowsy tenements, stores and garages. But it was quiet and deserted under the night stars the rain had washed clear and bright.

Suddenly the Phantom felt the quiver of his nerves. It was an old, familiar danger signal. Some razor-edged sense invariably telegraphed him a warning when peril threatened. The Phantom's eyes narrowed. The empty street and the cab ahead didn't seem hazardous. His mouth tightened as his driver said over his shoulder:

"He's pulling in, boss. What do I do now?"

"Pass him. I'll tell you where to stop. Go slow."

The blue cab paused in front of one of the steel-shuttered warehouse buildings. Darkness brooded there, thickly, in shoals. The Phantom had an impression the man he was following had left the blue taxi, but looking through the open window beside him, the Phantom couldn't see the man.

He was craning his neck cautiously when his nerves jangled again, this time with a whiplash so stinging that he instinctively drew back from the window. Above the pant of the taxi's chugging engine he heard what sounded like a rasping cough.

That followed the whine of a lead slug that lanced in through the open window, whizzed by the Phantom and buried itself in the upholstery on the other side of the car! Almost at the same moment the blue cab pulled away from the curb with a burst of speed. The Phantom knew what was coming and dropped to the floor.

He made it without a minute to spare. Coming abreast of them, its motor roaring, a hand came out of the window of the other cab and the gun in it spat again!

It was over in a flashing instant. Van's chauffeur jammed on the brake and jumped out, cursing. The Phantom, grim-faced, pulled himself up on the seat. Far down the street he saw the red tail light of the blue taxi disappearing in the distance.

"How do you like that?" His taxi driver turned around and opened the door. "A

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gunny trying to shoot me up! Did you get hit, boss?"

"I'm all right." The Phantom brushed off his coat. "We got in too close. He knew we were trailing him and didn't like it."

The driver stared, open-mouthed. "You a cop?"

"After a fashion. Let's forget it. He didn't damage your cab. If you find he did I'll pay for the repairs. Hop in and take me up to Park Avenue."

"Sure, sure. Did you get his license number?"

"Yes." The Phantom shrugged. "Not that it'll do much good. Our gun-toting friend will drop off somewhere and the driver'll never see him again."

CHAPTER V

WASHINGTON-BOUND



EARLY the next morning Van left the elevator in the Clarion Building and walked into the anteroom of Havens' office. As Dick Van Loan he had often been there before. The place was as familiar to him as his own living room. So was Miss

Marsh, the publisher's secretary.

She glanced up as the Phantom stepped quietly in and walked toward her desk. No recognition was in her face or eyes. She frowned a little as Van said:

"My name is Peterson. I have an appointment with Mr. Havens."

Miss Marsh spoke into the inner-office communicating system, listened to the answer that came back.

"Mr. Havens will see you," she said. "Second door to the left."

Havens waited until his visitor had closed the door and given an identifying signal. Then he smiled. The Phantom's repertoire of disguises was a constant source of amazement to the publisher. He looked at Van admiringly.

"Sit down," he invited. "I've been waiting to hear from you—about last night. Any luck?"

"Not a great deal."

Havens had expected as much. When on a case, the Phantom was always non-committal until developments shaped themselves into a definite pattern. Then, and then only, did he discuss the underlying motives and the trend his deductions had taken.

"At least you've made a start," Havens went on. "I hope—"

"Yes, I believe I have. Is Huston around? I'd like to ask him a question or two."

"I'll see."

Havens used one of the telephones on his desk. A few minutes later Steve Huston came in.

The reporter looked curiously from his employer to the man in the chair beside him. Steve, who had assisted the celebrated Phantom Detective on numerous occasions, saw nothing familiar about the "Mr. Peterson" to whom he was introduced.

"You don't know the gentleman, Steve?" Havens said slyly. "Sure of it?"

Huston's eyes began to widen. For a moment he stared blankly. Then, as Van gave the identification signal again—pulling the lobe of an ear—his face cleared swiftly.

"Phantom!" he exclaimed.

Van laughed. "Sit down, Steve. It seems we're both occupied with the same matter—Jim Darrel's murder. I understand you knew him."

"Fairly well," said Steve.

"Do you happen to know if he was a diabetic?"

The reporter looked surprised. "Diabetic?"

"I ask," the Phantom said, "because of something I found in his rooms last night. This." From his topcoat pocket he took a small leather-covered box. He opened it, letting Huston and Havens see its contents. "An insulin kit. It was on a dusty shelf. There was dust under and around it but not on it. It had been placed there recently, either by Darrel or whoever called on him. Insulin, of course, is used by diabetics."

"I'm sure Jim wasn't a diabetic," Steve said. "He always impressed me as being in perfect health, top physical condition."

"I should imagine so. His work must have been rather rugged. A news photographer, with all kinds of precarious jobs to do."

Huston, looking at the insulin kit, drew a long breath.

"It must have been brought in and left there by the killer!"

"Odd, the police didn't notice it," Frank Havens murmured.

"They probably did, but thought it was Darrel's." The Phantom turned to Steve. "When did you see Darrel last?"

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"About a week ago. Just before he went on his trip."

"Trip?" The Phantom's eyes brightened. "Have you mentioned that before?"

"No. I just remembered. Jim called me up the night before he left. He said if anything in his line came along to hold it until he returned. He said he expected to be away a few days."

"Did he say where he was going? To Washington, for instance?"

Surprised, Steve shook his head. "Washington? No, he didn't say, and I didn't ask. He was usually all over the place, trailing down news shots."

A FEW more words and Steve left the office.

"Washington?" Frank Havens said. "Why do you ask if Darrel went there?"

"That's what I want to talk to you about." Van produced the small pocket notebook he had found on the cluttered desk. He opened it to the page on which Darrel had scribbled his hasty message. Handing it to Havens, Van waited.

"Senator Future Selden!" Havens' brows went up.

"The colorful gentleman from Pennsylvania," Van added. "He's a friend of yours, I believe."

"I've known him for years. At one time Selden published the *Philadelphia Transcript*. He built it into a prosperous, powerful news sheet. I purchased it from him when Selden decided to exchange publishing for politics. What does this mean—'if anything happens to me notify Senator Future Selden. Tell him the pictures will explain everything'?"

"When I find out," Van answered slowly, "I'll know a lot more about the reasons for Darrel's being killed than I do now."

Puzzled, Havens shook his head. "I don't understand. What connection could Selden have had with Darrel?"

"I intend to learn—with your assistance. It's the only concrete lead I have, so far. On it depends what progress I make."

"How can I be of help?"

"You can get in touch with Senator Selden. Tell him a friend of yours will be in Washington this afternoon, a 'Mr. Peterson.' Make an appointment for me. I know how difficult it is to see these Congressmen. You can pave the way. And I'd like a letter of introduction to him, to use when I get there."

"I'll take care of it immediately," Havens promised, and Van switched the subject.

He asked about the police investigation on the murder in West Thirty-ninth Street. Havens said there was no new development. He had talked with Homicide earlier that morning. The Department frankly admitted no arrests were contemplated. The case of Jim Darrel had bogged down into one of those stagnant metropolitan killings without clues or suspects.

When Van left the Clarion Building, he made a plane reservation for early that afternoon. With that in his wallet he went back to his quarters to familiarize himself with Senator Future Selden's history and background.

He dug the facts he wanted out of a copy of *Who's Who in Congress*, a compact, well-written volume published only a month previous. In it the members of Congress were biographically complete, with the added advantage of sidelights not generally known to the public.

Van came to the section featuring Senator Selden and read the account with interest.

He learned that Selden had come up the hard way. Born of a poor Pennsylvania farming family, Selden's education had been limited. While still in his teens he had gone to Philadelphia. His first job had been a printer's apprentice. Then he had started to work as a copy boy for the *Transcript*, the paper he was later to own.

He had attended night school, finishing his neglected education. From a reporter had worked himself into a night editor's job. Thrifty and diligent, Future Selden had acquired stock in the newspaper. Finally, with the passing of years, and after a climb into the managing editor's chair, he took over the ownership of the sheet. As Havens had mentioned, his interest had then turned political.

With his paper as a powerful organ to promote him, Selden had made his debut in politics. Starting locally, it hadn't been long before he was in Washington as a legislator. His record as Senator from Pennsylvania had been brilliantly constructive. The bills he sponsored had made history. His native State respected and stood firmly behind him, regardless of the political winds that blew around Capitol Hill.

Senator Selden, Van learned, was one of the wealthiest men in Congress. His

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real estate holdings were tremendous. In the northeastern part of the state, Selden owned a five-thousand-acre tract, a virgin, undeveloped wilderness he called "Timberlands." There he had a summer lodge, on one of its lakes.

Besides his realty holdings, the senator held a controlling interest in several traction companies. He had been married twice. His first wife had died before he had gone to Washington, leaving him a son, Arthur, who acted as his secretary.

SELDEN had married his second wife, a Mrs. Carson Blake, a widow from California, some ten months previous. And Arthur, Van read, was married to the former Peggy Lamont, a Baltimore debutante whose beauty had been pictured many times in smart magazines.

With all the facts concerning Senator Selden and his family in mind, the Phantom boarded his plane at La Guardia Field in the vivid sunshine of the early afternoon.

As he took his seat, he wondered if the result of his flight to Washington was destined to shed any revealing light on the mystery of Jim Darrel's brutal murder. . . .

Washington, to Van, seemed no less crowded than it had been during the hectic days of the war. Pennsylvania Avenue still vibrated to the flow of traffic, thronged pavements. The hotels, restaurants and amusement places were just as jammed. The same air of hustle and bustle prevailed.

In the room that Frank Havens had reserved for him at the Paul Revere House, Van used the telephone. He spoke with Arthur Selden, learned that the Senator would see him at five o'clock sharp at his home and, with time to spare, studied the few meager facts he had on the Darrel case.

The insulin kit interested him. If it hadn't belonged to Darrel, whose was it? Had the killer found it necessary to use the contents of the leather-covered box and forgotten to take it away with him? What had he been after?

Where had Darrel's trip taken him? What was its purpose and result? Death, Van told himself, must have stemmed directly from it. Again he let his mind dwell on the mysterious pictures Darrel had referred to in the scribbled notation. What kind of pictures were they? Unquestionably, photographs which the cam-

era man had taken. But what did they concern? What was their importance?

The Phantom was at a standstill. So far, there was no answer to any of these questions. But he was sure of one thing. Darrel's murder hinged on the pictures mentioned. And he was determined to learn why.

CHAPTER VI

STEEL THREAT



AT FIVE o'clock on the dot the Phantom went up the brownstone steps of Selden's Washington residence. That was on an aristocratic side street, in a section where the other homes of prominent lawmakers were situated. An Embassy building stood on one corner. Across from Selden's house, one of the oldest clubs in the country turned its heavily draped windows to the street. It was a club, Van remembered, that boasted Andrew Jackson as one of its founders.

He pressed the pearl circle of the front doorbell. An ancient colored butler with white in his kinky hair admitted him. He was ushered into a front reception room.

He sat down, admiring the paintings on the walls, the English antiques that furnished the room. He got up and had begun to browse around, the Van Loan collector interest aroused, when he heard quiet footsteps in the wide entrance hall.

Draperies whispered as someone came between them. The Phantom turned. Somewhere a clock was chiming the hour in mellow tones, a clock that was several minutes late. But the Phantom paid little attention to that as he looked at the person who came in.

It wasn't Senator Future Selden.

Instead, a strikingly attractive woman, beautifully groomed and well poised came toward him. Evidently in the late thirties or early forties, she was dark and extremely attractive. Her hair and eyes were black, her smooth skin an olive shade, her features regular and patrician. In his first glance, Van had an impression that the woman, obviously troubled, was carefully hiding her worries behind her well-bred exterior.

But the shadow of fear was in the depths of her liquid dark eyes. Accustomed as he was to sizing up people, reading their characters in one swift glance,

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the Phantom saw what she was desperately trying to conceal.

"Mr. Peterson?" she said. "I am Mrs. Selden. The senator telephoned a few minutes ago. He asked me to tell you that he's been unavoidably detained and will be a few minutes late. He asked me to entertain you until he arrives."

The Phantom bowed. "Thank you. Entertainment isn't at all necessary. The privilege of looking at your furniture and art objects is more than enough."

"You might tell me something about New York," Mrs. Selden said. "I haven't been there this year."

They chatted for ten or fifteen minutes and then, through the curtains at one polished window, Van saw a Cadillac wheel into the curb and a tall, gray-haired man get out of it.

Another pause and Senator Future Selden entered the room.

"Sorry I was delayed, Mr. Peterson." Turning to his wife he smiled. "Thank you for taking charge of him, Martha."

Mrs. Selden left and Selden closed the door. At close range, he looked bigger than he had in the street. His gray hair was like a mane on his massive head. His face was furrowed with wrinkles, his eyes a blue-gray—steady, observant eyes, full of wisdom and understanding.

"Frank Havens told me your trip down here is a sort of confidential mission, Mr. Peterson," he said. "He also told me you would identify yourself more thoroughly when you met me. I'm curious to learn what he meant."

The Phantom's fingers slipped into the secret recess in his waistband. He lifted his hand; turning it palm up. The small jeweled domino plate mask gleamed as he displayed it.

Selden's bushy brows elevated.

"The Phantom Detective! No wonder Frank was mysterious about it. What can I do for you?"

"Answer a few questions that bear on a Manhattan murder. A case that Mr. Havens and the police are anxious to have solved at the earliest possible moment. You can tell me what you know about a man named James Darrel."

Selden frowned. "Darrel? I don't know any James Darrel. Never heard of him."

"He evidently knew you." The Phantom handed over the news photographer's memo book, turned back to the page on which the senator's name was scribbled.

"Read that."

Selden put on a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. Watching closely, Van saw the raised brows draw together. Selden rubbed his chin.

"Darrel," he repeated. "I seem to recall something now about a man telephoning me the other day." He pursed his lips, trying to remember. "Darrel. Yes, that might have been the name. He spoke to Arthur, after I shunted the call back to my son."

"What was the purpose of the call?"

"I don't know, exactly. If the person you mention was the one who phoned he said something about photographs."

"That was Darrel!" There was a ring to the Phantom's voice. "Try to remember, Senator. This is of the utmost importance. He contacted you for a specific reason, something that had to do with the pictures he mentioned. I've got to find out what that reason was."

THE big man with the gray mane shook his head.

"You'd better talk to Arthur. I was busy at the time the call came in. As I said, I turned it back to him."

"Where can I get hold of Arthur?"

"I'll find out directly." Selden got out of his chair.

He opened the door and went across to what Van saw was a small study on the other side of the hall. Van had a diagonal view of its doorway and, above it, the bend of an impressive spiral staircase. He heard the senator dialing a number, speaking on the telephone. The next instant he was aware of something else.

Mrs. Selden, coming down the stairs, stopped at their bend. Watching, the Phantom saw her hands tighten on the carved rail. She bent forward, her attitude tense, her head lowered as if to catch the drift of what Selden was saying.

The Phantom's eyes narrowed. But his expression was unchanged when, a few minutes later, the big man came back to the room.

"Arthur will be at his own home at eight—he doesn't live with us, you know. He'll be happy to give you any information you may want. Won't you stay and dine with us? We'll have an early dinner so we won't hold you up."

"Thanks, I'll be glad to. One thing more." The Phantom looked into the steady eyes that met his own. He lowered his voice. "My name's Peterson, Senator.

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I don't want it known that the Phantom is in Washington."

"I understand," Selden said. . . .

After dinner the senator's Cadillac took Van across Washington, depositing him in another section of the city. He alighted in front of a row of modern apartment houses—red brick buildings, with white trim, built around central gardens in four-winged units. He thanked the chauffeur who had driven him across town, told him not to wait, and went into the second building on the left.

While he waited for an answer to the bell he pressed, his mind went back over dinner at the Senator's home. Again he had been conscious of the secret agitation of Selden's wife. Despite the fact that she had been a charming hostess, a hint of uneasiness had been apparent during the time the Phantom had been in the house. She had tried desperately to hide it. Maybe she thought she had. But to Van it had been more than evident.

The door he now stood before opened. A young man looked out at him. There was no mistaking Arthur Selden. He had his father's frank eyes, the same features. His hair was curly and brown, his manner cordial.

"You must be Mr. Peterson," he said. "Come on in."

He led the way into a small living room. Here, too, the Phantom saw the same type of costly antiques he had seen in the senator's home. He noticed them last, though, his interest first caught and held by the pretty girl who was moving across the room to him.

"My wife, Mr. Peterson," Selden said. "This is Mr. Peterson, Peg, one of Dad's friends."

The former Peggy Lamont was as beautiful as her photographs. The Phantom was conscious of her tawny hair, worn in a halo of curls around her well-shaped head. Her profile was perfect in every line, every detail. Her long-lashed, brown eyes were remindful of sunlight on autumn leaves. She was slim and straight, graciously curved, and radiantly youthful in a plain white dress that set off her charms to advantage.

She murmured her pleasure at meeting Mr. Peterson, excused herself tactfully and shut the door quietly after her. The Phantom turned to Arthur Selden.

"I won't take too much of your time. Probably your father explained what I want to see you about."



STEVE HUSTON

"A telephone call. I'll be glad to give you any information I can. The one you're interested in came from Philadelphia."

"How do you know that?"

"I heard the operator repeating my number and asking if Philadelphia was ready."

The Phantom nodded. Young Selden had a good memory. Anticipation began to creep through Van.

"What happened?" he went on. "Did the man who called you give his name?"

"He said something that sounded like Harrel, or Darrel. He wanted to speak to my father. He said he had some pictures and information about burning rocks and—"

VAN'S quick exclamation made Selden break off.

"Burning rocks?" the Phantom repeated. "Are you sure those were his words?"

"Yes, but I didn't understand what he meant." Selden stared curiously as he resumed, "I put the call through to Dad, and got it back the next minute. You see, a lot of cranks and crackpots continually call the office. Some of them are lobbyists with fantastic ideas, harmless but annoying. Others are more dangerous. In the matter of this call, I told the man to write my father and explain what he wanted."

"You received a letter?"

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Selden shook his head. "Not that I know of. I'm curious about it. This Darrel—"

"Was murdered in New York," said the Phantom. "By someone who wanted some photographs he had. He left written instructions that if anything happened to him the senator was to be notified. That's why I came down."

While they talked, the Phantom had the impression that someone was listening at the closed door. His trained ear had caught a muffled footstep outside, a surreptitious movement that seemed to tell him the eavesdropper had moved away.

The Phantom's gaze roamed from Selden to the door.

"You have a servant?" he said casually.

Selden looked puzzled. "A maid. But she's gone. She leaves as soon as she does the dishes. Why?"

The Phantom moved his shoulders. "I was wondering." Abruptly he got back to the previous subject under discussion. "That's all you can tell me about the call—and Darrel?"

"Everything. I wish it were more."

"You've given me something to go on. Something," he added quietly, "that may be of tremendous importance in running down Jim Darrel's killer!"

"Really? What?"

"Mention of burning rocks!" the Phantom told him shortly.

Another few minutes and he had said good night to the Seldens and was out on the street.

So Peggy Selden had listened at the closed door. First, the senator's wife in the big house. Now the son's wife in the apartment. The Phantom saw a vague and shadowy link drawing the two women into a secret, unknown chain that stretched from the Capitol City back to crowded Manhattan and into the dusty living room of the West Thirty-ninth Street apartment where Darrel's dead body had been found.

Van, on the sidewalk, wondered how far it was back to his hotel. There were no cabs in sight. Nothing except a dark green sedan that stood several doors up the street.

He decided to go on to the avenue beyond, ask directions there. With that in mind he started off. But he was not destined to go beyond the parked car.

As he came even with it a man opened the door and got out.

"I beg your pardon—"

The Phantom stopped. The man came toward him and the next instant Van saw the shine of steel in his half-covered hand—pointing directly at him!

CHAPTER VII

MISTAKEN IDENTITY?



WARILY, the Phantom's gaze focused on the steel threat. The man put the gun in his pocket but Van knew it was still covering him. He shot a quick glance up and down the street. It was deserted from corner to corner, quiet and dark under the Potomac stars.

Behind him, to the left, the lights in Arthur Selden's living room shone against the drawn shade. He had a fleeting glimpse of young Selden's head and shoulders in silhouette. Then his eyes moved back to the man before him.

"You've made a mistake." His tone was casual. "I don't know you and I'm sure you don't know me. Wrong party."

"No mistake." The man he faced made it brief. "Get in!"

Another man, at the wheel of the green sedan, leaned over and opened the rear door. He gave it a push as his companion with the gun moved in closer to the Phantom. With a shrug Van followed orders.

He sat down on the rear seat. The man who had stopped him dropped down beside him. The door was shut and the car pulled away. The Phantom was watchful as his curiosity mounted. Who was this man beside him? Why had he been picked up—at gun's point? What was in the cards now?

In answer to these questions the Phantom drew a blank. But he knew he wouldn't have to wait long before he knew.

He turned his head and looked at the man who, with his hand still significantly in his pocket, sat inches away. Was he the man in the loose tweed coat who had paid the night call to Jim Darrel's apartment and, later, had tried to cut Van down in the taxi?

Van didn't think so. In his keen mind the recollection of the apartment intruder was still sharply clear. From what he had seen of this man here, on the pavement, he seemed taller, broader. A new factor in the shadowy drama of death?

The green sedan rolled along at legal

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speed. A few minutes passed and they were in a park. The Phantom saw the shine of a river in the distance. But he wasn't interested in the night vista spread out before him. He was anxious to learn the reason for his free ride.

"You were in Arthur Selden's apartment." The man beside him spoke abruptly. His voice was quiet, almost pleasant, the voice of an educated person. That made the Phantom's brows draw together.

"You're sure about that?" he asked.

"We saw your shadow on the shade. We saw you go in. We have a fair idea of why you went there."

"Really? Then why bother to put on this show?"

The driver was listening. The Phantom could almost see his right ear twitching. His impression of the chauffeur was principally that of a high-crowned felt hat worn at a slant, a line of profile set with the jut of a nose. He could see the man beside him more clearly.

He was aware of the fellow's sharp gaze, of a rather long, pointed face, the glimmer of white teeth when his abductor spoke. He was a man in the early thirties, well-built, well-dressed.

"This isn't a show," the man growled suddenly. "This is a showdown. A warning, in other words. Hands off—if you want to continue in business!"

The Phantom was genuinely puzzled. This didn't make sense. For an instant he had an idea that his first impression had been right, and that this fellow with the gun had picked up the wrong man. Only the mention of his own silhouette on the window shade contradicted that.

"Get to the point," he said impatiently. "What are you trying to say?"

"Selden must have sent for you. He couldn't take a chance seeing you at his office. So he made it tonight, at his house. What did he do—give you a retainer and a case?"

The Phantom began to get it. The words "case" and "retainer" began to give meaning to this episode.

"Just who—or what—do you think I am?" he asked.

"Don't let him get off the beam, Ed," the driver said suddenly. "Some of these private eyes are smart talkers."

The man called Ed leaned forward.

"Arthur Selden's house has been watched for the past two days and nights. We had an idea that, sooner or later, he'd call somebody in. Don't try to pretend

ignorance. He wants you to investigate certain New York angles."

The Phantom said nothing. But his mind ticked with thought. Again he remembered Senator Selden's house, the senator's wife, hiding some secret trouble, listening from the stairs.

HE REMEMBERED the pretty Peggy Selden, her muffled footsteps on the other side of the closed door. She, too, was concerned about some unknown something that reached out and touched her husband. And the senator's son, so this Ed believed, had called in a private detective to investigate a Manhattan angle.

The facts piled up in the Phantom's mind. Instead of giving him a fresh lead, what he had heard made the whole business sound muddled and cryptic. He asked himself if any of this could have a possible bearing on the murder of Jim Darrel, if it reached back from this city to the crowded and turbulent metropolis on its thirteen-mile island strip.

The car, turning into Washington's theater district, began to slow. When Ed spoke again his tone was vibrant and meaningful.

"This is just a reminder. The next time it will be different. You're to notify Selden that you can't handle his business. And don't think you can play smart. We know what agency you work out of. You'll be watched. Another contact with Selden and you're finished—permanently! Get it?"

"I think so."

"Stop at the next corner," Ed directed the man at the wheel. When they reached it, he opened the door. "All right," he ordered the Phantom. "Step out."

Back at the Paul Revere House, Van checked over the "warning." Had it really been mistaken identity? Had Ed got the wrong man in the car and delivered his ultimatum? Or had the incident been an indirect approach on their part to let him know that they were aware of his interest in Darrel's killing and were prepared to do something about it?

To the Phantom the first supposition seemed the more likely. Arthur Selden did have a problem and had probably got in touch with a local private detective agency. What that problem was, for the moment, was of secondary importance. The fact that interested Van was that he had been let go with nothing more than a warning. He was certain that if Ed had

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figured he had come to Washington on the matter of Jim Darrel's murder, he would never have been turned loose.

The Phantom brooded. The mysterious Ed hadn't even bothered to frisk him. Another fill-in on the idea that he had been mistaken for someone else.

Van's mind centered on the scraps of information he had obtained. Not a great deal, but enough to fire his imagination. Darrel had photographs of burning rocks. He had tried to interest Senator Selden in these pictures and had failed because both the senator and Arthur thought he was a crackpot.

"Burning rocks?" The Phantom repeated the two words slowly, thoughtfully.

He was confident that those photographs furnished the motive for Darrel's death. But where were they? What had happened to them? Had Darrel hidden them so well that no one could find them? After a long pause Van turned out the light and went to bed.

Steve Huston's inquisitiveness was a gift that was in no small way responsible for his reportorial success on the *Clarion*. Where other reporters took a thing at its face value and wrote about what they had observed, Steve's curiosity made him dig under the surface when given an assignment. That attribute was particularly valuable when the reporter had a job to do that concerned the Grim Reaper and his handiwork.

Huston's talent for handling murder cases, dressing them up to give the reader a clear picture of background, motive, cause and effect, had won him recognition. Frank Havens had been the first to realize and encourage Steve's ability in that line. And Huston, as he had been given more and more important writing jobs, had developed this talent to a greater degree.

At his desk, his sloppy felt hat pushed back on his curly head, Huston looked at the stuff he had hammered out on his typewriter. It was a follow-up on the Darrel murder case. But it wasn't so hot. He knew that. The writing was good enough, the idea was clear and concise, but there was no meat in it, no foundation of facts to build on.

Jim's death remained as unsolved as it had been when his body had been found with his head bashed in. Nothing had emanated from Homicide that gave any promise of the arrest of the killer or kill-

ers. Steve knew that was on the level. Through Inspector Gregg, at Headquarters, he had an "in" that had paid off handsomely in the past. Because of the *Clarion's* constant war on crime, and its owner's powerful influence in the interests of justice, Huston was aware that the Inspector always gave him the breaks.

BUT this time there were no breaks, no handouts. Gregg frankly admitted he and his men had got nowhere. The absence of the murder weapon, the lack of clues and motive, had stopped him. Huston had an idea that the Inspector was going to finish up with the case unsolved, unbroken. Just another one for the files to be dimmed out and forgotten as time passed.

But that couldn't be. Huston drew a hard breath. He brightened when he remembered the Phantom had taken the case. The Phantom had never failed before and he wouldn't now! His friend Darrel, Steve assured himself, wasn't going to be another murder victim whose case was shelved.

He rolled his copy out of the typewriter, glanced over it and dropped it in a wire basket. There was no immediate rush. He had set it for the five o'clock, or early evening edition of the paper.

Tilting back in his chair, Huston wrinkled his forehead. His thoughts were full of Jim. He began to wonder about the last trip Darrel had made. Where had it taken him? What kind of an assignment had he gone out on? What kind of pictures had he shot?

The furrows ironed out of Steve's brow. It would be a big help to the Phantom if he could learn some of these things. It would save the Phantom a lot of valuable time. But how was it possible to find out? All he knew was that Jim had called him up at his boarding house the night before he had left town and had talked with him for a few moments. Jim hadn't said where he was bound and Steve hadn't asked.

Yet, Steve saw, somebody must know where Darrel had gone. Somebody would know something about his itinerary. But who? Steve lighted a cigarette and puffed meditatively. After awhile he got up and went out.

Across from the *Clarion* Building was the White Star Cafeteria, a place where the customer, tray in hand, helped himself to the culinary items on display along a white counter. A check was punched and

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given him when he went through a turnstile at the end of the line.

Often Huston had lunched on the wing in the White Star with Darrel. It was a great place for a quick cup of coffee, a doughnut and some conversation. Darrel had eaten there for months. He knew all the employees and they all knew him.

Steve, crossing the street, had an inspiration. Why not duck into the cafeteria and see if he could pick up some information?

Entering, he took a tray from a high pile and passed the steam table. He was forty minutes too early for the usual noontime mob. There were only a few customers in the place. That made it easy for Steve to put his idea into play.

A pink-cheeked woman in a white uniform ran the cup of coffee he ordered from a huge copper urn. Her name was Molly. At least, everyone called her that, adding nothing further to it and not bothering to tack on the customary "Miss."

She put the coffee cup on Steve's tray, deftly whisked a paper napkin from a chromium container and, instead of her usual expansive smile, gave him an anxious glance.

"Anything new on Jim's case, Mr. Steve?" she asked.

Huston shook his head. "Not so far. By the way, Jim didn't happen to mention where he went on that last trip he took?"

"Not to me." Molly was thoughtful for a minute. "He might have said something to Joe."

"You mean Joe Mitchell, the short order cook?"

"Yes. Jim took a photo of Joe's two kids. It was to be a surprise for his wife's birthday. I know he was up at Joe's house a couple of nights before he went away."

"Swell. Ask Joe to step out here. Tell him I want to talk to him."

"You can't. He's home sick—grippe."

Steve frowned. Not to be put off by such a trivial thing as sickness, he continued:

"Can you get me his address? I'll go up and see him."

"I know where he lives." Molly rattled off an address readily. "Joe's wife and I have been friends for a long time. Sometimes I go around and sit with the kids so they can go to the movies."

"You're a big help," Huston said, picking up his tray and moving on. "Sometime in the near future I'll owe you a box of chocolate peppermints."

"Make them caramels, if it's all the same to you, Mr. Steve. I haven't got any loose fillings."

CHAPTER VIII

BROOKLYN-BOUND



JOE MITCHELL, the short order cook, lived in the West Sixties. The address Molly had supplied Steve Huston was that of a time-worn apartment close to Tenth Avenue. It was not a prepossessing neighborhood. There was nothing ultra about the buildings on either side of that in which Joe Mitchell resided. The service division of an automobile concern with a showroom on Columbus Circle stood on one side, a soft drink bottling plant on the other.

Steve, however, wasn't interested in the social aspects of the street. He believed that with any kind of a break he might be able to do the Phantom a favor, and by so doing bring the famous detective closer to the solution of the case.

The reporter went up two flights of unscrubbed stairs. The air was full of the aromas of recent cooking, the smell of washtubs and rooms that needed ventila-

[Turn page]



TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER



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tion. Huston, a stickler for fresh air and plenty of it, didn't pay any attention to that.

His knock on a door brought a pleasant-faced young woman in answer. Steve Huston pulled off his hat.

"Mrs. Mitchell? My name's Huston. I know your husband. Molly, down at the restaurant, says he's sick. I thought I'd drop around to see how he's getting along."

"He's a little better," Mrs. Mitchell told him. "I had the doctor. He has to stay in bed three or four more days."

"I'd like to talk to him for a minute or two, if possible."

The woman opened the door wider. "I guess that's all right. Joe's awake now." She smiled a little. "Maybe you'll do him good. I think he's getting bored with nobody around but the kids and me." She added, "They're in school now."

Huston followed her down a short hall and into the bedroom at its end. The cook of the White Star Cafeteria put down the newspaper he was reading. He rubbed the beard stubble on his chin, smoothed down the bed sheet and grinned at his visitor.

"Hello, Steve. Come in and take a chair. Not too close. The medico says these germs leap around."

Steve waited for the right moment to speak his piece. That came after some gossip concerning local affairs at the White Star and Steve's hope that the man in the bed would soon be up and around again.

Then he said, "You've heard about Jim Darrel?"

"Yeah. I was just reading what you wrote about it in the *Clarion*." He indicated the discarded newspaper. "Tough. Great guy, Jim. He came all the way up to take some pictures of the kids so I could give them to Helen for her birthday."

"Did he happen to tell you where he was going on that last trip?"

Steve asked the question slowly. He felt a pulse beat of anticipation. He watched Joe hopefully. The cook rubbed his chin again and thought hard.

"Seems to me like he said he was hopping over to Philly," he finally said. "I wasn't paying much attention. I was busy with a rush order on the fire and Jim was waiting for his coffee. I think he said something about using a plane to get some air pictures."

Steve's face brightened. He leaned closer, careless of what Joe had described as "leaping germs."

"Good. What else did he say?"

"Not much, except that he was to meet some guy by the name of Clancy over in Brooklyn. From what he said I got the notion this Clancy has a private plane and does special jobs for people."

"Did he mention Clancy's other name?"

Again Steve waited. Brooklyn covered a large area and the Clancy clan must be plentiful. Checking through them, even if the Clancy that Joe mentioned was in the telephone book or city directory, would take considerable time.

Mitchell, however, came up with the necessary information after another pull at his unshaven chin.

"Yeah. Jim called him Bob."

Ten minutes after Huston left Joe Mitchell he was in a corner drugstore, the Brooklyn telephone book open before him. He ran a finger down the Clancys. There was no Robert listed.

Back at the *Clarion* office, Huston put a call through to the *Philadelphia Transcript*. He got the city desk and Bill Everly, an old friend. Steve made it short and to the point.

"Look, Bill. You can do me a favor. Try to get some information for me on a party named Robert Clancy. He lives in Brooklyn but might keep his plane somewhere in your vicinity. Private flier. Leases his ship for special jobs."

"He lives in Brooklyn? Why?"

"Never mind the gags." Steve grinned. Then he sobered. "This is five-star stuff, Bill. Clancy flew Jim Darrel just before Darrel came back to town here and was murdered. Any information will be a big help."

"I'll do what I can," Everly promised. "Call you back."

IT was almost noon before Steve's answer came. The telephone on his desk buzzed. Everly's voice came over the wire.

"Got it, Steve. I think I'll quit this job and join the FBI. Took some time, but here it is. Got a pencil?"

"Shoot."

"Clancy does live in Brooklyn, but he's only there off and on. This is his address." Everly furnished a number in the Flatbush section and went on, "Ex Army pilot. He got himself a cabin Scott-Cartright job that he flies out of the Lincoln port in Camden. He's not there now so you might be able to nail him in his home town."

He rang off. Huston pushed the telephone away. A warm, inner glow began

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to creep through him. Bill Everly was tickled with his ability to find people, but Steve's satisfaction was twice as great. It only went to show what perseverance could do.

Now, he told himself, snapping his hat into place, if the breaks still remained good, he'd have a nice dish to set before the Phantom.

At the switchboard, Huston stopped long enough to say, "If anybody wants me I'll be back in an hour or so. I'm running over to Brooklyn."

The girl at the big board smiled up at him.

"Aren't you wasting your time? The Dodgers are in Cincinnati today." . . .

At about the same time Steve Huston was en route to the city of churches, perambulators and rubber plants, the Phantom's airliner from Washington deposited him at La Guardia Field.

The line's limousine took him to the Forty-second Street terminal and a cab most of the rest of the way to his Park Avenue quarters. He walked a block or so to his private elevator entrance.

A shower, a change of clothes and Richard Curtis Van Loan, debonair, blase as always, and outwardly at ease with the world, strolled into his sun-flooded lounge room. He spoke with Frank Havens on the telephone, made a luncheon date with the publisher in a half-hour and, arranging a blue cornflower in his lapel, let himself out to go down to the street in one of the building's regular elevators and become one of the pedestrians on the gilded avenue below.

Van moved leisurely along, stopping now and then to glance into a shop window. But for all of his nonchalance, his mind was busy. It was always like that when the Phantom was deep in the intricacies of a case. The murder of Jim Darrel was of more than usual interest to him. It promised a variety of angles. Mysterious, queer offshoots which, he was confident, would eventually weave themselves into the complete design of the murder picture.

The case, he felt, was more than just the brutal mowing down of a cameraman who had some pictures somebody had wanted badly enough to kill for. There was a lot more to it than that. There were dark, sinister threads stretching from New York into the aristocratic environs of the Nation's capital.

Characters, ranging from men in loose

topcoats who took desperate chances with firearms, to the family of the colorful Senator Future Selden, the people's choice from Pennsylvania, were arrayed in the warp and woof of the case. And through its dark, unknown channels the telephone call Darrel had made to Selden's office ran like a glimmering crimson tide—the mention of "burning rocks," fantastic, incredible, meaningless!

Havens was waiting for him when Van Loan went through the foyer of Armand's, that select luncheon rendezvous highly popular with Van's socialite friends. Its atmosphere was one of stringed, classical music, shaded lights, perfect decor.

Van shook hands with Havens and let a waiter seat him. Havens had picked out a table far enough away from those around it to make conversation private. He glanced over at the flower in Van's lapel, at Van's handsome face and drew a deep breath.

"What news?"

"Not too much. I saw the Senator, met his wife, son and daughter-in-law. All of them, with the exception of the elder Selden, play a part in Darrel's demise."

Havens stared blankly. "You're joking!"

Van shook his head. "I'm not—unfortunately. When this case ends you'll find how right I am."

"But—"

VAN didn't elaborate on his statement. Instead, he switched the subject.

"Anything new from Headquarters?" When Havens said there wasn't, Van's strong, slender fingers tapped the crystal glass beside him. He continued, "I have to find out where Darrel was. He called the Senator from Philadelphia. But what was he doing down there?"

"Possibly," Frank Havens said, "Steve may have something to tell you on that. He's checking on the trip Darrel made. . . ."

It was nearly five o'clock when Frank Havens called Van Loan at his apartment.

"Can you drop in at the office within the next half-hour, Dick?" The publisher's tone was casual, but Van was able to detect an underlying urgency in the request.

"I'll be glad to," he said.

He was back in disguise and on his way to the *Clarion* office within twenty minutes. When he entered Havens' office he found Steve Huston waiting for him. A

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glance was enough to tell the Phantom that the reporter had something hot on tap.

"About Jim Darrel's trip," Steve began, without preliminaries. "I've found out where he went and how he went!"

Havens nodded approvingly.

"Fine!" the Phantom said. "Let's hear it."

"Jim had an assignment to take some aerial photographs for some Philadelphia concern," Huston went on. "The name of it is the only blank in what I've learned. He hired a former Army flier, now in business for himself, to take him over northwestern Pennsylvania. I've talked with the aviator and arranged for you to see him. His name is Bob Clancy and this is his telephone number."

Steve handed over a slip of paper. The Phantom's eyes narrowed. Aerial photographs. Northwestern Pennsylvania. Senator Selden's vast realty holdings were in that part of the state, the thousands of acres he called Timberlands. But aerial stuff? How, and in what way, did burning rocks tie in with Jim Darrel's sky flight?

Steve explained how he had located Clancy through Joe Mitchell, and the Phantom helped himself to one of the telephones on Havens' desk. Before he dialed the number he looked at Steve.

"Who did you tell him I was?"

"A Mr. Peterson, a private detective hired by the paper to help track down Darrel's killer."

The Phantom hid a smile. So he was to be mistaken for a private dee again? This time, however, it would differ from the occasion of his ride in the green sedan through night-shrouded Washington. Making him a private operator had been a good idea on Steve's part.

He put the call through and a minute or two later was talking to Bob Clancy.

"Can I meet you at nine o'clock?" the Phantom asked.

"Yes," Clancy told him. "I'm coming over to Manhattan toward eight. Whereabouts?"

"There's a tavern on Times Square called the Green Spot. It's almost diagonally across from the Astor Hotel. You can meet me there."

"At nine," Clancy said. "I'll be on hand. How am I going to know you?"

"I'll bring Huston along to point you out," the Phantom told him.

He pronged the telephone and turned

from Steve Huston's anticipative face to Havens.

"Got a map handy?" he asked. "A map of Pennsylvania. I'd like to take a look at it."

CHAPTER IX

IN THE GUTTER



BROADWAY, when the Phantom walked down its echoing pavement that night was a glittering thoroughfare of multi-colored lights. Nowhere in the world, Van knew, was there a similar avenue. His travels had taken him to all the important cities in Europe, but none of them could boast a rainbow street so vibrant, crowded and pulse-quickening, as this scintillating boulevard of pleasure.

"Hysteria Highway," Steve Huston had dubbed it. But it was more than that. It was something you looked at and didn't forget; something you wanted to come back to when away from it; something to stimulate the imagination, give a lift to the spirit.

The Green Spot, selected by the Phantom as the rendezvous for his meeting with Clancy, was a tavern little different from thousands of others. Van had selected it months previous, while on other cases, because of its convenience. The "Crossroad of the World" noisy Forty-second Street had been called. The Green Spot was only a few steps away from that throbbing artery.

An illuminated clock, advertising a popular ginger ale, told the Phantom it was ten minutes to nine as he went in through the tavern's heavy oak doors. A circular bar was out front. Behind it were three busy men in white coats, pyramids of gleaming glasses, autographed pictures of the great and near-greats of the sporting world. Dimly shaded lights contributed to a restful atmosphere.

No matter at what time of day or night the Phantom stepped into the Green Spot, he always found it doing good business. Customers were lined up at the bar now, all types of men. He gave them a swift glance, looking for Huston. But Steve was not there.

The Phantom ordered his usual lime and seltzer. He drank it slowly, keeping an eye on the main entrance. The ginger ale clock moved its hands to five minutes of

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the hour, then to nine.

Van frowned. Usually Steve was on the dot. Not that a few minutes tardiness mattered much either way, for the main thing was this meeting with Clancy and what he would learn from it. From the first mention of Darrel's flight over northern Pennsylvania, and Selden's property, Van had been intrigued. There was a link between the cameraman's sky trip, his murder, and what the Phantom had encountered in Washington.

What that link was, he had determined to find out. He was certain that when he did he would be that much closer to the motive for Darrel's murder and to those who had done the killing.

While he thought, he was half-aware of sounds of confusion somewhere outside. The raucous voice of Broadway had grown louder. A blend of voices, shouts, were interlaced with the shrill blast of a patrolman's whistle. The Phantom listened, shrugged and was finishing his drink when Steve Huston came in.

The reporter looked as if he had seen a ghost. His eyes were round and filled with a startled expression. His face was white and every line of him registered shock.

The Phantom wheeled around and hurried to him.

"Steve! What's wrong?"

Huston saw him and gulped. "Outside!" His voice was tense with emotion. "Come on!"

A crowd had gathered at the corner. In the multi-colored rain of the glowing lights, the Phantom glimpsed the burly figure of a cop pushing the crowd back. Another patrolman was standing with one foot in the gutter and the other on the sidewalk. In the distance a siren's wail came closer and closer.

The Phantom's fingers tightened on Huston's arm. "What's happened?"

But Steve seemed unable to speak. Press pass in hand he hurried the Phantom past the first policeman. That minion of the law shouted over to his brother officer:

"Clarion reporter, Mike. Okay."

Steve stopped. The Phantom's eyes were drawn to the crumpled figure of a man lying in the gutter. There was enough light to show a white, upturned face, arms flung wide, a hat that had rolled away and lay crown-down on the asphalt. One glance was enough to tell the Phantom that the man was dead.

The crowd buzzed behind him, increas-

ing in numbers every minute. The Phantom hardly heard their excited comments, their references to hit-and-run drivers, jay walkers, traffic accidents. Suddenly the real reason for Steve's shock became apparent. The Phantom took a few steps forward.

"Must have died instantly," the patrolman was saying to Steve. "The car pitched him over here. It didn't stop."

THE Phantom's face hardened to stone. He drew a sharp breath, the expectancy of his evening's appointment and what he had hoped to find out melting away like snow under a tropic sun. He stood looking at the dead man silently, speculatively, until Huston's white, tragic face turned back to him.

"Clancy?" The Phantom's tone was quiet.

Steve choked deep in his throat. "Yes, Clancy!" he answered, his voice thick and husky.

The Phantom played no part in the events of the next few minutes. He stood by, brooding and taciturn, while Steve got what facts he could from the law officers. The ambulance with the wailing siren arrived. A brisk young doctor made a quick examination, shook his head, and drove off. One of the patrolmen stepped into the Green Spot to telephone, leaving the other to make a routine identification checkup.

"Robert Clancy, Thirty-three hundred Raymond Street, Brooklyn. War veteran."

The patrolman rattled on, talking to Steve and a plainclothes detective who had shouldered a way through the crowd. The Phantom's gaze roved over the throng. He lingered long enough to learn that apparently no one had taken the license number of the car that had struck Clancy. From the questions and answers he listened to when the cop came back from the tavern, it was obvious that no one had a clear idea of what the death car had looked like.

With a word to Steve Huston, the Phantom edged his way out of the crowd. Disappointment at the setback ran through him. His mind clicked with thought. He walked on, crossing the street to the other corner. There was a newsstand there, near one of the Times Square subway exits. He had a glimpse of a stout, well-dressed man picking up a late edition newspaper.

As he went closer, something the man

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was saying caught his attention:

"If you saw the car that hit the guy, why don't you tell the police?"

The newsdealer who had sold the newspaper leaned forward. The Phantom saw he was young, only a boy. He looked scared, peering up at the stout man while he moistened his lips. He shook his head.

"I didn't see nothin'! Honest, I don't know a thing about it! Why do you think I—"

"Because," the man before him interrupted, "the car cut in over here, after it hit its victim. I was in the drug store doorway and saw you watching it."

"Then you tell the cops," the boy countered.

"I will. Good citizen you are!"

He tucked his newspaper under his arm and stalked away. The Phantom took his place in front of the newsstand. Casually,

"I'll talk."

"Start."

"I know the car. It belongs to Harry Carter. I don't know who was driving him tonight, but Carter was in the right front seat. I couldn't miss—I know him well. He buys a paper from me every night."

"Carter?" The Phantom's brows drew together.

"He owns the Blue Lagoon up at Forty-Seventh. My old man got dough from him a couple of months ago to open this stand. If Carter finds out I've spilled he'll crack down and wrap us up."

THE Phantom studied the boy's thin face. Slowly, he said, "What about the man Carter's car ran over? It was no accident! How did it happen?"

"The guy got out of a taxi. Carter's car

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he consulted the headlines of the papers on display. His gaze wandered to the magazine racks and then back to the boy.

"What are you frightened about?" he asked.

"Who's frightened?"

"Possibly," the Phantom said, "you recognized the driver of the car, or the car itself? It must be that. Otherwise you'd want to cooperate. You wouldn't want to see someone deliberately murdered in the street and let the killer get away with it! Or would you?"

The boy peered at him. In his thin face the Phantom saw the same startled look that had been on Steve's countenance when he had entered the Green Spot.

"I don't know what you're talking about, mister. Who says I saw anything? Just because that fat lug said so don't mean nothin'."

His denial was overdone, his bluster didn't deceive the Phantom who slipped a hand in his pocket. When it came out one of the badges of the Detective Bureau was in its palm. He let the light fall on it and saw the effect it had on the boy.

"Let's hear about it. Otherwise, you go downtown with me and tell it to Homicide."

Both the law's insignia and what was said made the youth at the newsstand change his mind. He looked around warily, as if expecting someone else might be listening. He swallowed, dropping his voice to a tight pitch.

was right behind it. The cab pulled away and Carter's heap hit the man when he started to cross the street."

The Phantom had suspected as much. A few more words and he made his way north up Broadway. He had lost all chance of learning what he wanted from Bob Clancy. That information was gone now, forever. But he had picked up something of paramount importance that tied in with what he had first surmised when Steve had told him Clancy was the dead man in the gutter.

Someone had been waiting for an opportunity to present the ex-flier with a different kind of wings from those he had earned in the war. To Van it was clearly in focus. Someone who didn't want Clancy to talk, had tailed his taxi and had cut him down the minute he had stepped out of it.

Carter? Blue Lagoon?

The Phantom reached Forty-seventh Street and turned west. Most of the lights of theater marquees along the block had been turned off. But the illuminated night spot advertising made a radiant bonfire against the gloom. From the corner down Van read the titles—Jack Gaynor's 36 Club. The Haymow. Little Paris. Mike and Ike's.

In between them, the deep indigo of neon tubing spelling out the words "Blue Lagoon," with an electrical effect that showed moss-hung trees dropping above a rippling pool.

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CHAPTER X

BLUE LAGOON



OBSEQUIOUSLY the doorman, a giant in gold-braided blue broadcloth, saluted him when the Phantom stopped at the Blue Lagoon's glowing entrance. He went in, up some circular steps, past tall, painted screens and into a foyer lit by hanging blue lanterns.

Before him plate glass walls showed him the main section of the place, the ranks of tables, the elevated dais for the band, the gleaming oblong of a dance floor squared off with silver ropes so it looked something like a huge ring in which prize-fighters might compete.

To the left was the usual coat room counter presided over by a pair of blondes with heavy make-up and soulful eyes. Three telephone booths were in line beyond and opposite the Phantom noticed a narrow, straight flight of stairs leading to the floor above.

It was too early for the high tide of the Blue Lagoon's trade. That would come when the theaters dropped final curtains. Now, no more than a dozen tables were occupied. The two blondes yawned and chatted together, the bandmen in white costumes had gone out for a smoke or a drink. Two waiters, their trays containing bar orders, went down the center aisle.

The Phantom turned as a short little man in a bright blue tuxedo came around from behind the glass wall. He carried an elaborate menu card. His smile of greeting was stiff and mechanical.

"Table for one?"

"I'm looking for Mr. Carter," the Phantom said.

"Upstairs. Office at the end of the hall."

The Phantom thanked him and went up the steps. He found himself in the usual type second floor. Those who designed metropolitan night clubs evidently worked from a stereotyped pattern. All had a second-floor aisle with private dining rooms on either side.

The Phantom's plan was sketchy at best. He wanted a look at Harry Carter. Any excuse would do. He was there to arrange for a business men's banquet. Or he was a representative of a champagne importing house looking for new business. Or he wanted to sell Carter the

idea of putting illegal coin machines in the gents' washroom.

He went down the corridor. Most of the rooms were empty, their doors half-open, semi-darkness behind them. Carter's office showed a glow of light against its frosted glass door. A murmur of conversation drifted out, the heavy tones of a man speaking slowly and distinctly.

"I'll see what I can do," he was saying. "Meanwhile, don't forget what I told you."

The office door began to open. The Phantom had an impression of a woman coming out, of a slender figure framed against green-shaded lamplight. Her head was turned while she listened to the rest of what the man inside was saying. The Phantom saw her profile and, a tingle running through him, stepped quickly into the first handy supper room.

He had hardly got out of sight before the tap of heels on the rubber linoleum on the hall floor faded in the direction of the stairs. He glanced out cautiously. The girl had reached the top of the narrow staircase and was about to go down it.

For one more second the Phantom had a good view of her. If his eyes had tricked him the first time, they were seeing right now. There was not any mistake. He recognized the young, charming and beautiful girl.

The last time he had seen her had been in a Washington apartment. She was Peggy Selden, the Senator's daughter-in-law!

The Phantom did some fast thinking. What he had told Frank Havens about the Selden family being connected in some way with the Darrel murder came back to him with greater force. Intuition had told him as much, and his powers of deduction had backed his theory. Now he was proved right in his surmise. Watching Peggy Selden disappear down the steps, the Phantom knew that he hadn't made any mistake in coming to the Blue Lagoon.

This place was tied in with the West Thirty-ninth Street death room. Some mysterious link connected it with Jim Darrel's apartment. Some other link fastened it securely to the two homes he had visited in Washington. That much was clear, but in the understanding came a new array of unanswerable questions.

What was Peggy Selden doing in a place of this kind? Whom had she come to see? Why? What reason could have taken her from the Capital to West Forty-seventh Street and a tawdry night resort like the

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Blue Lagoon?

These and other questions pounded through Van's mind. He stepped out of the room where he had taken refuge and went on to Carter's office.

A MAN looked up from a glass-topped desk, his head wreathed in cigarette smoke. He was short, stout and typical of Broadway in looks and apparel. His dinner clothes were a midnight blue, flamboyantly cut. He had reddish sandy hair cut extra short, parted in the middle and plastered down on either side. His cigarette was wedged in a long ivory holder. A hat and topcoat, tossed carelessly on a chair, might mean he had come in recently and hadn't had time to hang them up.

The Phantom shut the hall door behind him. In the instant that accurately filed the man's face away in his mind, he had an impression that the room was furnished as a regulation office, with leather chairs and steel cabinets. A door to the right probably opened on a washroom. Another, half-ajar, was over on the left.

"Mr. Carter?" he asked.

"I'm Carter."

The Phantom walked over to the desk. He had never seen Carter before. As he looked at him, using his gift for reading faces, he saw that Carter's showed no criminal hallmarks.

He was the perfect counterpart of a Broadway night club proprietor. A man with a flair for the gaudy, with showshop instincts.

"I'm with Devereaux Freres." The Phantom rolled it out easily. "We have a large consignment of champagne due in next week on the *Castlemont*. I'm booking advance orders."

Carter shook his head. "Sorry, Mr.—" "Peterson."

"I'm tied up with a contract. Lazarus and Son. They got me before France began to ship in quantity. We don't go in much for quality here." He laughed. "Just so long as it bubbles and froths."

"Then I won't take up any more of your time."

The Phantom turned to go. But he hadn't taken more than two steps when he stopped. The door on the left side of the room had begun to open wider. A man was coming through it and at the sight of him Van's nerves jarred to attention.

The man coming in had a gun and it covered the Phantom.

"Just a minute," he said, "before you go.

I think Mr. Carter might be interested in knowing something about you, something more than the line you just supplied him with. Reach—high—and fast!"

In the glow of the green-shaded lamp-light the Phantom looked into the sharp gaze of the same well-dressed, well-built man with the white teeth who had forced him into the sedan outside of Arthur Selden's apartment house.

The man who had mistaken him for a private detective. Who had warned him to have no dealings with the Senator's son.

The man came closer. The Phantom raised his hands while Carter, getting up from his chair, went over and turned the key in the door.

Waiting for the next move, the Phantom offered no comment. Carter walked back, his eyes narrowed to slits.

"What's all this, Ed?" he demanded. "Who is this man?"

"Feel around and get his iron," Ed directed. "Then I'll explain."

Carter's white hand patted the Phantom's pockets.

"Under the coat, under his left arm," Ed aid impatiently, and the sandy-haired man helped himself to the Phantom's automatic.

He looked at it curiously, laid it on the desk and waited for Ed to explain.

"This is the private dick I told you about, Harry. The one I warned in Washington. He's working for young Selden."

Carter's expression changed. "He must have followed Mrs. Selden in here!"

"Exactly." The lids came down over the sharp eyes. "I told him to get off and stay off, but he didn't listen. The question is how much does he know."

Carter's face shadowed. His gaze wandered from the gun on the desk, to the Phantom and then over to Ed.

"If he knows anything, he's dangerous."

"My idea. Too dangerous to turn loose."

There was a whip in his words. Carter got the implication in them.

"Wait a minute, Ed," he said. "No rough stuff—here. This club is my bread and butter. You know I can't afford to take any chances."

"Bread and butter?" Ed sneered. "You're talking dimes with a million ready to be cut up. What am I supposed to do—wrap him in cotton and mail him somewhere?"

"I told you—"

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"I'm telling you," Ed snarled. "This party's mixed in. Nobody can take any chance on having him talk. He's got to be fixed!"

CARTER moved his dinner-coated shoulders. He started back to the desk, talking as he walked.

"There's only one way to settle this. I'll call Phil."

He picked up a telephone, shielding its base so the Phantom couldn't see the number he dialed, mashed out his cigarette, and waited for the call to go through.

The Phantom, his hands back at his sides now that his fangs had been drawn, gave Ed some attention. There were a dozen ways of overpowering the man with the white teeth. The Phantom had methods at his fingertips, time-tested, infallible methods. But he didn't use them.

Knocking Ed out and leaving the Blue Lagoon in a hurry meant the loss of what he saw was a chance to get closer to the solution of the murder case. Earlier tonight Bob Clancy's death had thrown an obstacle in his way, blocking a highly important angle. He didn't intend to lose out on any chance, no matter how slight, that would furnish a lead.

At the same time, the Phantom didn't discount his present danger. He had seen samples of how this group operated. The dead Clancy was an unforgettable souvenir of their handiwork. Ed had mentioned a gamble for "a million." Under such circumstances they wouldn't be squeamish about dealing out sudden death to keep their plans from being interfered with.

The Phantom's swift thoughts ranged further. Always in a conspiracy of the kind there was a head man, the brain that motivated every move. Carter, Van saw, was a hireling of the principal who had plotted Jim Darrel's murder and followed it with the running down of Clancy. So was Ed. Carter had spoken of calling "Phil." And this Phil, the Phantom told himself, must be the chief who hired them, the man the Phantom was trying to get.

"Carter speaking." The sandy-haired man's voice snapped the thread of the Phantom's thoughts. "I've got a problem. Listen to this."

Carter furnished a brief word picture, supplemented by asides from Ed, that had to do with the supposed private detective's presence in his office. When he stopped, the receiver crackled with a voice that

supplied directions. Harry Carter nodded and put the phone down.

"He isn't so sure this party's really a private eye," he said to Ed.

The other man's mouth tightened. "What does he mean?"

"The Phantom Detective's been called in!" Carter's voice rasped. "Charley picked it up from a stoolie downtown. The *Clarion's* boss has handed him the case!"

Ed's eyes widened. He stared at the Phantom for a second or two. Then he began to laugh.

"This guy—the Phantom? Put that in a comic strip. I told you who and what he is. He's a fly cop with the Spangler Agency."

"Phil wants him brought up." Carter's tone quickened. "What did you do with the car?"

"It's around back."

"You'd better drive him up and let Phil handle it."

"Get Charley," Ed said briefly. "He's down at the bar."

CHAPTER XI

THE HOUSE ON WEST 77TH STREET



CARTER thumbed a button, spoke into an audio-box and fitted a fresh cigarette to his ivory holder. He twirled the lighter on his desk, inhaled, and smoothed back his hair with the palm of one hand.

"Can you manage all right?" he asked Ed.

"With this phony gumshoe?" Ed's lips curled derisively. "A wrong move on his part and Phil will never get to talk to him. I don't like people who think I'm joking when I'm serious."

The Phantom smiled to himself. He remained silent while Carter waited word from some man called Charley. That came after a long minute. A waiter knocked on the door and Carter unlocked it. The Phantom heard the waiter say:

"Charley's out in the car, Mr. Carter."

"Thanks." Carter shut the door and went back to Ed. "I'd better go on ahead and see that the hall's clear. Don't let him slip you, Ed."

Ed grunted and Carter stuck his head out of the door. He looked back, nodding, and then went out in the hall. The Phantom didn't move when Ed stepped in close to him. The gun in the other man's hand

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was jammed against the Phantom's side.

"You might be dumb, but you're not deaf," Ed said. "You heard what we're going to do. Don't get any fancy notions—if you like breathing. All right, we're on our way."

Out in the corridor Carter, at the head of the stairs, beckoned. But the narrow flight wasn't the staircase toward which Ed steered his captive.

They went to a fire exit in the form of some iron steps behind a steel-faced door around a bend in the passage.

They went down, the Phantom first, Ed's gun urging him on.

Carter called "Good luck" after them and the aroma from the kitchen told the Phantom they were in the rear of the Blue Lagoon. No one was in sight. With his left hand Ed opened the door.

Beyond the car was the cement strip of an alley cutting in between buildings. It led around the Blue Lagoon, evidently a service entry for tradespeople and the night resort's employees. Ed urged the Phantom along it.

Out on the street a car was waiting. The Phantom looked at it. The car that had struck Bob Clancy? The car the boy at the newsstand had recognized as being the property of Carter?

For the second time, Ed ushered the Phantom into a sedan. For the second time Van saw that the man at the wheel was obviously the driver of the green sedan in Washington. He wore the same high crowned hat, had the same line of profile, jut of nose.

Ed verified it with a curt few words.

"Here's our friend again, Charley. Turns up in the most unexpected places. We're taking him uptown. Roll!"

They went up Eighth Avenue, crossed Columbus Circle and continued north on Broadway. Nobody said anything. The Phantom pushed out his long legs, resigned to patience. He didn't dislike playing a waiting game—if there was a payoff at its end.

He had a hunch that there would be.

At Seventy-seventh Street the car turned west. It drew up in front of a brownstone private house. In an earlier day, when the neighborhood had been more aristocratic, the house had undoubtedly been kept up. Now, it seemed shabby around the edges. Its trim and roof coping needed painting, the bay windows overhanging an areaway needed both cleaning and new curtains. The steps leading

to the vestibule could have stood a sweeping and the bell itself a polish job.

Charley stayed in the car. The Phantom went up the steps, Ed behind him, his gun covering the prisoner from his pocket. Ed leaned around him to jab at the bell.

"Open the door," he said, "and don't try any tricks."

The outer door led into a tiled vestibule. Most of the tiles were missing, dirt was piled up in the corners. A wan light shone behind colored slabs of glass around the inner door. That opened after a minute.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Winston." The door opened wider. "Come in."

The speaker was distinctly a character. Snow-white hair was fluffed on his massive head. His face, ruddy and wrinkled, was striking in its bold proportions. A Roman nose, bright blue eyes and a wide-lipped mouth went with a strong jaw and a square chin.

HE wore a rusty black suit, a soft-collared white shirt that could have been fresher, and a flowing tie that somehow gave him a theatrical appearance. A hint of the footlights was in his sonorous, deep-toned voice. He reeked of 'East Lynne', windy speeches and arm-waving histrionics.

"Hello, Pop," Ed said. "We'll go right up."

"By all means. Help yourself, Mr. Winston. Never let it be said that a Brewster-Peckham barred the way. The stairs, sir, are yours!"

He stepped aside, indicating them with a flourish. Ed chuckled and motioned the Phantom up a flight of steep stairs broken by one short landing. The white-haired man paid no further attention to them. Talking to himself he disappeared into a room off to the left of the entrance foyer.

With every step the Phantom went up, his interest quickened. Each, he was sure, was taking him closer to the brain that had brought sudden death to two people. Conscious of the menace that increased as he drew nearer to the key figure in the murder drama, he let his gaze focus on the door on which Ed Winston knocked.

Feet struck against a rug inside as if someone had lowered them hurriedly.

"Who is it?" a voice asked.

"It's me," Ed answered.

A crack of light widened as the door swung in. Confronting the Phantom was a short, slim man whose square face was decorated with a small, threadlike black

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mustache. Heavy-lidded eyes stared back. The man's mouth was full and loose, and his nose had a spread to the nostrils.

The Phantom's tightly drawn nerves fluttered. He didn't need a glimpse of a tweed topcoat tossed carelessly over the back of a chair, or a sight of the man's slender hands, to realize the individual facing him was the visitor to Darrel's apartment, the man who had fired at him from the taxi.

Their glances clashed. The man shut the door and gave Ed a low-lidded look.

"So this is the man Harry phoned about?"

Ed nodded. To the Phantom he said, "Sit down. Make yourself comfortable."

The Phantom seated himself in a dusty Morris chair. He was in a room that passed as a library or study, a place of leprous wallpaper, shelves containing elderly books, large and heavy. Well-worn Victorian furniture stood cumberously about. On the walls were framed playbills, faded photographs of actors and actresses of a past generation. The light came from a center chandelier, a thing of corroded brass and grimy crystals.

A length of curtain dangled at a doorway that connected the room with another behind it.

Ed, gun still in hand, said, "Look, Neal. Charley's downstairs waiting. Find out what Phil wants me to do with our friend here."

"Help yourself." Neal jerked a thumb toward the curtained entrance. "He's inside."

"Keep him covered." Ed handed the gun over and pushed the curtain aside.

The Phantom heard a door open and close. Then Ed was talking to somebody. The conversation was inaudible, a grumble of monotones shut off by a heavy door.

Neal rubbed his thumb along the barrel of Ed's automatic. The Phantom sized him up in one comprehensive glance. Carter and Ed Winston were different from the ordinary, run-of-the-mill criminal type. Neal wasn't. From the snaky glint of his overbright eyes to the weak looseness of his mouth, the hallmarks of crime were written indelibly into his square face.

He was the ratlike kind that was brave as a lion with a gun at hand, fearless and dangerous with an unarmed set-up before him. But he would be cowardly and cringing the minute the odds were against him.

The Phantom switched his contemptu-

ous gaze from Neal, letting it drift around the room. It stopped at a small, marble-topped pedestal table that held a yellowing plant in a majolica jardiniere. Beside it, the Phantom saw something that had a familiar look. It was a small leather case, a duplicate of the insulin kit that had been on the bookshelf in Darrel's apartment.

He stared at it, eyes narrowing.

THE mumble of conversation continued. The Phantom began to realize that the mysterious Phil was not going to show himself. Phil, hidden in the back room, was evidently transferring his orders to Ed. The Phantom didn't like that. He had permitted himself to be removed from the Blue Lagoon and brought to this house on West Seventy-seventh Street for one purpose only.

That was to meet Phil, face to face.

Now, in the other room, the man who had devised the killings was undoubtedly deciding the Phantom's fate. To linger longer would be foolish. He had gone so far, he had learned a lot tonight. But he had hardly started to penetrate the case. And time was ticking away.

His gaze left the insulin kit and focused idly on Neal who had perched himself on the arm of a chair across from where the Phantom sat. Neal's foot, in a highly polished pointed tan shoe, swung back and forth. His attitude was relaxed and indolent.

"Mind if I smoke?" The Phantom's tone was mild.

Neal's loose lips curled back over his teeth. "I don't care if you break out in a blaze." He laughed at his own crack.

The Phantom forced a smile. He reached in his pockets, patted them, getting up slowly as if to make access to them easier. He brought his hands out—empty.

"Spare a cigarette?"

Neal hesitated. With a shrug he pulled a crumpled package of cigarettes from his coat and tossed it over. The Phantom caught it. He shook a cigarette out, put it between his lips and inwardly tensed himself. The next few seconds would determine whether or not he was to get out of the house alive!

The Phantom crumpled the cigarette package into a ball, kept it concealed in his right hand. "Thanks," he said, and let the package go.

It smacked into Neal's face. The man's reaction was what the Phantom had

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counted on. Neal, snarling a curse, instinctively ducked. As he did the Phantom jumped him. Steely fingers went around Neal's pistol wrist, wrenching the shiny gun away before its trigger could be squeezed. Simultaneously he clamped his left hand over Neal's mouth to prevent an outcry.

In the Phantom's grip the square-faced man was like soft putty. The Phantom applied more pressure and Neal began to wilt. But even as he worked on the fellow the need for time made itself more acutely known.

Ed had finished his conference and was opening the door behind which he and Phil had talked. Footsteps sounded in the passage. The door was shut.

The Phantom brought the butt of the gun he had wrenched out of Neal's hand down on Neal's head. He let him slump to the floor, wheeling toward the door that opened on the landing. He had hardly reached it before Ed was in the room.

Over his shoulder he caught a glimpse of Ed grabbing for a weapon. He didn't wait to see how swift on the draw Ed was. The door was open and the Phantom was through it like a streak of light.

He faded down the stairs, the crack of a silenced gun following the whine of lead triggered from the landing. It smashed against the colored slabs of glass around the front entrance. Another shot followed, closely spaced, but the Phantom was in the vestibule then—going through the outer doors and down the brownstone stoop.

Charley, half-doing at the wheel of the waiting sedan, paid no attention to him. But he jerked his head up when the Phantom climbed in beside him, jamming Neal's gun against his side.

"Get going!" the Phantom ordered. "I'll tell you where!"

CHAPTER XII

THE PHANTOM MOVES



REARING off, the car's swift jerk was expressive of Charley's amazement and dismay. The Phantom saw him cower back against the upholstery as he shifted gears. In the rear-view mirror the Phantom saw a shadowy figure running down the steps of the house he had just left—Ed, peering wildly after them.

"Turn right at the next corner," Van ordered. "Keep going."

"Look, pal," Charley whined. "I haven't done anything. I just work for those guys."

The Phantom hardly heard him. His mind was busy with thoughts and plans. His first idea was to have Charley stop when he sighted the patrolman at an intersection, to have the officer go back to the house on West Seventy-seventh Street and bag its occupants.

Quickly he decided that was no good. His escape and the absence of the car were enough to make Ed and the retiring Phil flee the house. Neither would linger, knowing there was a chance the police were about to bear down on them. By the time the law arrived, the house would be empty.

"Where do you want me to go?" Charley mumbled, giving his passenger a side-long, apprehensive glance.

"Police Headquarters," snapped the Phantom.

Charley gulped. "Listen! You can't pin anything on me. Like I said, I just do the driving. I don't know what their angle is. It's none of my business. I get paid by the hour, and that's all there is to it."

"You can tell that to the proper authorities," the Phantom interrupted. "Watch the lights and keep going."

By the time they reached Centre Street Charley had a bad case of jitters. The Phantom thought he knew why. Probably Ed's chauffeur couldn't stand any official investigation. He looked to be the type who would have a record on file.

Still protesting, but making no attempt to outsmart the man he was driving Charley stopped the car at the proper destination.

Promptly the Phantom marched him to Inspector Gregg's office. There the Phantom drew the head of Homicide out of Charley's range of hearing. He identified himself, supplied brief information and as briefly told Gregg his wishes.

"Before we question this man," he said, "I want the house on West Seventy-seventh Street looked into. The two others I spoke of are undoubtedly gone. But there's another character there, an elderly man who calls himself Brewster-Peckham—a combined last name, apparently. Have him brought in for questioning if he's still around."

Gregg nodded his grizzled head and reached for a telephone. He snapped a

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few brisk orders into it and turned back to the Phantom.

"What else?"

"Have a man named Harry Carter picked up. He owns the Blue Lagoon, a night club on West Forty-seventh Street, as you of course know. The chances are that he's gone underground, but have a couple of your men go up there anyway."

Once more the Inspector used the telephone. This time he got someone in the squad room and rapped out instructions. He finished, drew a long breath and stared at the Phantom speculatively.

"So you think there's a chance to crack the Darrel case?" he asked. "I hope you're right. Frankly, I haven't made an inch of progress on it."

"Let's hear what Charley here has to say," the Phantom suggested. "First, you'd better check him for a record. He made speeches all the way down here. I wouldn't be surprised if you have him in the gallery."

Charley, in a chair with a plainclothes man beside him, looked up haggardly.

"You win," he mumbled. "I'm on the books. Under the name of Vernon, Hugh Vernon. I did two and a half for larceny some time back. But I'm clean. Like I said, I've been driving—"

"A murder car!" the Phantom cut in. "You killed a man tonight on Times Square. You and Harry Carter!"

Charley's color drained away. It left his face ashen. His hands shook nervously, but he still had enough courage left to snarl sudden defiance:

"I'm not talking until I see a lawyer! Go ahead—give me the works! You won't get any phony confession out of me! I know my rights."

"Take him away and let him cool off," the Phantom suggested. "Book him on suspicion of murder and hold him incommunicado for a while. I think when he decides to talk he can supply some interesting information."

THE room cleared. Gregg made no attempt to hide his satisfaction. Relief that came with the knowledge the Phantom had struck was in his expression. He sat further back in his chair as he was given the particulars of Clancy's "accident" and a few other details tying the Blue Lagoon in with the murder.

But the Phantom reserved the main facts he had concerning Darrel's death. Those could be given later. When it was

expedient, the Phantom worked in conjunction with Inspector Gregg, but since his own methods of investigation varied from the Department's procedure the Phantom preferred to play a lone hand at most times, calling the police only when necessary.

He had finished giving Gregg his outline of the evening's events when a policeman came in with the white-haired man in the black suit who had been in the house on West Seventy-seventh Street. Brewster-Peckham, as he called himself, was visibly shaken. His ruddy complexion was not as florid as it had been, and his eyes were wide and frightened.

But he still retained a measure of his poise, still the actor, even under the most adverse circumstances.

"My name," he announced sonorously, when the Phantom took over the questioning, "is George Brewster-Peckham. The hyphen comes from English ancestry. You gentlemen have undoubtedly heard of me—London's Drury Lane, my brilliant Shakespearian revivals. And in this country the old Madison Square Theater—Henry the Eighth and Richard Third. My press clippings—"

"We're more interested in tonight's drama," the Phantom said quietly. "Suppose you tell us about the occupants of the second floor of your house."

"What can I say?" The elderly man made a gesture. "A month ago the gentleman who resides there answered an advertisement I had in the paper. He told me his name was Phillip Johnson, that he was ill. He rented my second floor. A quiet man, obviously one with money, something I sometimes sorely lack. Naturally I was overjoyed at his proposition to take over the entire second floor. It was manna, gentlemen, direct from heaven."

"Later," the Phantom said to Gregg, "have Mr. Brewster-Peckham look over the photographs. See if he can find this Johnson." To the aged actor, he continued, "What about Johnson's friends?"

The snow-white head shook negatively. "They came frequently—Mr. Winston, a Mr. Carter, one or two others. I had no reason to suspect any of them. They seemed eminently respectable, solid citizens I believe you'd call them."

More questioning and the Phantom saw he was getting nowhere. He was sure that Brewster-Peckham was telling the truth. He leaned over and said to Gregg:

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"That's all. Let him go now. But I'd like this Johnson's luggage, and personal effects, brought down here—if he hasn't already removed them. I'll call you in the morning about Carter. Now, before I say good night, I'll have a look at the gallery myself."

The Phantom did. Charley's photograph was on display with the name Hugh Vernon under it, but there was no likeness of Ed or Harry Carter. The Phantom had expected that. He bowed out and made a roundabout way back to Park Avenue. . . .

The Inspector's report the next morning was about what the Phantom had thought it would be. Carter had disappeared from both the Blue Lagoon and his West End Avenue apartment. A general alarm was out for him, but that didn't mean much.

The night club owner had gone underground, as the Phantom had told Gregg he would. Digging him out would be a difficult job for the police.

Charley had stubbornly refused to add anything to his statement of the previous night and an examination of the second floor of the house on West Seventy-seventh Street had failed to turn up anything important. Johnson had left nothing except his clothing and haberdashery.

The Phantom called the *Clarion* on his private phone and told Steve Huston where to meet him. Then, touching up his disguise, he left his sky-high suite by his private entrance and went to the garage where he parked his three cars.

This was a short distance from his Park Avenue home, a three story building, owned and operated by a man in whom the Phantom had every confidence. For some time he had done business with the garage owner. His cars were kept in the peak of condition, fueled, greased and ready for instant use. They stood in a row on the main floor, shiny noses pointed toward the garage door, so they could roll out without a moment's delay.

The proprietor was discreet. The Phantom paid well for his silence and services and knew that the man believed his good customer was some sort of Government secret service agent. A fact which accounted for the disguises, the air of mystery that cloaked his comings and goings. The Phantom let him think that, using a pre-arranged signal whenever he stopped at the garage, as his own personal identification.

HE USED that now as he went across the damp cement floor and got into the driver's seat of a black coupe. A minute later he had the car in the street, headed for the place where he had told Huston to meet him.

The car's multi-cylindrical engine purred silkily. Outwardly it looked like a special body, an expensive job, probably a foreign car of a type seldom seen in Manhattan. Only the garage man knew that the three machines kept in his place had bullet-proof bodies and windows, that under the sleek hoods were motors capable of excessive speed.

But even the garage man did not know that built into each model and locked securely were make-up compartments, a space for clothing, another for weapons and ammunition. Also in each car was an emergency laboratory in miniature, on the order of that in the hidden room at the apartment. The Phantom owned a much larger and more completely equipped laboratory in the Bronx, close to the Westchester line.

Steve was on the corner specified when the Phantom approached it. The reporter recognized the black car. He had ridden in it numbers of times. To do so again, gave Huston a feeling of expectancy and excitement. It wasn't often that he was personally privileged to accompany the famous detective on a mission. What the Phantom had told him on the telephone when he had made the appointment, ran like quicksilver through Steve Huston.

He was in the car and on its heavy leather upholstery before it had been slowed to a stop. Steve drew a breath, an excited one.

"This is swell!"

The Phantom smiled faintly. "I'll answer that more fully when it's over," he commented.

"Meaning?"

"We're taking a trip today."

He didn't say where, but the reporter knew better than to ask questions. After all, what did it matter? There was a promise in the Phantom's statement that fired Steve's imagination. A trip? That meant danger, thrills, the chance for a front page story!

"We start at Clancy's home," the Phantom went on. "You have the address?"

"Right here in my pocket."

"Good. Supply directions. Brooklyn, to me, is as much of a mystery as the case I'm on."

THE CASE OF THE BURNING ROCKS

Over one of the East River bridges and through the tangle of the city on the other side of it, the black car kept on until it was in the Flatbush section. Steve, who knew the city almost as well as he knew the crowded metropolis they had left, found Raymond Street without mistake.

The Phantom stopped in front of the proper number. As they got out he locked the car doors as a precaution. Further down the street was a maroon convertible. He idly noticed that as Huston led the way up a few steps leading to the front door of an ordinary looking brick house whose main distinction was its air of cleanliness.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MAROON CONVERTIBLE



HUSTON rang the bell, and the Phantom let him do the talking. The woman who admitted them was stout and gray-haired. As she talked to Steve the Phantom noted that her eyes were red from recent tears. He understood why

even before she dabbed a damp handkerchief at them and said:

"It was a great shock. Bob was like one of the family. You see, we knew him before the war. He wrote us all the time he was away. When he came back he wanted to find some place to live near Philadelphia, but my husband wouldn't hear of it. He had to stay here with us, as he used to. But that was only on week-ends, when he wasn't flying."

Steve nodded. "This is Mr. Peterson from Headquarters, Mrs. Jackson. He wants to look around Clancy's room. There's just a chance there might be something important there."

"I don't understand." The woman gave them a puzzled glance. "If it was an accident—"

"It wasn't," the Phantom said shortly.

The room to which Mrs. Jackson took them was on the third floor, in the rear. It was a small, but pleasant place, with windows looking over a neat back yard. In the room souvenirs of the late conflict were on display. A piece of a plane's propeller stood in a corner, pocked with shrapnel holes. Photographs of Flying Fortresses were on the walls. A German helmet held a blossoming geranium plant.

They went in, the Phantom shutting

the door behind him.

His eyes moved around the room. They fell on a small writing desk to the left. The Phantom sat down before it and began a systematic perusal of the papers, letters and other things he found in its pigeon-holes and drawers.

While Huston watched silently, the Phantom thumbed through the letters. Steve saw him shake his head impatiently as he discarded them one by one with a, "Nothing there. Personal correspondence from his buddies. Let's see what's in this drawer. You take a look at the pockets of the clothing in the closet, Steve."

"What would you like me to find?"

"Some communication that might tell me something about Clancy's last flight, his Pennsylvania air trip. There should be a hint of it around somewhere."

Steve opened the closet and went to work while the Phantom continued checking over the contents of the drawers. Again he found nothing of any value, nothing that gave him any clue to what he wanted. Steve Huston, rummaging through the pockets of the two suits on hangers in the closet, had no better luck.

"Nothing here, Phantom."

Van shut the last drawer and got up with a shrug.

"Unfortunate," he said, disappointed. "I had hoped that possibly Jim Darrel might have revealed the reason for hiring Clancy to fly him so he could take the aerial pictures. No matter. There are other ways of learning that."

They said good-by to Mrs. Jackson and went back to the car. As they got in and drove off the maroon convertible that had been parked down the street got underway at the same time.

The Phantom noticed it in the special panoramic, glare-proof mirror at the top of the slanting windshield. He glanced at the other car casually and spoke to Steve.

"Pull out the slide with the Pennsylvania road map," he instructed. "I think we'll run down to Lincoln Field. . . ."

When they left the Holland Tunnel on the New Jersey side of the Hudson, after a return to Manhattan over the same East River bridge they had crossed, the Phantom looked for the maroon car.

It was still in their wake, rolling along at some distance to the rear, but keeping the black car in sight.

The Phantom moved his shoulders. Some of Phil's handy helpers? He couldn't be sure, but one thing was certain.

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Someone had expected that at the first opportunity Bob Clancy's living quarters would be investigated. Those who tailed the black car had been watching and waiting for just such an eventuality.

Now, following along, they intended to go all of the way. Or thought they would. The Phantom had other ideas.

Over the Pulaski Skyway, through the traffic tangle, he let the car roll along until they were southbound on a main New Jersey highway. Steve kept conversation in check. The Phantom smiled to himself. Excellent companion, Huston, a man with enough sense not to disturb a train of thought with idle chatter.

"Not that way," Steve said suddenly, when the Phantom, reaching an intersection, took a macadam road that led off to the right.

THE MAROON convertible was pocketed behind a string of trucks. The Phantom's foot came down harder. With a throaty roar the black coupe leapt ahead.

"We're shaking a car," the Phantom said, "that shagged us all the way from Raymond Street. Someone interested in learning where we are going." He raised his eyes to the panoramic mirror. "We've dropped him."

"This is an alternate route," the reporter observed, his finger on the map. "We can cut back to the main road ten miles further on."

They flashed along through open country. The Phantom watched for the reappearance of the red car. But there was no sign of it as the miles clicked away.

"The business of murder," the Phantom said, breaking a long silence, "is intricate and complex, Steve. In itself, the taking of a life is a simple matter. What a killer faces is the untangling of his crime, the revelation of his guilt, the penalty the law exacts. Murder, as in the case of Darrel, was planned in advance and carried out for a specific reason. The killer thought he was clever enough to get away with it."

Steve, listening, nodded. "But the specific reason, Phantom?"

"Darrel's photographs, of course. The point is this: The killer is beginning to doubt his cleverness. The careful plans he laid have been upset. He knows the hand of retribution is reaching for him."

Huston looked inquiringly at the Phantom's expressionless face.

"You mean—"

"He's trying desperately to evade the reaching hand. He has struck twice. He is prepared to make a third attempt—on me. He has to escape the fingers that are stretching out toward him, so he is using every trick in the book to do that, every means at his disposal."

"But he isn't getting away with it!" Steve said sibilantly.

The Phantom smiled grimly. "Not so far. Yet, to overtake him, there is a difficult problem to solve. In this particular case the motive for wanting those pictures, for killing to get them is cleverly concealed. Until I find what it is, the person responsible for the double deaths is temporarily untouched."

"You know who he is?"

"A man over six feet." The Phantom remembered the dent in the pillow on the bed in the back room of the house on West 77th Street, the heel marks made by Phil's shoes on the counterpane. "A man in the advanced stages of diabetes. He goes by the name of Phillip Johnson, which is undoubtedly an alias. He has money, enough to hire assistants to carry out his orders. He's a person of education and intelligence. He has no metropolitan police record. The man from whom he rented rooms failed to find his picture in the gallery."

Steve stared. This was the first inside information he had had on Darrel's killer. He listened to every word intently, his eyes bright with interest.

"In some way," the Phantom continued. "the intricacies of both Darrel's and Clancy's deaths bear directly on the family of Senator Selden—in Washington. Last night I saw the senator's daughter-in-law in the Blue Lagoon on West Forty-seventh Street."

Huston's eyes widened. "What does that mean?"

"Something I intend to find out before too many hours elapse. Carter, one of this Phil's associates, owns that night club. He has disappeared. But I have a hunch it isn't for long. I have a feeling that both Carter and the man he works for will be heard from again, shortly."

"As I see it," Huston said, "Jim's photos—if they ever turn up—will explain the mystery."

The Phantom shook his head. "I know what the pictures are. Finding them, without learning the death motive first, will explain nothing. The pictures themselves

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are of some rocks—burning!”

Steve's mouth opened. For a moment he thought it was a gag. Another look at the Phantom's grim face told him it was not.

“Rocks—burning! Rocks from a volcano?”

“No. Not unless there's an undiscovered volcano in Pennsylvania. I expect,” the Phantom went on, “to witness this phenomenon today. That's one reason I brought you along. I thought you'd like to have a look.”

“When I see that,” Huston replied, “I've seen everything!”

HE HOPED for some further explanation, but the Phantom had lapsed back into meditative silence. That remained unbroken until they were almost at their destination.

On the main traffic highway once more, the Phantom aroused himself when Camden came in sight.

“See if you notice a maroon convertible, Steve,” he said. “Keep on the lookout for it.”

But Huston didn't see any sign of a car of the color mentioned. Twenty minutes later they were at the Lincoln Field.

It was a commercial port, large, flat-terrained, with all the modern conveniences and equipment of flying fields dotting the landscape from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Off to the right, Steve noticed a straight row of hangars, some with planes fronting them, others empty.

The Administration Building was in the middle distance, the radio-observation tower at the west end of the field. A parking space for automobiles sprawled to the left. There were no more than a half-dozen cars there when the Phantom nosed the black coupe into place.

“No maroon convertible,” Huston announced, after a look down the line.

The Phantom got out. He turned the key in the lock of the car door and said:

“They know my car now. It's a posi-

tive marker, if they show up later. However, it's a chance that has to be taken. Come on, I'll get hold of the official in charge and see what we can find out about Clancy.”

The Detective Bureau badge worked its magic on the portly gentleman named Walker who presided over the main office in the Administration Building. He listened to what the Phantom had to say and picked up a telephone.

“I'll put you in touch with a chap named Eaton, Bill Eaton,” he said. “He is the mechanic who took care of Clancy's plane.”

Shortly the Phantom and Steve were talking with the man to whom Walker had spoken over the telephone. Eaton, a slim, wiry, grease-stained youth with a shock of blond hair and a sunburned face, had heard the news about Clancy that morning and was still in the depths.

“A right guy,” he said, stepping on his cigarette. “We're going to miss him around here. He was one of the best pilots on the lot. Could have got himself a berth with any of the commercial lines, but he didn't like routine. He was doing all right with his ship, too.”

“Think back,” the Phantom said. “Do you remember a flight Clancy made with a photographer some few days ago?”

“Sure I do. Party named Darrel. News cameraman. Feller who got himself murdered a couple of nights ago.”

Steve's pulses began to beat faster. He asked himself if the Phantom were on the verge of learning something important to the case.

“Did Clancy happen to say anything to you about that trip?”

Eaton looked thoughtful. “No, I can't say he did. Bob never talked much about where he took his passengers. All I remember him mentioning is that he landed somewhere in the woods and Darrel took some photographs.”

The Phantom's eyes narrowed. So Darrel's pictures had not been shot from the air! He had landed and taken them on the ground. Van's keen mind filed that away. No satisfaction that came from the information showed in his face as he added:

“We want to rent a plane and fly the same route Clancy took Darrel over.”

“I'll talk to Lanky,” said Eaton. “He's open for business this morning. Former transport pilot, picking up a little dough on the side while he waits for a permanent job with East Coast. Be right back.”

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THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE

CHAPTER XIV

BURNING ROCKS!



QUICKLY Bill Eaton returned with a tall, stoop-shouldered young man whom he introduced as "Lanky" Crawford. The Phantom made arrangements, after explaining what he wanted, and Crawford led the way over to a three-passenger, dark gray Bobolink that stood spick and span in the sun.

Its motor was turning over, a couple of mechs were putting last minute touches on it. Crawford hauled out his air map and gave it a long look.

"Timberlands?" He studied the map for a minute or two and rolled it up. "Okay. Climb in."

Steve had often flown before. But he always got a kick out of a take-off. The rush of wind as the motor accelerated and the ship left the ground. Then the bending arch of the blue sky, the clouds they seemed to head for, the thin, upper air. His heart pounded as the Bobolink made its altitude, leveled off and flew to the north.

Below, the cities of Philadelphia and Camden, with the silver thread of the river separating them, dwindled to toy proportions. Traffic on the main thoroughfare the Phantom's black car had traveled turned to moving specks. In the distance the Atlantic spread out like a flat, green-blue floor. Huston was able to see ships along a far horizon, plummets of smoke trailing behind them.

Once more the Phantom mused, as the steady pulsation of the motor sang a monotonous song in his ears. Was he to learn what he hoped this air trip would reveal? Or was the secret of Jim Darrel's pictures to remain hidden?

Within a short space of time they were over the wild tangle of virgin forests. Timberlands? The extensive holdings of Senator Future Selden? The plane nosed down for a better view of the tract, as Crawford put the first of the Phantom's orders into effect.

Van's gaze searched the wilderness below them. He saw the glint of lakes, seemingly no larger than a half-dollar in size, the steep inclines of hills, the lush green of valleys. Then he saw something else, something that made his nerves grow suddenly tight.

In one of the cleared spaces over which they winged, a lazy smoke haze rose in the still air!

"Land!" The Phantom's one word was taut with expectancy.

Crawford dropped lower, searching for a cleared space. There must be one in that vicinity. Bob Clancy had landed there. The Phantom bent forward, scanning the landscape below, watching while the trees seemed to rise up to meet them.

"I'll set her down over there." Crawford jabbed a finger to the left of one of the hills.

The Phantom and Steve had a glimpse of a flat, level, grassy stretch that made a natural landing strip. The Bobolink glided to it. Crawford, with expert skill, set it down with hardly a jar. He cut, and opened the door beside him, reaching for a cigarette.

The Phantom climbed out, Huston following. Birds caroled from the trees. The air was warm, full of earthy perfume. Somewhere a brook gurgled, deep in the verdant underbrush.

"This way, Steve."

The Phantom had carefully memorized the location of the smoke he had seen from the air. It must be beyond them, to the left, around the bend of a hill. He started toward it. For some distance the way was clear, then the undergrowth made a waist-high barrier.

Searching around, the Phantom found a trampled-down path. Broken shrubbery told its own story. Darrel must have gone in there, beating down the underbrush as he went along. The Phantom walked faster, Huston behind him.

A grove of trees made light-shot shadows on the ground. In their shade, the Phantom stopped. Below a slope of barren ground he saw a pool. Huston noticed how intently his companion studied the dark circle of its stagnant water.

"Notice anything peculiar about it?" The Phantom half turned. "Such as the fact no vegetation is growing anywhere near its rim or where the ground is moist?"

Huston began to get what was meant. The ground sloping down to the pool looked like rich, dark loam. But it was bare of any foliage or vegetation, and not a ripple disturbed the placid surface. No fish jumped or swam within it.

Puzzled, Steve watched while the Phantom went down the slope. He saw the detective take something from his pocket.

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It was a small vial. Into it, the Phantom scooped some of the pool's murky water. He returned the vial to his pocket without comment or explanation. They started off again, through the trees and out to the clearing at their edge.

There, in a shaft of sunlight, the Phantom stopped abruptly. One hand dropped to Steve's shoulder, he pointed with the other.

The smoke he had glimpsed from the air was rising just beyond them. Huston, craning his neck to see better, choked back his exclamation of amazement as the Phantom spoke:

"There they are, Steve! The burning rocks responsible for Jim Darrel's death!"

FOR MINUTES the Phantom stared narrowly at what he had indicated to Huston. Rising from the ground in a series of shelflike layers, stratified rocks, glowing incandescently, burned with molten heat while giving off blue-gray smoke that spiraled lazily in the unstirring air.

From where they stood, the Phantom studied them carefully. He had never seen anything like it before. He doubted if he would again. Rocks on fire! Rocks, burning—giving off heat and smoke!

The Phantom's natural determination always to find a reason for anything unusual sent his glance moving swiftly around. The rocks were burning, but what had ignited them? A camper's carelessly left fire? Or some freak of Nature?

Almost directly behind the smouldering rock ledge, he found his answer. There, a giant oak had been split by a bolt of lightning. At the base, and around the tree, was dried grass, zigzagging in a parched line from the tree to the rock formation. Grass, undoubtedly, that had caught fire from the lightning. Grass that must have blazed momentarily.

"I can't figure it!" Huston said huskily. "What does it mean, Phantom? You must have an idea."

"Only an idea," the Phantom said shortly. "Let's get back to the plane. This needs some laboratory work. . . ."

Lanky Crawford, feet elevated, was dozing in the sun when they got back to the Bobolink. The motor roared into life. Crawford, with a glance at the open sky above, settled himself back in his seat.

"Hold fast, folks. This won't be as smooth as the runway back at the drome."

He shoved the stick and gave the plane more gun. It jolted and rocked as it plunged down the open-strip. For one nervous minute Steve Huston was almost certain they were about to collide with the tall trees at the end of the cleared space. Then Crawford nosed her up, the landing gear hardly brushing the castellated tops of the huge pines they roared over.

Another pulse beat and they were climbing into the sun.

Steve expelled a sighing breath and relaxed. The Phantom had twisted around and was looking past him. Some strained questioning expression in his face made Steve follow his glance. Above, circling around, Huston saw a red plane winging toward them.

Crawford leveled, banking for the swing southward. He brought the wings up and righted the Bobolink about the same time the red plane went into a long, slanting dive.

Unaware of the other plane, Crawford was glancing at the instrument board in front of him when the red ship's dive brought it sharply across the Bobolink's wings. Startled, Crawford jerked his head up, grabbing for the controls.

The Phantom, straining tensely forward, kept his gaze glued on the other

[Turn page]

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Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

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plane. Its slanting swoop had been too close for comfort, too well-executed to have been anything but deliberately planned. The sky above Timberlands was not like the traffic-filled highways below. Here, near the clouds, were illimitable open spaces.

Why, he asked himself, should the crimson plane pick out the Bobolink to stunt around? The next nerve-gripping minute told him that this was no air show staged by some exuberant young aviator, no aerial acrobatics indulged in by a pilot who wanted to show off. The red plane, coming out of its steep dive, swung around and headed toward them again.

"Look out!" Huston yelled. Crawford ripped out an oath and hurled the Bobolink out of the path of the oncoming menace.

The Phantom, still leaning tensely forward, watched with narrowing eyes. This time, as the red hawk cut in to pass them, he saw the muzzle of a gun being leveled at them from the right side window. A blast of fire tore under the fuselage of Crawford's plane. Not rifle fire—they were being blasted with an old-fashioned tommy-gun!

While Steve Huston clung to his seat, his mouth opened and his eyes wide, Crawford dived.

Wind shrieked past the Bobolink's streamlined cabin. In the seconds of their plunge downward, the Phantom found time to admire Crawford's skill. They hadn't made any mistake flying with him. The tall, stoop-shouldered youth was showing his stuff. He pulled the Bobolink out of its earthward plunge, banking sharply in an effort to shake off its crimson pursuer.

THE Phantom twisted around, stared past Steve's white face, looking for a red flash in the sky. The other plane was coming at them again, righting itself from a power dive that brought its shadow across the sun.

Fascinated, the Phantom waited while Lanky Crawford used every trick of his trade to shake off the sky raider. More gunfire sent lead to rattle against the Bobolink like hail. Twice the other plane zoomed up at them, so close that the Phantom could see the figure of its pilot, could see the hands clutching the tommy-gun at the window.

The Phantom understood. He might have shaken the maroon convertible that

had followed them from Raymond Street, but his route had told those who tailed him what his destination was. The convertible must have holed in somewhere near the airport. As he had told Steve, his own black car was known to them. It had been easy enough to check his presence at Lincoln Field.

And in checking, the Phantom told himself, those who wanted to prevent him from returning from Timberlands were taking final, desperate measures.

How successful they would be depended on Lanky Crawford. With the landscape below rising to meet them Crawford, in a series of turns, loops and spirals, shook off the red enemy and headed for the drome.

It was over as quickly as it had begun. Realizing the futility of further attack, the other plane turned, climbed swiftly and winged away. Another few minutes and the flat ground of Lincoln Field was safely under the Bobolink's landing gear.

Crawford taxied toward the hangars, switched off and braked. He let off what was bottled up within him in a barrage of profanity. Then he wiped sweat from his face with the back of his hand and turned to his passengers.

"How'd you like that? For a couple of minutes I thought I was back over Belgium! Believe me, somebody's going to get jailed for that!"

Huston was too limp to reply.

"You know that red plane?" the Phantom said.

"Never saw it before in my life. I don't want to again. But I'll find out who it belongs to! Some crazy guy's going to pay for this—through the nose!"

The Phantom exchanged a look with the reporter.

"All right, Steve?"

"Yes, sure." Huston pulled himself together and climbed to the ground. He dug his feet into the sun-warmed dirt. "Feels good. I wasn't sure whether I was ever going to step on it again."

"I'm going to see Mr. Walker and file my complaint," Crawford said. "One of you gentlemen had better come along to verify it. Otherwise, Walker's likely to think I'm either plastered or out of my mind."

"Take care of this," the Phantom said to Huston. "See if they can get any line on the red plane. If they do, notify the Camden authorities, using my name. I'm starting back to New York immediately.

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Let Mr. Havens hear from you as soon as you learn anything."

He shook hands with Steve and turned to Crawford.

"Huston will back your story up. I owe you something, Lanky—something for bringing us safely through."

He was reaching for his wallet when Crawford shook his head.

"Nix. No pay-off except at regular rates. I'll get my reward when I find the skipper of that crate!"

With Huston beside him, Lanky Crawford started toward the Administration Building and Walker's office. The Phantom watched them go. Then he made his way to the parking section of the field and his black car. Just before he got in he searched the blue realms of the sky overhead.

No planes were visible. Only white, foamy cloud wracks moved serenely across it!

CHAPTER XV

THE SENATOR TALKS



ACKING incident on the way, the return trip to Manhattan was made speedily. Back in the city, the Phantom first stopped at Headquarters. Inspector Gregg had nothing new to offer on the case. As in the morning telephone report, it stood unchanged.

The general alarm sent out for Harry Carter had drawn a blank. Charley continued silent and no new developments had turned up. The Phantom was in and out of the busy building within the space of a few quick minutes.

His next objective was his Bronx laboratory, and he drove away at once.

The laboratory stood close to the Westchester line, a building which once had been a small warehouse, and which was set apart from the houses in the vicinity to give it a measure of privacy. Almost from the first days when he had made his brilliant debut as the Phantom Detective, Richard Curtis Van Loan had realized the necessity of having a workshop, secret and remote, in which he could conduct the scientific experiments so essential to the solution of his cases, and this laboratory was the result.

The small brick buildings served his purpose admirably. There, in the guise

of Dr. Bendix, a bearded, elderly savant with a penchant for scientific research, the Phantom had every instrument for crime detection at his fingertips. Occasionally, to keep the Bendix legend good, he let himself appear in the neighborhood, in the character of the old doctor. Those who lived in the district knew him as a harmless eccentric, gruff and none too friendly, so he was left strictly alone.

Leaving his car two streets away, Van approached his lab leisurely. He made sure no one was watching before he slipped a queer-shaped key into the multiple lock on the front door. A turn and he was inside.

The door swung silently shut after him, and indirect lighting automatically snapped on to dispel the heavy gloom bulking behind the light-proof curtains at the shuttered windows.

The place was just as he had left it after his last visit. Here, as in the secret room of his Park Avenue apartment, were the same kind of scientific, precision instruments, the same ray machines, microscopes and all the other paraphernalia, though in more elaboration, that went to make up a modern laboratory of the most advanced type.

Here, also, was a disguise wardrobe somewhat larger and more extensive than his other. Rows of garments neatly arranged and ready for immediate use. Here, an arsenal to gladden the heart of any gun collector, boasted weapons that Van had picked up from time to time. They ranged from purse-sized pistols to Lugers of a caliber large enough to bring down wild game. Each was cleaned and oiled, and, like the rows of garments, ready for instant selection.

His crime library filled a section on the left side of the building. Steel cabinets contained complete case records and histories of the many crimes he had brought to successful conclusions. And nothing was lacking from a triple-mirrored make-up table in the center of the place—mirrors that had reflected the image of unnumbered characters assumed by the Phantom—characters that had earned him the sobriquet of the "Man of a Thousand Faces."

That was a sobriquet, however, he had not lived up to lately. The old, rapid-fire succession of disguises had given way to a newer procedure. Now he used one, sometimes two faces for each case, altering them to meet situation and emergency. He

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found this more practical, more time-saving.

Van seated himself before a white porcelain table and reached for a test tube. He took from his pocket the vial which contained the sample of water from the stagnant forest pool at Timberlands. He drained that into the tube, turned on a Bunsen burner and lined up several chemical jars in front of him.

The test tube went over the heat. He measured out crystals and liquids, pouring those in another tube. On a glass slab he put a pinch of a grayish powder. To that he added ten drops of a clear acid and waited for the water in the first test tube to boil.

The Phantom believed he knew the secret of the burning rocks, but had to be sure. The scientific test he was making was to prove it to his own satisfaction. For he never did things in a haphazard manner, took them for granted, or used guesswork to arrive at conclusions. No small part of his fame was due to the painstaking effort he put into whatever claimed his attention and was necessary to a case.

A FEW minutes more and the chemical reaction of his test brought a confirming nod. He turned off the burner, washed his hands and put the chemical jars back in the glass-faced cabinet.

He knew the secret of the burning rocks. He had found part of the motive for the murders of Jim Darrel and Bob Clancy. But there was still a tangled skein of threads to unravel. Still shadowed mystery to clear away before he could crack the case.

He pondered, the quiet of the laboratory unbroken around him. He laid his plans swiftly and with his usual regard for the future and what confronted him mapped out, left the laboratory, went back to his car and drove from the Bronx to Park Avenue.

A short conversation with Frank Havens from his sky-high suite followed when Van got home. The publisher had heard from Steve. But Huston had nothing to report on the red plane. An attempt to trace it down, with Walker's aid, had failed. The crimson hawk, so Havens explained, had disappeared completely.

The call finished, Van made another. That was for a reservation on the next plane leaving La Guardia Field for Washington. He packed a bag hastily and within an hour was at the airport and for the

second time on his way to the seat of Government in connection with the case.

It was dark when he reached the Capitol. Again he registered at the Paul Revere House and put a call through to Senator Future Selden. The butler told him the Senator had just finished a late dinner and asked the caller to hold the wire.

The name "Peterson" the Phantom had given brought quick response. Almost at once the Senator's deep, familiar voice came across the wire.

"Yes, Mr. Peterson?"

"I realize this is short notice," the Phantom said, "but I would like to see you tonight if possible."

"Tonight?" Selden hesitated. "Yes, I had some correspondence to take care of but that can wait until tomorrow. May I send my car for you?"

"I would rather you came here to see me," the Phantom told him. "I'm at the Paul Revere House. Suite Four J."

"I'll be over within a half-hour."

Almost exactly thirty minutes had passed when the Phantom opened the door of his hotel suite and admitted the senator. He came in, frankly curious as to this second trip to Washington, the reason why the Phantom contacted him again.

"About your Pennsylvania property, Senator," the Phantom began, losing no time in explaining his purpose. "Timberlands. I want some information concerning it."

Selden's face mirrored surprise. "Timberlands? What do you want to know?"

"How long have you owned it?"

"A good many years. Ten, possibly more."

"What are you holding it for—exactly?"

Selden flung Van a puzzled glance. "What do you mean, holding it for? No particular reason. I picked it up for a song, undeveloped, wild, rough country. It rather appealed to me. Not so much as an investment but as a retreat from the world, a place to go for a complete change. I have a lodge there, at the eastern tip, with a lake at my front door and the finest trout fishing in the world."

"You never engaged anyone to make an aerial survey of the place?"

The senator ran his fingers across his wrinkled face.

"I didn't, no. But the Franklin people might have."

"Franklin people? Who are they?" The

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Phantom pounced on the remark swiftly.

"I'd better explain." Selden settled further back in the chair. He stripped the cellophane from a cigar, clipped its pointed end with a gold cutter and moistened it. "Martha—Mrs. Selden—for some unknown reason has taken a dislike to Timberlands. We honeymooned there." Selden twirled a lighter.

"One blissful month—" the senator continued. "We used to go up in the autumn. I never knew Martha didn't like it until a few weeks ago. Then, when I mentioned a vacation there this year, she came out and told me that she had never liked it, that she hated it. She said she wished I'd sell it, so there wouldn't be any chance of going back there again—ever!"

The Phantom's brows drew together.

"So you put it on the market?" he said quietly.

"I gave the Franklin Land Company of Philadelphia exclusive sales rights."

"When?"

"A month ago."

THE Phantom filed that information away in the back of his mind. "Has anything developed?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. A few days ago Lyman Buck, the president of the company, got in touch with me and told me he had an offer for Timberlands."

"How much?"

"Fifty thousand dollars."

"What did you tell him?" The Phantom's lids came down over his eyes.

Senator Future Selden puffed on the cigar. He shifted his weight in the chair and frowned.

"I didn't accept or turn the offer down. I told Buck I'd think about it. He was a bit insistent. Tried to high-pressure me. I'm used to that, being in Congress." The senator laughed. "But Buck wasn't to be put off. He pinned me down to a date. That's tomorrow. I'm to give him my yes or no then."

"You've made up your mind?"

Selden rolled the cigar from one side of his mouth to the other.

"Yes, I'm going to let the property go. I don't want to, but Martha's asked me to. As I said, selling it is almost a phobia with her. If getting rid of it will make her any happier—" He made a gesture and shrugged. "Got to please the ladies, you know. They get strange notions, and there's no use trying to talk them out of them."

The Phantom got up and took a turn around the room. Hands rammed deep in his pockets he stopped in front of the chair where Selden sat.

"When Buck calls you tomorrow—or you call him—I want you to tell him you need more time to think the transaction over. Under no circumstances close the deal!"

The senator's leonine head jerked up. He stared perplexed at the man who faced him.

"I don't understand. You brought me up here to talk about Timberlands. I've told you what you wanted to know. Now suppose you tell me what you have up your sleeve."

The Phantom shook his head soberly. "I wish I could. Unfortunately, it isn't possible at the moment. But I can tell you this much. Your Pennsylvania property has been the direct cause of two murders! If those murders are to be solved and the killer run down, you'll have to stall Buck along for a few days. Will you do that?"

"Of course," Selden said heartily. "I'll do anything you suggest."

"Thank you. One other thing. Don't mention our talk here tonight to anyone—not even your family. By the way, you've spoken of the offer to Mrs. Selden?"

"Naturally. She's kept after me, never lost a chance to ask about it."

"In that case," the Phantom said, "you'd better tell her that you think you can get a higher price. Tell her you intend to sell eventually, but for more money."

"I'll do that." The senator looked at his watch and got up. "I want to cooperate with you in every possible way, Phantom. I know quite a little about your past achievements. It's a real pleasure and an honor," he added with sincerity, "to be of assistance."

Another few minutes and he was gone. The Phantom, analyzing what Selden had told him, felt quick satisfaction. At last, he believed, wheels were beginning to turn. The plot was opening up, light penetrating its dark corners. There was nothing further for him to do until the next day. So far his plans were going ahead smoothly.

The Phantom wondered if they would continue so, when, at ten o'clock the next morning, he rang the bell of Arthur Selden's apartment, and after a pause, looked into the eyes of the senator's attractive daughter-in-law.

"Mr. Peterson!" There was a fright-

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ened catch in Peggy Selden's low-toned exclamation.

The Phantom, a foot in the door to keep it from being closed, pushed it wider and walked in.

"I hoped I would find you at home," he said pleasantly. "I want to talk to you!"

CHAPTER XVI

BLACKMAIL



EGGY SELDEN made a good attempt to control her agitation. Her warm, curved lips smiled. But the Phantom saw what was in the depths of her brown eyes. The long lashes fringing them could not hide the quick, apprehensive look that had come into them.

In the morning sun, the girl's youth and beauty were emphasized by the cool white lounging pajamas she wore. A short red silk jacket and a pair of sling-back slippers completed the ensemble. In the get-up she looked as slim and straight as a boy, as radiant as the morning itself.

The smile, stiff and fixed on her curved lips, remained while she said, "Isn't it Arthur you wish to see?"

"I'm calling on you this morning," the Phantom told her. "I want to ask you a few questions."

"Questions?" Her arched brows, thin as half crescents, lifted inquiringly.

"I hope you will explain something that puzzles me."

She shot him a swift glance, reached for a cigarette and perched herself on the chintz-covered arm of the wing chair opposite.

"What do you want to ask me, Mr. Peterson?"

"First," the Phantom said briskly, "you know what I am?"

"In a general way. You're a detective, aren't you? That was the impression I gathered from what Arthur said. Though why a detective should be interested in us I can't imagine."

He saw that she intended to fence with him.

"I'm working on a double murder case," he went on. "It has a connection here in Washington. One of the men involved goes by the name of Harry Carter. You've heard that name?"

He asked the last part of the question casually, and his sharp gaze watched for

its effect. Peggy Selden turned the cigarette between her slender, mahogany-tipped fingers, coughing a little as if its smoke had got in her eyes.

The lashes came down further over the eyes. She reached to tap the ash into a silver dish on the table beside her. A moment or two passed before she turned her tawny head.

"Harry Carter?" She wrinkled her tipped nose. "I don't believe I have. Should I know him?"

"You should, and you do!" The Phantom got out of his chair. "Don't let's pretend, Mrs. Selden. I want to know what you were doing in Harry Carter's office at the Blue Lagoon the other night."

The Phantom saw he had scored. At last the mechanical smile faded from Peggy Selden's lips. Her pretty face remained inscrutable, but in her graceful white throat he saw a tiny pulse beating rapidly. Her long nails dug into the cigarette balanced between her fingers. She mashed it out in the silver dish, forcing what was intended to be a light laugh.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Carter? The Blue Lagoon? It doesn't make sense."

"You weren't in a night club of that name on West Forty-seventh Street in New York?"

She shook her head. "No."

The Phantom shrugged. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Selden. You're forcing me to do something I dislike to do." He reached for his hat, carried it to the door. The girl sat motionless. He could feel her gaze on him with every step that took him toward the entrance hall.

Would she continue to bluff it out? The Phantom didn't think so. He was confident his last remark would make her stop him before the door closed behind him.

"One moment, Mr. Peterson!" When he turned, she had slipped from the arm of the chair. "What do you mean—you'll do something you dislike to do?"

"I'm going directly to Arthur Selden. I saw you the other night at the Blue Lagoon. This is murder, Mrs. Selden! I'll have to tell your husband what I know, that you called on Harry Carter at the night club."

"Wait!"

The emotion she had held successfully in check broke through its bonds. She seemed to go momentarily to pieces. The Phantom heard the choked breath she drew. He saw the agonized twist of her

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hands, the blank look of stark fear in her brown gaze, the quiver of her full, soft lips.

"What did you see Carter about?" He drove the question home insistently.

Peggy Selden slumped down in the same chair the Phantom had just left. She pressed her hands over her face, breathing hard and fast.

The sounds of the city drifted in, faint and murmurous. The Phantom waited, standing before her like a relentless nemesis. Finally she looked up at him, her eyes strained and her face shadowed.

"I went to New York—to see this Carter—because of Arthur!"

THE words came jerkily. The Phantom made no comment. She glanced into his set face and continued:

"He—Carter—is blackmailing my husband! Arthur doesn't realize I know about it. For some time I've been aware that Carter has been in touch with him, that he's been paying Carter sums of money. The night before you came here, there was a New York call to my husband.

"I listened in on it over the extension. It was Carter. I heard enough to learn his name, and about the Blue Lagoon. He wanted Arthur to meet him there the next night. Arthur said that was impossible, that he'd make another appointment—later."

"So you decided to go to New York?"

"I used a shopping trip as an excuse. I went to the Blue Lagoon. I saw Carter. I told him who I was, that I'd listened to his call. I told him I wanted an explanation, that if I didn't get it I'd go to the police."

"What did he say?"

Peggy Selden drew another long, deep breath. The pulse in her throat still throbbed, but she seemed calmer. It was as if by telling him what had been gnawing at her for days brought relief to her troubled mind.

"Carter put me off," she told the Phantom. "He said he didn't have anything to do with it, that he was acting for someone else. He told me that if I went to the police, Arthur would—would be in danger. That any mention of it might prove fatal to my husband!"

Blackmail? The Phantom had half-expected as much. But with her explanation came another unanswerable question. What hold on the senator's son had the "someone else" Carter was acting for?

"You must believe me!" Peggy Selden cried vibrantly. "That's the truth. I—I lied to you because I'm afraid! I know Carter will carry out his threat, if I talk! I had to tell you. I couldn't have you go to Arthur! What does it mean? What trouble is he in that he has to pay to keep them quiet?"

"You have no idea?" The Phantom felt sorry for the girl. All of her poise had left her. She looked frightened, cornered. "Think, Mrs. Selden. You must have some clue to the answer."

"I haven't been able to sleep, trying to figure it out. I haven't got anywhere. I can't imagine what it could be. Arthur's never had any secrets from me. Even when Martha telephoned him, and wouldn't give me the message, he told me what it was all about. But this—"

"Mrs. Future Selden telephoned your husband? When?"

"Several times, about a month ago. But it had to do with a birthday present for Arthur's father. They were buying it together."

The Phantom's eyes narrowed. "They bought the senator a gift and didn't let you in on it?"

She nodded, the sun glistening on the halo of curls around her small, well-shaped head.

"Oh, that was quite all right. I didn't mind. Besides, it was a lovely silver humidior." She stopped suddenly, her lips parting as if, for the first time, she caught the drift of what the Phantom had said. "Surely, you don't think—"

"In my business," he told her, "conjecture is often a shortcut to failure. Tell me something about the senator's wife."

Peggy Selden's information was more or less what the Phantom already knew. But he learned a few new facts. The woman, a rich widow from California, had formerly been the wife of a man named Ashley Venning. Her late husband, so Peggy Selden explained, had been a retired professor of mathematics, formerly connected with some Middle Western university. The money had come from his family.

After Venning's death, the widow had come to Washington. She had met the elder Selden at some Embassy function, he had fallen in love with her and had married her shortly afterward—ten months previous.

"Martha couldn't be involved in this!" Peggy Selden exclaimed, when she brought her recital to a close. "That

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would be too fantastic! You can't believe she is!"

The Phantom shrugged. "Everyone," he said tersely, "is innocent of wrongdoing until an investigation proves them otherwise." Thoughtfully, he went on, "Say nothing to anyone about what you've told me. There's not the slightest doubt Carter will carry out his threat—or try to—if he finds there's been a leak. For Arthur's sake as well as your own, keep this quiet. I'm sure that within a short time neither Carter nor the man he works for will be in a position to make good on any threat."

Hope came back into Peggy Selden's eyes.

"I won't say a word," she promised.

"I'm leaving a telephone number with you." A pencil and scrap of paper slid into the Phantom's hand. "Keep your extension covered. I must learn when Arthur leaves for New York, all possible particulars concerning where he's to meet Carter, or the others. The minute you get any information, call this number."

HE added a few more instructions, and presently was out on the sunny sidewalk.

What he had learned from Peggy Selden filled him with a restless impatience. For the first time since he had taken the case, the Phantom saw that the dark curtains cloaking the Selden part of it were ready to be brushed aside. He walked west, making sure that there was no green sedan to follow him this time, no maroon convertible, no Ed or Neal to pick him up.

That night they had forced him into their car they had thought he was a private eye. To Van the mistake indicated that Arthur Selden must have been in touch with some local agency. Probably, he decided, on the same matter that had worried and shaken his wife. Young Selden was no fool. In his own way he undoubtedly had been combating the Carter forces.

The Phantom walked faster. The question of Martha Selden loomed large in his mind. From the first time he had met the Senator's wife he had been conscious of her suppressed anxiety. He remembered how she had listened from the stairs when her husband had phoned. And she had been in secret communication with Arthur, using a trumped-up excuse.

On the corner, the Phantom hailed a cruising cab. He had a choice. Either Arthur Selden, with a demand for the truth

—or Mrs. Future Selden. He didn't hesitate. For the moment it was better to let young Selden alone. Arthur, he was sure, would prove valuable to the windup of the case.

The taxi stopped. The Phantom climbed in. "Where to, boss?" the hackie asked.

Van supplied the address of the senator's house and, with his pulses quickening, sat back on the worn upholstery.

CHAPTER XVII

HAWK'S NEST



IN the drowsy warmth of the late Philadelphia afternoon, busy Walnut Street held its usual quota of traffic and pedestrians. The Phantom, alighting from the train he had taken at the Union Station in Washington, was part of the throng that moved along the thoroughfare.

His destination was the Continental Building. Before returning to Manhattan, he wanted a look at the offices of the Franklin Land Company, a chance to meet the high-pressure, insistent Lyman Buck. He walked unhurriedly past the glimmering store windows, his thoughts not on what lay ahead so much as what his morning interview with Senator Future Selden's wife had brought to light.

He went back over the conversation he had had with that attractive, charming and perfectly groomed woman. Each word she had uttered, each statement made, was indelible in his mind. Each word had pushed the curtains further aside, giving an open view of what had huddled enigmatically behind them.

Still, the information he had come across was not enough. Loose ends remained to be tied together. Before he could strike with all the power necessary, there remained several things to be cleared. For the Phantom never acted on impulse, never closed in until every detail in his carefully planned diagram was accurately in place.

When he reached the Continental Building he consulted the directory board in its marble-lined lobby. The Franklin Land Company had a suite on the ninth floor. He took an elevator to it, opened one of a pair of swinging glass doors and found himself in a well-appointed reception room. Old maps were on the walls, the furniture was Pennsylvania Dutch, an-

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tiques that were time-mellowed and valuable. A plain gray rug covered the floor from wall to wall. In its center a dark-haired girl with a fresh, pretty face looked at him inquiringly.

"I'd like to see Mr. Buck," he requested.

The receptionist gave him a quick, appraising glance. It was impossible to tell by her expression whether or not she approved of him.

"Have you an appointment?" she asked.

"No. My business is personal."

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Buck has left for the day. If you'll give me your name I can arrange an appointment for you tomorrow."

"That won't be necessary," the Phantom said. "I won't be in Philadelphia tomorrow."

"Then I suggest you write," the girl said efficiently.

Back in the corridor, the Phantom reflected. Whether or not Lyman Buck was in his office was a matter of speculation. Something more important, he saw, was developing.

One of the local elevators had stopped, its door opening. Two or three people got out. The Phantom, about to move forward, turned around quickly and stared down the corridor in the opposite direction. He made the turn without a second to spare. An instant's delay and he would have been face to face with Ed!

There was no mistaking Ed's long, pointed face, the glimmer of his white teeth, his gait. Halfway down the corridor, Van glanced back over his shoulder, in time to see Ed entering the Franklin Land Company office.

The Phantom went down to the street. Outside, he checked the cars parked along the side streets, close to the corners. Two blocks from the Continental Building he saw the one he looked for. A maroon convertible stood at the curb there, locked and empty. Van walked past it.

At the next corner he found an idle taxi. Its driver looked like a bright young man. The Phantom caught his glance, nodded and let him lean to unlatch the door.

"Police business." He showed his credentials briefly. "I've got a job for you."

The hackie looked dubious. "Shooting? This is a brand new heap, right off the floor. And the guy I work for is kind of particular about me getting holes in it."

"Tailing job," the Phantom said.

"That's different. Who do I follow?"

"The car's down the street. It's owner's

in the Continental Building. He may stay there ten minutes or two hours. There are a couple of empty spaces on the other side of the street, behind the car. Drop into one of them and we'll wait." The Phantom added, "There's a double payoff for you if you handle this right."

THE taxi changed its parking position. The Phantom pointed out the maroon convertible and drew back into the near-leather seclusion of a corner of the cab. Ed might be on his way back to New York. But that was a chance he had to take. Wherever the man with the long, pointed face was going, the Phantom wanted to learn about it.

A half-hour dragged by. The taxi driver, a chain smoker, used up most of a pack of cigarettes. The Phantom, patient and watchful, kept his gaze riveted on the car up the street.

Fifteen minutes had passed when he saw Ed rounding the corner. He snapped a word to the driver, watching while Ed unlocked the convertible, got in, wound the window down and started the motor. The red car backed out of line and went off-down the street.

"Don't crowd him—take it easy," the Phantom told his driver. "He's smart. If he thinks he's being followed he'll give us a wrong steer."

"I'm new at this," the driver said, "but I'll do the best I can. Maybe you'd better tell me how you want it handled."

The Phantom did, as the convertible wove its way through the traffic, finally taking an avenue that ran straight north.

After awhile they were on the outskirts of the city, approaching one of its suburbs. The Phantom realized that a taxi was not the best vehicle for the kind of thing he was doing, but fortunately, the traffic was fairly thick. A stream of cars taking office workers home from the city mingled with trucks and kept the cab from being too much in the open, too conspicuous.

Yet, the Phantom knew, if Ed was watchful, sooner or later he would mark the taxi hanging in his rear. Five miles clicked off before the maroon car turned west at a junction. The Phantom's chauffeur spoke over his shoulder:

"Whiteside," he said. "A couple of more miles and we'll hit the farming district. He'll spot us sure."

"Slow down."

The Phantom studied the road ahead.

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There wasn't much traffic going in either direction. What the driver said was true.

The highway was hilly. The car in advance of them didn't go on for more than another half-mile before it made a second turn. The Phantom saw it round a grove of trees and, in a haze of dust, start along an unpaved country road.

"Slowly," he cautioned. "We've got to find out where he goes, but we can't be seen doing it. Stop here a minute."

Jumping out, he cut across an open space that brought him to a stone wall paralleling the country road. There were plenty of trees along it that offered partial concealment. He reached the wall and looked down the straight slope of one of the hills.

In the distance beyond he saw the red convertible flashing in the sun as it went into the entrance of a farm on the right side of the road.

Shading his eyes, the Phantom surveyed the countryside as it spread away at the place where Ed had gone in. He made out the sprawl of a white house, outbuildings behind it, open fields on two sides and a fringe of woods on the other. Trees grew along the roadway leading to the property where Ed had gone.

The Phantom hurried back to the taxi. He rapped out fresh orders and hunched himself forward while the cab went down the hill. Before it came to the line of trees, the driver pulled the wheel around and, picking out a cleared spot, drove it well off the dirt road.

"Good." The Phantom getting out again, saw that they were behind enough shrubbery to shield the taxi. "I may be gone some time. Stay here and wait."

He went forward, cutting in diagonally toward the farm at a point midway through the tree growth. Another stone wall, where a giant larch spread leafy branches, gave him an unobstructed, three-dimensional view of the property. The maroon convertible stood near one of the outbuildings at some little distance from the house.

Ed was busy at its open trunk. Out of it he seemed to be taking an accumulation of luggage.

The lid of the trunk banged down. Ed picked up some of the bags and began transferring them into the outbuilding. He made two trips before he got the last piece of baggage.

With that in hand he vanished into the building and did not reappear.

The Phantom continued on along the side of the stone wall. It curved where an apple orchard grew picturesquely. Somewhere a brook made music as it flowed along.

The Phantom thought of Timberlands, the trees there, the quiet and the song of another brook.

WHERE the orchard ended he caught a glimpse of pasture. Something whipped across his nerves. At a point where pasture and orchard merged he saw something that held his gaze rigid and intent.

A crimson plane stood there, a tarpaulin draped over its nose!

So he had found the scarlet hawk's nest! From this place the winged menace that had tried to shoot down Lanky Crawford's Bobolink had flown!

In a flash the Phantom saw how easily it had been arranged. They had seen his car in the parking space at the Lincoln Field and had telephoned the farm house. The red plane had taken off immediately. Locating the Bobolink above Timberlands had not been difficult.

The outbuilding into which Ed had gone drew the Phantom like steel to a magnet. The orchard gave him cover for his progress. His gun was loose in its shoulder holster. Step by step he went on until a clear, open space separated him from his objective.

There were no windows in the rear of the shack. Van made sure of that before he stepped out and went across to it. He caught the smell of cigarette smoke, heard a tune being whistled monotonously. Papers rustled, footsteps sounded on a wooden floor.

Ed was moving around inside.

Close to the shack, the Phantom sent a searching gaze around. There had been two men in the plane. Someone other than Ed must be close at hand.

But he saw no one as he slipped past the end of the shack and moved up to its open doorway.

From where he stood he could see Ed inside.

The man was bending over a spread-out map on top of a littered work table. He kept whistling the monotonous tune over and over while he looked at the chart in front of him.

The Phantom, on cat feet, took two steps closer to the door. The whistling stopped. Though Ed didn't straighten, the

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CHAPTER XVIII

Phantom knew that the man was tensing himself.

He understood why when he saw the shadow his own hat made on the wooden wall behind the work table.

Ed's right hand left off fingering the map and inched itself toward a hammer that had been tossed carelessly in with some other rusty tools. Ed's fingers were almost touching it when the Phantom stepped inside.

"Don't, Ed! You'll need more than a hammer to batter your way out of this! Stand as you are!"

It was a perfect posture on Ed's part for the Phantom's quick examination. Police rookies were taught to line suspects up in that leaning-over position so they could be frisked for weapons. The Phantom helped himself to Ed's. It came out of his belt, and a glance was enough for the Phantom to identify it as his own automatic, the one which had been removed from his person in the office of the Blue Lagoon.

He shoved the gun in his pocket and told Ed to turn around. The white teeth didn't glimmer now. Ed's mouth was shut tight. Only his eyes, glinting with venom and rage at the easy way in which he had been trapped, showed what was boiling within him.

He laughed harshly as he let his eyes dart to the man before him.

"And I thought you were a fly cop with some snoop agency! I said you ought to be in a comic strip!"

"A natural error."

Into Ed's long, pointed face came a new expression, a mingled blend of incredulity and quick fear. As if intuition brought understanding, his voice dropped to a tense, half whisper.

"You—you're the Phantom!" he said huskily.

VAN EXPLAINS



MAKING no reply, swiftly the Phantom decided what to do with Ed now that he had him. First, his problem was to get the man back to the taxi without interference from anyone on the farm.

He didn't doubt that fear, replacing fight, had made Ed easier to handle. The man seemed stunned by the realization of his captor's identity. He licked his lips, his eyes haunted while the Phantom motioned him to the door.

"Who's on the farm—in the house?" the Phantom demanded.

"A couple of people. They haven't anything to do with—me. I rent this place from them."

"We're going through the orchard, over the stone wall," the Phantom told him. "Keep a step ahead of me and don't turn around."

Ed nodded, his shoulders sagging.

They started back by the same route the Phantom had taken to reach the outbuilding. He kept the man in front of him covered with one eye, the farmhouse with the other. No one emerged from it, no one came across the sunny spaces in front of it.

Over the wall and back through the trees, the Phantom whistled when he was near the taxi. The driver parted the underbrush, staring at the Phantom's prisoner with open-mouthed curiosity. This was a lot better, he thought, than the detective cartoon serials he kept up with in his favorite tabloids.

"Open the door." When the youth pulled it wide, the Phantom said to Ed, "Get in."

[Turn page]

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THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE

"Now where?"

The driver got back under the wheel and started the motor.

"Police Headquarters, Philadelphia."

Ed said nothing during the ride back. Arms folded loosely, he sat with his head tipped forward, his gaze heavy and listless. Beside him, the Phantom let his mind spin out plans. Whether Ed talked or not was not important. He had a feeling that the man he had caught couldn't tell him much that he didn't already know.

He was still considering his next move when the taxi was back in the city and had stopped before the building that housed the machinery of its local law.

In short order the Phantom was inside. He left Ed in the custody of two brawny police officers and went into the chief's office. The man, middle-aged, sharp-eyed and as grizzled as Gregg, looked up as the Phantom's hand came away from the secret waistband pocket of his trousers.

He opened it and the small, jeweled mask-plate scintillated in its palm. "The Phantom Detective!"

Briefly, the Phantom explained. The chief was familiar with the Darrel murder case. A teletype lookout for Harry Carter was pegged on a board above his desk. He listened with interest to what the Phantom told him concerning Ed.

"You want him locked up," he said then. "What'll I book him on?"

"Suspicion of murder. Inspector Gregg and your district attorney can get together on an extradition. Keep him under lock and key. He's smart. He'll try a break if he gets the chance."

"He won't get one!" the chief assured.

They shook hands and when the Phantom left he found he could get a train back to New York within a quarter of an hour. He was on it, relaxing with a newspaper open before him, when it pulled out of the Philadelphia station.

It was dusk when he reached Manhattan. Like Jim Darrel, on the cameraman's return from his last trip, the Phantom went through the echoing Pennsylvania Terminal, up to the street and out into the roar of the metropolis. A taxi took him near his Park Avenue home.

From his lofty apartment Van telephoned Frank Havens, made a dinner date with the publisher for an hour later. He took a quick shower, after removing his disguise, dressed carefully, as usual, and Richard Curtis Van Loan went out to keep his date.

Havens had made it at the Patroons Club, that staid, exclusive rendezvous that always reminded Dick Van Loan of a museum. Dignity and decorum gave it an aristocratic, though dreary atmosphere. Van often had a perverse desire to see how its staff of somber servants would react if, upon entering, he broke the cultured quiet with a roaring laugh or a shouted question.

At the Patroons bank presidents rubbed elbows with chairmen of the board. Retired wealth yawned from deep upholstered chairs in sheer boredom. Railroad magnates smoked dollar cigars in petrified tranquility. The place, Van had once decided, had all the makings of a funeral home, including the corpses.

ITS principle asset was privacy. In the dining room, where Frank Havens maintained a table by the year, there was a chance to talk without being listened in on. The members dining there were engrossed with their own importance, not interested in others. Besides, Van knew, not one of them would believe, on oath, that a character as famous as the Phantom Detective could be under the club house roof.

Havens was waiting for him in the reading room. The *Clarion* owner discarded the late afternoon newspaper he had been glancing through and got out of his chair.

"Glad to see you, Dick." That and a handclasp was for the benefit of an elderly traction king deep in the pages of a yachting magazine. "Dinner?"

"Good idea."

"I'll speak to Roger and have him bring us a menu."

It was characteristic of Van to slip easily from one role into another. Hours previous he had been the Phantom, hard on the trail of those responsible for the deaths of Jim Darrel and Bob Clancy. Now, as he let a club waiter seat them in the wainscoted dining room, he was the bored dilettante again, the society favorite.

But there was nothing blase or indolent in the handsome face he turned to Frank Havens when they were alone.

"What have you heard from Gregg since this morning?" he asked.

"Not a thing. Steve got back. He failed to find any trace of that plane."

"I located it." Van spoke casually. "I also picked up Ed, one of the top men. He's in jail in Philadelphia for safe keeping. I'm reasonably certain I'll have the

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real killer tonight—if things work right. It depends more or less," he added, "on a telephone call."

Havens' brows went up. "Telephone call?"

"From Mrs. Arthur Selden." Van switched the subject back to the crux of the case. "Now I can tell you the motive for Darrel's slaying. I can explain what I meant when I mentioned the burning rocks."

The publisher, sitting across the table from him, bent interestedly forward. "Let's hear it!"

"What sort of a phenomenon would produce rocks that burned?" Van spoke slowly. "Rocks that keep on burning. Obviously, they would have to be impregnated with and fed by some combustible fluid from the ground they were in. What kind of fluid?"

Frank Havens shook his head. "You'll have to tell me."

"Oil!" Van clipped the word off short. "You undoubtedly know that the Bradford district of Pennsylvania has always produced the finest petroleum oil in the world. The toughest, richest oil known. A premium oil of high viscosity. An oil that—"

"You mean Selden's property contains oil!" Havens exclaimed.

Van nodded. "That's the pivotal point of the whole case. Oil! Those back of the land company must have known about its presence there. That was their reason for wanting Selden to sell, for pressuring him. They were trying for an easy million. All they had to do was get the property and wealth was theirs."

"But where does Darrel come in?"

"For some reason the Franklin outfit wanted aerial shots taken of the tract. Probably for their prospective customers—after they'd purchased the land from the senator. They hired Darrel to take the pictures. He did, but while doing it saw the burning rocks, landed, and took some shots of them—for himself."

"Why?"

"Darrel," Van went on, "was no fool. He must have understood that the phenomenon of rocks that smoldered and gave off smoke meant oil. There's little doubt that he kept the pictures he took undercover and said nothing about them to the outfit that had hired him. In fact, he must have been suspicious of the Franklin Company. So much so that he tried to get in touch with Senator Selden the minute he was

finished with the job."

FRANK HAVENS, listening, drew his brows together.

"That's clear enough, but how did the Franklin Company know about Darrel's pictures? Those he *didn't* turn in?"

"I think the answer to that is undoubtedly in a link between Arthur Selden and Mrs. Future Selden. More about that later. Or," Van added, "Bob Clancy might have talked. It doesn't take rumors long to get around, particularly if they're unusual—such as having seen rocks on fire."

"You realized the meaning of them the minute you saw them?"

"I was fairly certain. To make it positive I took a sample of water from a stagnant pool. A pool, which oddly, had no vegetation around it, another fact that pointed to petroleum deposits. The test tube settled it without question."

Van Loan was about to add something else when one of the club's pages made his way across the dining room and stopped at their table.

"Telephone for you, Mr. Havens."

The publisher nodded and went to answer it.

Dick Van Loan looked up when he came back a few minutes later. From the expression on Havens' face he knew the call had been important.

"From Steve—at the office," Havens said, dropping his voice. "It's for you. From Mrs. Arthur Selden—the call you said you expected. Huston has it for you!"

CHAPTER XIX

MADE FOR MURDER



NEVER in all of his crime career had the Phantom Detective got back into disguise as quickly as he did when, leaving the Patroons club and Frank Havens, he hurried to Park Avenue and the secret room behind the bedroom wall.

The whip of expectancy lashed his nerves. The instructions he had left in Washington with Peggy Selden had been carried out. That meant that before much more time elapsed the final chapter in the murder drama would be written and the book closed!

Seated before the triple mirrors of his makeup table, Van proceeded to replace

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the face and features of the socialite play-boy with the countenance of Peterson. Once more he created the likeness he had used throughout the case. Not a line deviated from his original inspiration. Each shadow and tiny wrinkle was back in place when he finished.

For his night's work he selected a gray tweed suit. Into its pockets he put the tools of his trade—the Phantom Detective's identification badge, flashlight, money, gun, rolled felt mask and master key. He was ready for any eventuality when the wall panel went back into place and "Peterson" shut the door of the apartment after him.

Steve Huston was nervously prowling around Havens' spacious quarters when the Phantom reached the Clarion Building and went up to the office. Far below the presses rumbled, getting out the morning news. But in the publisher's private sanctum, with its door closed, the quiet was broken only by the pad of Steve's restless feet on the thick rugs.

"Phantom!"

Huston swung around as the man he expected stepped in. Havens, an after-dinner cigar in his mouth, smiled at the reporter's look and breath of relief.

"Here's the message, Phantom," Steve said quickly. "Just as I got it over the wire. I hope I didn't miss anything. She spoke fast and in a low voice. I took it in shorthand and typed it out for you."

"Good. Let's have it."

Huston handed over a folded paper. The Phantom helped himself to a chair and opened the message. He pulled a lamp around to give him more light and read:

Some man named Johnson telephoned my husband late this afternoon. I overheard their conversation. This Johnson said it was imperative that he meet my husband tonight, in New York. He told him to go to a place called the Rutledge mansion above Van Courtlandt Park, off Central Avenue, on Smithfield Road. He said any taxi driver would know it. He said my husband was to be there as early as possible, that he would be expecting and waiting for him. After the man rang off, I heard my husband telephone for a plane reservation. Please give this message to Mr. Peterson immediately. It is of vital importance.

"That's all?" Frank Havens said, when the Phantom finished reading Peggy Selden's message aloud.

"It's enough." The Phantom got up. "The Rutledge Mansion?"

Huston, familiar with all the city's landmarks, cut in quickly, "I know the place.

It hasn't been occupied for years. It's up in the Bronx."

"Check with La Guardia and find out what time the last Washington plane came in and when the next one's due," the Phantom directed. "I have to talk to Gregg at once."

Havens saw the Phantom's face shadow. "Something wrong?"

"I hope the Inspector handles this tactfully. We can't have scandal breaking, as it will, and splash over the Senator. This thing's got to be done with finesse. I've got to pound that into Gregg's head."

While Steve was using one telephone on Havens' desk, the Phantom picked up another. He took that to a corner, plugged it in and dialed Center Street.

Steve finished first. "An East Coast plane landed about fifteen minutes ago, from Washington," he informed. "No more until around midnight."

"Then let's go."

The Phantom gave Havens a few more hasty words and hurried Huston out to the elevator.

From the Clarion Building they taxied directly to a corner where the Phantom's garage man had a car waiting, according to telephoned instructions. They were out of the cab and into one of the super-powered black cars before Steve had a chance to draw a second breath. The Phantom let it glide along the street, turned left at the first corner and started up a broad avenue.

"Watch for a possible tail," the Phantom said. "Not that I think we'll be followed. Our friends are running low on assistants. Meanwhile, Steve, I want to bring you up to date on the case. You'll be pounding it out on your typewriter for the *Clarion* shortly. I want you to be familiar with the facts."

HE gave them in order as they went along, stringing them together so they made a clear picture for the reporter. Steve listened breathlessly. Some of what he heard he already knew. But the black-mail angle was new to him. He absorbed the information eagerly.

Over the Spuyten Duyvil bridge, under the subway's elevated structure they went on, the black car having no chance to show its speed. The Phantom glanced at the electric clock on the instrument panel from time to time. He figured out how long it would take Arthur Selden to get to the Forty-second Street terminal, find

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a taxi and come over this same route. If, of course, he had been aboard that plane.

According to his figuring, they still had a little leeway. But not too much.

A right turn, a road through the park, a curving hill and they came out on Central Avenue. While Steve supplied directions, the Phantom gave the car more throttle. Like a thoroughbred released from an electric stall-gate it slipped swiftly away through the darkness.

In seconds they had turned off and were on Smithfield Road. Another space and Steve said:

"The Rutledge Mansion is just ahead."

The moon had not come up. A few misty stars flickered wanly in the cloudy sky. The municipal lights along Smithfield Road were set at widely separated intervals. The headlights of the Phantom's car pierced the black and showed him the driveway that went in between a high, overgrown private hedge.

He steered in, branches of shrubbery rubbing and rustling against the car as it bumped over an uneven, rutted roadway. The mansion, he saw, was set well back in the property, almost a quarter of a mile in. Fronting it were melancholy evergreens that had been allowed to grow wild and untrimmed. Dense banks of rhododendrons reared up beyond the driveway, making a thick screen.

"I remember reading something about this place," Huston said suddenly, while the Phantom, slowing, looked for a place to run the car in out of sight. "It just came to me. The Rutledge estate recently rented the property. To some man who is going to open a roadhouse."

"Carter." The Phantom nodded, as if verifying the fact.

It was more than likely the owner of the Blue Lagoon had taken it over. Making the old rookery a rendezvous for that night added weight to the theory. Selden couldn't be interviewed now at the West Forty-seventh Street address. The Blue Lagoon was under the watchful eye of the police. The house on West Seventy-seventh Street was likewise out. Phil had had to dig up a new meeting place and the Rutledge mansion, with Harry Carter as its new lessee, filled the bill.

At some distance from the house the Phantom ran the sleek black car in behind the rhododendrons. A faint breeze stirred their leaves funereally. Pale starshine gave their setting a spectral glow.

"What a place!" Steve shivered. "Looks

like its made for murder!"

The Phantom laughed under his breath. "Nerves? In this business you don't have any!"

They approached the house from its south side. Stark against the gloom, large and impressive, it was plain that in some past decade it had been a show place, pretentious and elegant. Unoccupancy and the ravages of time had taken their toll. Like the grounds surrounding it, it had fallen into neglected desuetude.

"Wasn't that a light?" Huston gripped the Phantom's arm. "Upstairs—second floor!"

The Phantom looked up. But no lighted window met his gaze. He stared for a minute or two.

"Now you're seeing things, Steve," he said.

"I could have sworn I saw a yellow gleam of light up there."

"We're in time." The Phantom searched for a parked car, without success. "If our man was on that plane, we're all set. I think we'll go in."

In the rear of the building, he found what he wanted. An entrance, once used by tradespeople, was behind a jut of rotting lattice overgrown with wisteria. His hand closed over the knob. It was smooth to the touch, free of corrosion or rust. Someone recently had cleaned the knob, had used it.

The door was locked. While Steve stood watchful beside him, the Phantom produced his master key. That ingenious device of the Viennese locksmith was such a clever, delicately designed contrivance that the Phantom constantly found invaluable. Against that key no door remained closed. He slipped it into a keyhole as he had done once before on this case, made an adjustment on its shank that spread the flanges of the key into the wards and tumblers of the lock.

A QUICK turn and the latch snapped back, the door opened.

The Phantom's flashlight, with its special lens that was capable of expanding or contracting its beam, sliced the black like a knife. He closed the door quietly behind Steve and himself, breathing in musty air. He frowned. For all of its mustiness, he was conscious of an underlying aroma, the faint but unmistakable smell of habitation—tobacco and cooking.

They were in a recess with the entrance to the kitchen on one side, a laundry on

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the other. A hall went away from it toward the front of the house, another passage led to what Van assumed to be the servants' quarters. No sound except Steve's deep breathing disturbed the tomblike silence.

The torch moved systematically around. It went over the cracked, moldy walls and the floor. Suddenly the light held on the worn, painted boards. The Phantom bent forward, his face grim, his mouth tight.

Almost directly in front of him he saw the imprint of a shoe, smeared with a fresh red stain! Steve Huston, seeing it the next moment, stifled an exclamation. The Phantom leaned closer to the footprint. He touched it with a fingertip, held his finger to the light before wiping the finger on the wall beside him.

"Blood!"

Steve dragged in a hard breath. "What does it mean?"

The Phantom didn't answer. The beam of his torch roved on along the floor. There were two doors some short distance away from where they stood. Another footprint was outlined on the boards, close to the threshold of the first door.

The Phantom studied the second mark. Like the first it was pointed away, toward the front of the house. Straightening, he shifted his light and pushed the door open.

Huston's breathing quickened. The Phantom crossed the threshold and entered the room. Shades hung at the windows, unneeded because of the boarding nailed across them. The first stab of light was enough to show him that the room was in use.

A new Army cot was set up along one wall. A painted chiffonier had been cleaned. Its top held a clock that ticked quietly, a wallet, some keys, a scattering of coins and a carton of cigarettes. There were two chairs. A coat was draped over one, the seat of the other held two magazines and a recent newspaper.

But the Phantom saw those things last.

The flashlight focused on the room's occupant. He lay on the floor between the cot and chiffonier, face-down, his arms reaching toward nothing. A pool of blood seeped out over the rag rug under him.

Even before the Phantom turned him over, he saw familiar reddish-sandy hair, parted in the middle and slicked down on the sides. A round bullet-hole had been drilled neatly into the man's brain at a point above his left ear. He had been dead only a short time. The Phantom, experi-

enced in such matters, determined that by the blood pool that had not yet coagulated, the fact that rigor mortis had not yet set in.

"Who is he?" Huston's voice, thin and shaken, lifted the Phantom's heavy gaze.

"He was Harry Carter," the Phantom said. "No wonder Gregg hadn't been able to find him. He's been hiding out here since he disappeared from his night club!"

He was about to add something else when, from outside, his quick ears caught the sound of tires on the rutted driveway, the pant of a throttled-down engine!

The light in the Phantom's hand went out.

He listened. The arriving car had stopped. He heard a door shut, heard faint voices, low-pitched. Then, from the front of the house, the sound of another door opening—closing.

Still motionless, the Phantom waited, the dead Carter at his feet. He thought he could understand the motive for Carter's murder, the third victim on the roster of the burning rocks case.

The night club owner had not been any strong, tough character. The Phantom remembered how he had ordered Ed out of the Blue Lagoon, saying he wouldn't tolerate any "rough stuff" there. Phil, undoubtedly, had been afraid that Harry Carter, not taking his enforced seclusion too well, would go soft and talk. Carter, like Darrel and Clancy, had been taken care of to prevent that.

Who had killed him?

THE Phantom's brows drew together. Steve had said he had seen a light upstairs.

"We'll go back to the recess, Steve," the Phantom whispered. "Walk quietly."

He left the door of the room in which Carter had hidden out open and, careful that betraying boards didn't creak under his feet, retraced his steps to the square where the kitchen and laundry stood on either side.

Inching wide a door there, he found that the recess opened onto a long front hall. A gleam of light came from one of the rooms to the left of an impressive spiral staircase above which hung a tremendous crystal chandelier. The floor was tiled in black-and-white triangles. Carved mahogany wainscoting covered the walls. The tang of cigarette smoke was sharp on the musty air.

A voice the Phantom recognized as that

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of the square-faced Neal said:

"He ought to be along any time now, Phil—if he's coming."

"He'll come!" another voice grunted. "He'll be here!"

"I can't figure why we haven't heard from Ed," Neal continued. "He was to phone at five. Not a sound."

"Probably got tied up in Philly. He'll be along, too. I never worry about Ed. He knows how to handle himself."

"He ought to have some news." Neal spoke reflectively. "If the deal with the senator's washed up tomorrow, Ed should know all about it."

"He will!"

Before Neal could speak again the Phantom heard a second car pull in on the driveway and stop. Through the crack in the door he saw Neal glide out into the hall. The square-faced man's hat was at a jaunty angle on the side of his head. A cigarette hung pendulous from the corner of his mouth.

He was at the huge front door and had it open when Arthur Selden reached it.

"Come right in, Mr. Selden. We're expecting you."

Neal's greeting was hearty.

CHAPTER XX

REWARD ENOUGH



KEENLY on the alert, the Phantom saw the senator's son follow Neal into the lighted room. Then he heard Selden's voice.

"Where's Mr. Carter?" Selden asked.

"He won't be here tonight,"

Neal said smoothly. "I want you to meet Mr. Johnson. He's the one who telephoned you. Carter's been working for him. Johnson's the principal in this matter. You can do business with him."

"Sit down, Mr. Selden," Phil said. "You've brought the money?"

"Yes." Arthur Selden's tone was expressionless. "You understand this can't go on much longer. Carter assured me that when the property was sold, these payments would end."

"That's right," Phil informed him. "But the property hasn't been sold. In fact, your father's stalling. He told me he wants more time to think it over."

"We'll know more about it, later," Neal put in. "We're waiting for someone who

was at the Philadelphia office this afternoon."

"I'll take the money," Phil said. "Use that table and count it out for me."

A chair grated on the floor. The smell of cigarette smoke increased. The Phantom leaned close to Steve Huston and whispered something. Then he moved away, going silently forward with ghost-like quiet.

In the lighted room, as he reached its arched entrance, he saw Neal with his back to him. The man was resting against a high-backed chair, watching through the smoke haze his cigarette made. Arthur Selden had seated himself before a little table and was counting out money.

The Phantom's narrowed gaze flashed to the third man in the room. This was the first time he had seen Phil. He looked at him curiously. As he had told Steve, the man was tall, over six feet. Under a smartly styled felt hat, the Phantom saw gray hair. Phil's high cheekboned face and deep-set eyes were turned to young Selden. One glance was enough for the Phantom to see that in Phil's face were the ravages of disease.

"I think you'll find this correct." Selden pushed the sheaf of money across the table. "You'd better count it."

There was a sarcastic note in his voice. It was lost on Phil who said:

"I don't have to. I did that while you were dealing it out. Now, Mr. Selden, let's talk about the future."

"Whose future?" the Phantom asked from the doorway.

Neal swung around with a smothered oath. Arthur Selden, his good-looking face a study in bewilderment, jerked his head around and stared blankly. Phil, dropping the money, strained forward. The gun in the Phantom's hand moved in a slow, level arc, covering them.

Phil was the first to speak. Three words escaped his twisted lips in a low snarl:

"The Phantom Detective!"

The Phantom stepped further into the room.

"Gunplay," he said quietly, "is useless. This house is surrounded. Enough people have been killed—we'll leave the score as it is. Mr. Selden, you can be of some help. Relieve these gentlemen of their weapons."

In slow motion, as if stunned by the Phantom's presence, the senator's son helped himself to Neal's poisonous-looking automatic. Tensely poised, ready for

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any trick or subterfuge, the Phantom watched Phil when Selden approached the tall man.

But Phil made no move to interfere when Selden removed a Smith and Wesson .38 from his side pocket. An ironic smile began to cross his pale, sick face. He coughed deep in his throat while Arthur Selden came over to the Phantom with both guns.

"Now what?" Selden asked.

"The next move," the Phantom said, "belongs to Inspector Gregg and Homicide."

Huston, after the Phantom's whispered instructions, had slipped out of the Rutledge mansion. Now, returning with the Inspector and the advance guard of the Homicide detail, for sufficient time had elapsed for them to reach the place, the reporter stepped aside to let Gregg enter first.

"Your prisoners, Inspector!" The Phantom made a gesture. "Two murderers! You'll have the particulars later. Take over. There's still one job left for me to attend to."

Before Steve could speak to him, and while Gregg and his men moved in to handle Neal and Phil, the Phantom faded out of the room.

THE spiral stairs twisted up to the same impenetrable gloom that had filled the rear of the house, the room in which Harry Carter lay dead. The Phantom's heart pounded. At last he was in the final stages of the case. One by one he had hunted down the guilty and turned them over to the law. But, as he had told Gregg, there still remained one last matter to attend to!

The stairs ended on the sweep of a broad landing. The Phantom drew in close to one frescoed wall. The pale starshine at the grimy windows let in just enough light to make the landing murky where the deep shadows ended.

He went forward, slowly, deliberately. A dozen steps and he was back in the gloom again where the landing turned to meet a corridor bisecting the left wing of the old house.

He stopped. His voice, as he spoke, made thin, flat echoes:

"Come out, Venning!"

The echoes died away. Rats scurried in the walls. From below the heavy tones of Inspector Gregg's voice were gruff and muted. For a minute there was no answer. Then, out of the blackness in a

front room facing him, the Phantom had his reply.

"Come and get me!"

"The game's up, Venning! Like your friends downstairs, you haven't a chance. You've never had one! You know that now. Come out and give yourself up!"

A low laugh answered him. The Phantom heard footsteps. The gun in his hand lifted. For an instant he thought he would have to shoot it out with the man concealed in the gloom.

Then the man's voice, mocking now, sounded again:

"You had me once—why didn't you keep me then? You're not so smart, Phantom! I've been one step ahead of you all the way! I'll stay one step ahead!"

The Phantom placed the location of the voice. It came from a point in the room directly in front of him, to the left, from behind its half-open door. The Phantom's eyes had become more accustomed to the gloom. He was beginning to see things more clearly now. Things that had been shapes of shadow clarified themselves. He took two more relentless steps forward.

A new sound broke out. The sliding rasp of a window being raised. The Phantom surged forward, into the room!

At the window, the man attempting to raise its sash with his left hand, swung around. The starlight fell along the glinting gun in his right hand. In a breath-catching second the gun swept up. The Phantom kept on moving, plunging toward the man.

He was an instant too late! The gun shattered the quiet with its report. A flare of flame lighted the room momentarily. The gun clattered to the floor and the hand that dropped it clawed at empty air. Before the Phantom could reach him, the man reeled away from the window and pitched forward, falling with a thud!

The spiral stairs drummed to the beat of feet. Heavy, official feet. Torchlight danced along the frescoed walls of the landing. But the Phantom paid no attention to those outside. He knelt beside the fallen figure on the floor, his fingers not entirely steady as he holstered his gun and turned on his pencil flash.

In that moment he knew a stab of disappointment at not taking the master killer alive. It came and went quickly. Then suddenly he realized that the self-inflicted shot that had killed the man he bent over had also stilled forever the tongue of scandal—the scandal he had told Frank Ha-

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vens he was afraid would blacken Senator Future Selden and his family.

The yellow glare of the flash focused on snow-white hair fluffed on a massive head. On a face, wrinkled and bold in its proportions. On a Roman nose, a wide-lipped mouth and bright blue eyes that stared up at the Phantom with unseeing vacancy.

The brain that had directed the moves in the murder drama belonged to the man whom the Phantom had called Venning, but who called himself George Brewster-Peckham!

* * * * *

IT was almost an hour later when the Phantom and Steve Huston exchanged the time-blighted reception room of the Rutledge mansion for the deep, comfortable cushioned seats in Frank Havens' shiny Cadillac.

The owner of the *Clarion*, following the Phantom's instructions, had arrived some thirty minutes previous. Steve Huston, still thrilled by the wind-up of the case, shoved his notebook back in his pocket and then took it out again as the Phantom, sinking down on the whipcord upholstery, turned to the publisher.

"Ashley Venning!" Havens began. "How—"

"Mrs. Selden supplied the tip-off, when she saw that what she believed was a private and personal matter wasn't so secret after all. All I had to do was mention telling the senator what I had learned and she cooperated. She gave me all the necessary details needed to fill in the gaps, including a complete description of her former husband."

"She wasn't a widow?" Havens said.

"She had divorced Venning years ago, after she found out the type of person he was. Brilliant and clever, really an actor with a genius for double dealing and crooked promotion, Venning, after the California divorce was granted, came back into her life when he learned she had married the senator."

Frank Havens nodded. Steve, in the glow of the instrument board, held his pencil poised, but didn't use it.

"What was the setup, Phantom?" Havens asked.

"By her marriage to Selden," the Phantom explained, "the woman made herself an open and easy target for her former husband's blackmail. Venning threatened to expose the fact that she had married Selden as a widow when she was really

the divorced wife of a man with a prison record, an unsavory crimson past. Venning knew she was in love with the senator, that she would go to any lengths and pay any amount to protect him."

"She used Arthur Selden as her agent?" Havens said.

"In her predicament, when Venning first appeared on the scene, she had to go to someone for help. In Arthur she found a sympathetic ally, one equally anxious to keep his father clear of scandal. So Selden took care of the blackmail payments for her. You already know how young Mrs. Selden became suspicious."

"All this," Huston said, "is out the window as far as my story for the first edition tomorrow is concerned. Right? But where does the Franklin Land Company come in?"

"Lyman Buck, alias Phillip Johnson, knew Venning from the old days on the Coast. When he learned there was oil on the Timberlands tract, he offered Venning a chance to come in with him and make a fortune. They saw a way to make Selden sell, by clamping down on the senator's wife and using her as their tool. It would have gone through, too, if I hadn't got Selden to stall them off. You can write your story, Steve, without any mention of this link in the case. Gregg will keep his own silence. We don't have to worry about that."

"But what about Phil Johnson?" the publisher asked.

"I doubt if he lives long enough to be brought to trial. The district attorney will make a deal with him. His silence for a short shift. The others—Neal, Ed and Charley—know nothing about the blackmail angle. I made sure of that."

"And Carter?" Steve said. "Who—"

"Venning took care of him, shortly before we arrived. Venning, who plotted all three murders, but only actually carried out one, that of the Blue Lagoon's owner. Carter was used because the night club was a convenient place for a Manhattan rendezvous. Like Charley, Ed and Neal, Carter was on a salary basis."

"Which," Huston observed, "clears up about everything except what became of Jim Darrel's photographs of the burning rocks."

Frank Havens coughed. He reached a hand in his pocket and took out an envelope.

"Just before I left the office, Miss Wilson asked me to give you this, Steve. It

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seems that Darrel, stopping in at the *Clarion* the night he was killed, asked her to see that you got it. She put it in her desk drawer and completely forgot it until she came across it this evening. Maybe it will explain."

HUSTON took the envelope. The Phantom switched on the car lights. Over the reporter's shoulder he saw a pencil scribble on the face of the envelope, writing in the same hand that had made the notation in the pocket memo book he had found in the cameraman's apartment.

Darrel had written:

Do me a favor and keep these pictures until I ask for them.

Wonderingly, Huston began to open the envelope. The Phantom turned to Havens. He said good night, shook hands with the publisher and opened the door beside him. There was nothing to detain him further. Some of the Inspector's men were still

in the old house. Passing it, bound for his parked car, Van smiled thinly. Tomorrow Gregg would receive full credit for cracking the triple murder case. Tomorrow the glory was all the Inspector's. But after all the Phantom felt that was as it should be.

For him, remained the satisfaction of knowing he had helped the law to strike again. That tomorrow and all the other tomorrows standing ahead, those who attempted to frustrate the ends of justice would have to cross swords with him.

Tonight, he told himself, he was free once again to slip off the Phantom Detective's disguise and step back into the gilded character of the bored and wealthy Richard Curtis Van Loan, taking up his position in the social whirl of the metropolis, where he had left off the night of Darrel's death.

And that, Van decided as his black car rolled down the rutted driveway of the Rutledge mansion, was reward enough.

NEXT ISSUE'S PHANTOM NOVEL

THE CROOKED MILE RIVER MURDERS

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A tall husky man walked out of the bushes with the rifle still aimed, and advanced toward Don

THE CONCRETE CURTAIN

By JOHN L. BENTON

Sometimes cold cement can talk — and it tells plenty to Don Taylor when he seeks evidence pointing to murder!

PAUL CONWAY'S fifty years sat gently upon him. He was lean, healthy looking with clear blue and frosty eyes. His whole face could smile with that kind of genuineness that makes others smile too.

He only sneered with his eyes and unless a man knew him well, even this would pass unnoticed. Don Taylor saw it and recognized it.

Paul Conway said, in that almost theatrically melodious voice of his, "Don, your father and I were hunting yesterday. We were after deer. He stood about twenty yards away from me and there was only a cleared space between us. He was smiling at me, trusting me wholly. I merely raised my rifle, aimed it carefully and shot him between the eyes."

Don Taylor's mouth twitched slightly

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at the corners, but not in mirth.

"You could tell that story to any police authority on earth and they'd laugh at you," Don Taylor answered. "I'm not laughing, Paul."

Conway reached for a tall glass beside him. He spoke above the rim of it. "You're a fool, Don. I shot your father to death, yes. We had separated. I saw a stag. That's what we both wanted to bag. Then I lost him. My eagerness was tremendous. Something moved in the brush, and I fired. It was your father who had moved. He was after the same stag. Our positions could so easily have been reversed and it could have been me who now lies dead at that funeral home."

"You murdered him," Don said.

Conway drank some of his highball. He put the glass down carefully. His hands didn't shake any more than Gibraltar.

"Tell me why I killed him," he challenged the son. "Give me one lucid reason. Your father and I have been fast and firm friends for two years. He was not obligated to me nor I to him. By his death I gain absolutely nothing and yet you persist in the belief that I shot him purposely."

"I know you did," Don replied. "And there is a reason somewhere, and somehow I'll find it."

Conway noticed a drop of liquid running down the side of his glass. He took a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped the table and then the whole glass. He shook out the handkerchief, examined it critically and decided it hadn't even become damp. He folded it and put it back into his pocket. Then he glanced at Don again.

Conway shook his head. "You're a nice looking young man, Don. Twenty-six, aren't you? Coming right along in your father's business too. Now you own the whole thing. You are possessed of average intelligence, your wit is nimble enough, but there's an ugly streak of obstinacy in your makeup. I did not kill your father."

DON arose slowly. "I've known you for two years," he answered. "Just as long as Dad knew you. You and Dad were together a lot, you were friendly, and I guess you were the best friend Dad ever had. But you're also the most careful man I have known. You make no move, no matter how small, without sighting in all directions. You would not have shot

Dad accidentally. You would not have fired blindly at a rustle in the bushes. You aren't the type."

"Is that what you place your flimsy beliefs upon?"

"Partly. But even more on the fact that Dad was standing erect when he died. The man who killed him was erect also, with a rifle at his shoulder. If Dad had been standing, you would have seen him. The brush was not tall enough to cover him and the bullet entered his forehead on a level course. There wasn't the slightest angle."

Conway sighed wearily. "I've had enough for one evening, Don. After it's all over, you'll realize this is all a pack of nonsense. Good night."

Don walked to the door, hesitated and looked back. He was on the verge of making another accusation, but knew how useless it would be. Conway wasn't in the least impressed. He'd committed murder and it seemed he'd get away with it because of the sheer simplicity of the crime. He'd shot John Taylor to death, admitted it freely and exhibited the proper amount of sorrow. There was no apparent motive, not even a trace of one. He'd really been a great friend of Don's father. He gained nothing at all by his death and yet there was a motive somewhere. Don knew it because Paul Conway hadn't been the only careful man on that hunting expedition. No one took less chances than Don's father.

Don went back to the apartment he'd shared with his father and for two hours he sat at a desk in the library. The place was painfully lonesome and now and then he almost turned toward the big leather chair in which his father had been accustomed to sit. No advice would be coming from that direction again. Don was on his own with a mission of proving that Paul Conway had deliberately, and with malice aforethought, murdered his father.

Certainty that the killing had been deliberate stuck in Don's mind. It had flashed there almost the moment he'd heard the tragic news and not even sorrow could drive it out. There was instinct that convinced him Paul Conway was a murderer. It plagued him until his brain ached.

There was the fatal wound, a meager refutation of Conway's story about shooting blindly into the brush where the victim of his bullet was crouched. Disproving it was Conway's ever present

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sense of caution and also Don's father's extreme care when hunting.

Accidents like this happened, of course. The hunting season usually ushered in several such incidents, but the victims were either careless or were killed by the result of carelessness. Neither Conway nor John Taylor fell into such a category.

He couldn't just sit there and think. The time was past for that. Don went to his bedroom and began packing a small bag. Into it he placed a souvenir of his Normandy Beachhead days, a bulky .45 automatic. He got out the speedy coupe and headed north.

By dawn he was nearing the vicinity of the spot where his father had been killed. Don knew the country. He'd fished and hunted there from the time he was old enough to hold a rifle at his shoulder and cast a line into Dusty River, so called because, while it swept through all sorts of meadows and forests, its water was never clear, but dust colored.

He stopped at the small, two room cabin which his father had owned. It seemed as empty and desolate as the big leather chair in the library back home. Don found ample supplies there and made himself a hearty breakfast. After that he put on high leather boots over whipcord breeches, slung a hunting jacket across one arm and hiked in the direction where his father had died.

Civilization stopped three miles south of this point. Here it was all wilderness except for a few modern touches such as dirt lanes. Two miles west ran an arterial highway. If the wind was right, car horns could be heard now and then.

Don found the spot easily enough for Conway had described it well. He even picked up the shell ejected by Conway's rifle. He studied the brush at the spot where his father had crashed down upon it in death. He stood at the place where Conway had been standing and again felt certain this had been murder.

OF COURSE the constable in the town which had jurisdiction over this area had looked the scene over, but he'd accepted Conway's story. What else could he do, Don reflected. There were no witnesses. The State Police had come into the case also, and merely stated that Conway possessed no motive for murder and that the tragedy had all the earmarks of another hunting accident.

Don walked slowly for about a quarter

of a mile until he stood on a knoll and looked down at the brown river. It was about twenty feet wide, sluggish at this season, but appeared to be slightly muddier than ever. He moved closer toward the bank and finally sat down to chew on the succulent end of some weed he'd yanked from its stalk.

He studied, mentally, the history of Paul Conway, as he knew it. There wasn't much and he'd gone over it a dozen times in the last twenty-four hours. Conway had suddenly moved into the city and taken a leading place among the financiers. Whether he operated on sheer nerve or he really did have a moneyed background was an unanswerable question because, some weeks after he appeared, Conway's uncle had come to live with him. This uncle was a man possessed of a huge fortune and an ailing man who stated bluntly that he was on his last legs. He'd died in five months and left every penny he owned to Conway, making him a wealthy man.

Don tried and tried to think of some murder motive connected with Conway's inheritance. There simply wasn't any. Conway's uncle had been happy enough. The best medical care had been provided for him. His death was properly attested to and he'd been buried decently and expensively in a mausoleum. Don's father couldn't possibly have known of any criminal act involving the death of the old uncle or of Conway's inheriting the estate.

Conway's past was vague, practically a blank, but Don knew for a fact that his father had possessed no knowledge of it and that he had met Conway a few days after he appeared. From then on they'd been fast friends. Don even conceded, grudgingly, that he'd liked Conway.

Then, quite suddenly, Don was on his feet and drawing the .45 he'd tucked under his belt. The snapping of underbrush told him someone was coming this way and he put nothing past a man like Conway, not even the murder of his first victim's son.

The dry brush stopped crackling. For two or three minutes there was dead silence and Don's grip on the thick butt of the weapon grew firmer than ever. He slowly rotated, trying to determine from which direction the sound had originated.

Then he heard a voice, a rather calm, but distinctly gruff tone. It said, "Drop that gun, mister, or I'll put one through your back. This is the law talkin'."

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The voice wasn't Conway's nor even remotely like it. Don had nothing to fear from the law. He let go of the gun and raised his hands slightly. He turned around. A rifle barrel protruded from the edge of the brush. It was steady and pointed straight at him.

The brush parted and a tall, husky looking man walked out and advanced toward Don with the rifle still aimed. He had a harsh, weather-beaten face, but Don couldn't tell whether the grim features had been born on the man or etched there by the elements. Certainly he was an outdoor type and was dressed in old, rough but rather expensive hunter's clothes.

"You can put your rifle down, sir," Don said. "I don't mean any harm. I was nervous and when I heard you, I automatically pulled my gun."

The man came closer. "A .45 automatic, huh? There's a law against totin' weapons like that, even in these woods. I'm the game warden and you're under arrest."

Don shrugged. "All right, but stop pointing that rifle. It makes me nervous."

"How do you suppose I feel?" the game warden parried. "Turn around and keep them hands up until I see whether or not you're totin' another gimmick like the one you dropped."

Don was clumsily frisked, his wallet taken away from him. He didn't move. He could hear the warden going through the contents of the wallet and when the man spoke again, his voice was much more friendly.

"All right, Mr. Taylor. Reckon you're the son of that old man who was killed right about here yesterday. You got troubles enough. The pinch is off."

"Thanks." Don put his hands down. "I came up here to go over the scene. I've got a silly idea that my father was murdered."

THE warden propped his rifle against a stone and sat down on the ground slowly, curling his legs up under him like an Indian. He took a pipe from his pocket, stuffed it and applied a match. The tobacco smelled like old leather heels burning.

"Now look here, son," he said. "I been warden in these parts for two years. Started two years ago last month. Your father is the third man to die by carelessness since then. Most times them that gets killed shoots themselves. I don't have much sympathy there, but your father was killed by another man's care-

lessness. But murder! Bell of Hades, no! I was here right after it happened."

"I didn't know that," Don said.

"Sure. I heard this single shot. Then Mr. Conway began yelling his lungs out so I came runnin'. You been hurt, son. Hurt bad, but that wasn't no murder."

Don massaged his forehead in a tired fashion. "I suppose I am a fool. There was no reason why Conway should have killed my father. I merely based such an assumption on the fact that both my Dad and Conway were always so careful when hunting."

The warden nodded. "Lots of people are careful. Most times when they get careless, it's the first—and the last—time. I'm Sam Markle. I know Conway pretty well and I knew your father even better. Real nice fellow. Well, I got to make my rounds."

Markle got up, stretched and thrust his rifle under one arm. He gravely saluted Don and walked away, disappearing in the brush. Don slowly followed the river, not knowing what to look for and condemning himself as a super-fool.

At first he thought he saw a packed mass of tree branches sticking out of the water, but on closer inspection he realized that what looked like branches were really antlers. The rest of the animal was submerged and jammed up against the dam which had been built two years ago or so, at one of the widest parts of the river.

Don stared, because a stag with antlers like these had never died by drowning. He turned to shout for Markle, but gave up the idea. Markle had work to do patrolling these forests and no time for petty things like a dead stag.

Don contemplated swimming out, but realized he couldn't possibly drag such a heavy body ashore. What he needed was a rope. There was plenty of rope back at the cabin so he hurried away.

The moment he entered the cabin, he got that eerie feeling that someone had been here very recently. Things looked the same as when he'd left, but a careful inspection showed that his city clothes were slightly disarranged, as if they'd been searched. He went out to where the car was parked and found even more evidence of a search. Whoever had frisked the car had merely taken the set of keys from the dashboard lock and replaced them, with one important difference. The wrong key had been partially thrust into

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the ignition switch.

Don frowned, trying to figure out who could have been so interested in him. Markle? But why? Perhaps Paul Conway had followed him here and searched to see if Don had discovered any clues to murder. Don returned to the cabin and got out a length of thin but stout rope.

He returned to the dam and walked down the grassy slope toward it. He knew all about that dam. Below it the river had been stocked with trout. That muddy, sediment filled water was trapped by the high concrete wall and the sediment allowed to settle. During normal seasons, water flowed over the spillway, minus much of that dusty color.

In dry spells, a large gate could be opened by turning a wheel on top of the four-foot-thick dam. Muddy water would gush through, but while this interfered with fishing, it was better than a dry river bed in which all the fish would die.

Don walked out along the top of the dam, stepped over the gate wheel and reached the spot directly above those slowly moving antlers. He fashioned a noose, dropped it carefully and pulled the rope tight over the antlers. Then, paying out rope, he retreated to shore and slowly began pulling in the animal.

It required all of his strength but finally the carcass slid up onto the bank. Don waded out a bit and looked the animal over. It was a magnificent beast, just the type his father had been hunting.

It hadn't been dead very long, a day or two perhaps. There didn't seem to be a mark on it. Don seized the antlers and raised the head. Then he saw the bullet hole, neatly driven just to the right of the left eye. Apparently the animal had been shot as it swam across the river. It had died instantly from a wound of this sort and the carcass had drifted downstream until it was stopped by the dam wall.

WHAT did it mean? Had his father shot this stag? If so, what was it doing in the river? Don tried to figure it out. And why hadn't Conway returned to seize such a prize as this? The spot may have had bad memories for him, if he'd shot Don's father accidentally, but Conway wasn't the type to let things of such nature bother him. The whole affair made little sense, but it was intriguing. Don walked back to the dam and out over its wall until he reached the gate control wheel.

From the looks of that wheel, it hadn't been turned in months. Then he noticed the tiny flecks of rust on the cement. Very small particles which the wind hadn't been able to loosen and sweep away. The wheel had been turned. He bent down to seize the wheel.

The cement just below him gave off a tiny cloud of powder and there was the smack of a bullet followed simultaneously by the crack of a gun. Don, already stooped halfway over, just let himself fall. He slid off the dam and into the deep upstream water where the stag had been jammed against the dam.

As he fell, he heard the gun crack once more. There was sudden fear in his heart, but also a wave of vast satisfaction. If he was being shot at, then something more than just "accidental" murder had taken place here.

He began swimming close to the dam, keeping a wary eye on shore. Distantly he heard someone shouting. Then, from the opposite side of the river, came Sam Markle pounding over to the bank. He had his rifle held at a ready position.

"Someone was shooting at me from the east side of the river," Don shouted. "Watch it! He's a crack shot."

"So'm I," Markle yelled, but he took the precaution of seeking shelter behind a tree trunk. Don reached the river bank, drew a long breath and came out of the water at a dead run. He kept going until he plunged behind the outer fringe of brush thirty feet beyond the river bank.

Markle came over beside him and Don related what had happened. "Something is wrong," he added. "Why should anyone shoot at me just because I found a dead stag and noticed the dam gate had been tampered with?"

"Gate ain't been open in months." Markle looked across the river, trying to spot some movement there. "The dead stag ain't surprisin'. Ain't the first animal that drifted downstream— Look out!"

His rifle jumped to his shoulder and he fired fast. Just one shot. Then he brought the rifle down. "Must be gettin' old. Could of sworn I saw somethin' move over there, but I was wrong. I'm goin' across, over the dam, and have a look around. You better stay here."

Don agreed. He dug cigarettes out of his pocket. They were very wet and he laid a couple out in the sunlight to dry. His hands shook with this simple operation, but he didn't condemn himself for

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for the bullet had come dangerously close. He estimated that if he hadn't bent over just as the killer fired, he'd have taken the stag's place down there against the cement wall.

Markle signaled and then yelled that everything was clear. Don gathered up the clothing he'd shed to dry, picked up the still moist cigarettes and made his way over the cement wall.

Markle said, "It was either somebody tryin' to scare you just for the sake of seein' you jump, or another careless hunter who just sights his target and never minds what's behind it in case he misses."

"Keep looking around," Don advised. "I'm going to drive to town. There is a hunch I want to ride. Be back in an hour or so."

He hurried toward the cabin where his car was parked and kept the .45 automatic in his hand all the way. It had received a good soaking and he didn't even know if the thing would shoot properly, but it looked big enough to make any lurking assassin stop and ponder a moment or two.

Don's car hadn't been molested again that he could see. He drove fast to the village six miles away. There he parked in front of Town Hall, stowed the automatic in the glove compartment and looked around for a telephone. He saw a drug store, hurried to it and found a phone booth. He called the city, asking to be connected with Paul Conway and no one else.

He was humming slightly as he waited. If Conway wasn't there, he'd have a right to believe it was he who'd fired that shot. Conway simply could not be there.

BUT he was. There was no mistaking Conway's smooth, level voice. Don was so surprised that Conway almost hung up when there was no reply to his greeting.

Don explained about the stag in the river and asked if his father had killed it. "No, I'm positive he did not," Conway reported. "It may have been the beast we both saw, though. A big brute with the most beautiful points I've seen in many a year. I didn't have time to count them."

"That's the animal," Don said. "I called because, if you or Dad shot that stag, I intended to take the antlers."

Conway's voice grew a trifle gruff. "Don, it's absolutely none of my business,

but what the devil are you doing up there? Your father's funeral is tomorrow. People simply don't go off on a hunting expedition at a time like this."

"They do," Don retorted, "when the hunting is the type I'm doing. Thanks, Conway. I'll be back tonight, I hope."

He hung up feeling lower than at any time since he'd received the news of his father's death. Conway hadn't fired that shot. It was simply impossible because the city was almost two hundred miles away and even a jet plane couldn't have whisked Conway there in time to receive the phone call.

Don walked across the street to Town Hall which sported a neat sign indicating that the Constable's quarters were located on the first floor, rear. Don entered the office and shook hands with a gaunt, slow-moving man whose gimlet eyes were frankly skeptical as Don explained his mission.

"Now see here, son," the Constable said, "I investigated your father's death. I admit I never come up against murder, but the State stroopers do and they were here too. It was an accident, pure and simple."

"Maybe simple," Don said, "but don't call it pure. What do you know about this Sam Markle, the game warden?"

"Not too much. He just happened to be around these parts when Pete Andor got himself another job as caretaker on an estate some place out West. Sam wasn't working so he asked for Pete's job as game warden, and got it too. Nobody wants the dang job. It's all work with little pay. Twenty dollars a week is all. But Sam seemed to like it and stayed. He's a good warden too. Ain't much goes on in those woods he don't know about."

Don said, "He was Johnny-on-the-spot when that shooting happened. I'd have suspected him except the bullet came from the opposite side of the river from where Markle happened to be. Does Markle live up there?"

The constable nodded. "Built himself a nice little place a mile above the dam. He don't have many friends, I guess. Quiet sort of a man. Never comes to town unless he has to. Wouldn't even see Pete Andor when he came home last year on a vacation. Pete had traveled all the way from some place known as Inwood, way out West, but that didn't cut no ice with Sam Markle."

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Don walked out. He bought half a dozen packs of cigarettes and then drove back toward his own cabin. He passed it, though, and continued on until he spotted Markle's place. The constable was correct. It was a neat house of at least four rooms.

Don parked the car some distance away and walked up a path toward the dwelling. From the front porch he could look down across a small valley and see the glistening white dam very clearly. Don knocked on the door, received no answer and went inside.

The place was very comfortably furnished. There was a liquor cabinet stocked with imported whiskies. A gun cabinet contained four high powered rifles and some side arms with plenty of ammunition. There was a pair of powerful field glasses on a table just below a picture window overlooking the valley and the dam. Also a telescope. Markle certainly seemed very interested in keeping watch over the domain assigned him as game warden.

There was a good library, too, consisting of most of the classics and a number of old school books. Don removed one on intermediate algebra. The flyleaf bore Sam Markle's name, a date twenty odd years before and the name of his school. Inwood High.

Don frowned. "It seems as if I've heard that name before."

He put the book back, however, looked around to make sure he'd disturbed nothing, but glanced once more through the picture window at the valley and the dam. He saw something moving down there. Don picked up the telescope, brought it to focus.

WHAT he'd seen was Sam Markle energetically at work removing the head of the dead stag, not a surprising act. That head was valuable and would look mighty well above the fireplace in Markle's home. As game warden, he was entitled to dispose of any unclaimed carcasses.

Don put the telescope back, left the house and drove away. He reached his own cabin and, contrasted to Markle's place, it seemed ramshackle. Don sat down to think. Markle made twenty dollars a week. How in the world had he built such a home or even supported one like it on an income so meager?

And why, Don mused, did Markle talk like a careless backwoodsman when he

possessed an education that included intermediate algebra? It didn't make sense. Sam Markle, as a conundrum, began to assume larger proportions.

Someone tramped heavily outside the cabin. Don's hand traveled in a brief journey to the gun stuck in his belt. The door opened and Markle walked in.

"Saw your car and knew you was back. Mind if I sort of wash up? I been takin' off the stag's head. Goin' to mount it. Looks mighty nice and I don't have to say somebody else shot the animal, do I?"

Don grinned and waved toward the kitchen. "Help yourself, Warden. I'm heading back to the city."

Markle's voice came from the kitchen. "Well, like I said, ain't nobody murdered your father. No, sir, just another huntin' accident." He emerged, drying his hands on a large towel. "Men like Mr. Conway don't go around killin' people, son. Killers are a different breed."

"I guess you're right." Don unlaced his leather boots as he spoke. "I've been looking at too many movies lately, I guess. The villain is always a very smooth article like Conway."

Don changed clothes rapidly. He walked out with Markle and locked the door behind him. As he drove off, Markle stood there, waving and smiling. There seemed to be a great deal of satisfaction in that smile. Don waved back as he turned off the lane and onto the dirt road to town. But a mile further on he rolled the car into the shelter of some tall trees, pushing back their branches so that the car was well hidden once in the grove. Don checked his automatic and prayed it would work if he needed the weapon. He took along a flashlight and then trudged back.

He reached the river and followed it. The sun was going down. He could see the windows of Markle's house glisten in the reflected light. Don stopped now and then to listen. He heard no one. It was dusk when he came to the dam and started out along the wall.

If Markle was anywhere about and the dam held some sort of a secret, as Don believed it did, he would be in danger. Yet solving a murder was never a tame affair, even to a law officer. Don reached the valve wheel, bent over it and shuddered in recollection of the bullet which had nearly killed him only a few hours before.

He peered down at the smooth sides of

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the dam and its gate-lock. It was just ordinary cement. Maybe he was all sorts of an idiot, but he doggedly refused to give up the idea that his father had been atop this dam too and died because of something he noticed.

Don seized the wheel and began turning it. Particles of rust broke off the threads as they emerged and he had to use all his strength to turn the mechanism. The two gate-locks started to move slightly. Water was seeping through them already.

Don straightened up and looked off toward the lower part of the river. The banks were muddy, as if the river had been up slightly. Then he knew his father really had opened the gate-locks. Something had happened as the water surged through to fill up the shallower portion of the river below. Don bent over the wheel with renewed hope.

The water was pouring out now, making a din that startled him. The reservoir backed up against the dam wall was falling, slowly but definitely. The water level crept down and down the dam wall.

Suddenly he knew what had happened. His father had shot the stag. The animal, crossing the river, had floated to the dam. Don's father, being a poor swimmer, had planned to drain the reservoir until the stag's body was exposed. Then he could wade out and get it. Perhaps there was something at the bottom of this river, something not meant for innocent eyes to see.

Don became impatient as moments passed. If Markle was on the watch with his telescope, he'd be on his way down here by now. Don thought of that rifle shot, and of the way Markle had come from the opposite side of the river and fired at an imaginary object. Why? Because his rifle had been discharged and he wanted to account for a dirty rifle barrel in case Don demanded to see the weapon?

DON couldn't stand there and wait for the water to go down. He was far too exposed a target. He ran quickly off the dam wall and took refuge in the surrounding forest. It was getting darker but Sam Markle made very little noise as he approached the dam. Apparently he had spent some time studying the situation before venturing out onto the wall. He began turning the gate-lock valve energetically and he had to put down his

rifle to do it.

Don had his automatic ready. He came into the open. Markle didn't see him. Don fired one shot. Markle almost fell off the wall. He started to grab for his rifle and Don chipped off a bit of the cement with a second bullet.

"Stand straight," he called out. "Knock your rifle off the wall with your foot. Go for it and I'll kill you."

Markle shouted a curse, hesitated, but saw Don carefully sighting the heavy automatic. Markle kicked the rifle into the water. Then he sat down, disgustedly. Don didn't move. Shortly afterward the rest of the water in the reservoir had spilled through the open gate but it was now almost too dark to see anything. Don went close to the edge of the remaining water and threw the beam of his flash around. He saw nothing.

Then he went to the dam wall and walked out along it. He made Markle raise his hands high and he searched the man. Markle wasn't carrying any smaller weapon. On Don's orders, the warden walked back to the end of the wall and stood there. Don threw the beam of his flash around again.

He saw something a few moments later. It was imbedded in the cement gate opposite the dam opening. He could see an arm and an odd looking foot in a weird shoe that was partially decomposed. It was a human body, encased in cement. Another look told Don that the shoe had covered a club foot.

One hour later Don had listened to Sam Markle's strange story. Two State Police Bureau of Criminal Investigation men had prodded the story out of him. There were long distance phone calls made, then the party headed for town.

Don rang Paul Conway's apartment bell. Conway opened the door. He looked keenly at Don, over his shoulder at the two husky state policemen and then Conway smiled wryly.

"You found it then?"

Don said, "I found it—the body of the relative from whom you inherited a fortune. We checked. The relative had a club foot. So did the corpse lodged in the cement gate lock. The man you passed off as that relative was an impostor. You weren't going to get the money and you you had to have it, so you killed the man up there in the hunting country. The dam was just being built then. Cement had been partially poured into the gate lock.

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You dumped the body into the frame, poured more cement on it and went away."

Conway nodded somberly. "It wasn't hard to check once you found the body. Go on, Don."

"You brought the impostor here and he posed as your relative from a Western town called Inwood. Sam Markle came from there too. He was the brother of the man who took the place of your relative. That impostor was sick and dying. He entered into the scheme readily enough in exchange for the privilege of dying in comfort.

"His death was natural. You could afford to wait for nobody doubted your word. The death certificate was filed in Inwood and as the only living heir, the property was transferred to you. A will your relative made, you destroyed. Then my father discovered the body in the gate-lock. That meant an investigation. The club foot would make identification easy, so the jig was up. Neither you nor Markle realized that the corpse had lodged against the outside of the gate-lock because the water had never gone

down to the point where the corpse was located.

"My father drained the reservoir and the body came into view, just as if Dad had raised the curtain on murder—a cement curtain! You pretended to be surprised as he, but when he started on his way to make a report, you shot him. It was very clever to admit the shooting. It did look like an accident except for the fact that I knew both you and Dad were the most careful men imaginable. Sam Markle arranged for the first game warden, Pete Andor to be offered a far better job. Caring for your newly acquired estate at Inwood. That helped to give the plot away too. Markle took the warden's job so he could watch the area. Some day you planned to remove the body though it was an almost impossible job."

"Can I get my hat and coat?" Conway said.

"You won't need 'em," one of the State Troopers said gruffly. "Where you're going there's plenty of heat."

Conway bent his head slightly. "Yes, I imagine. Plenty of heat—and all meant for me, eh?"

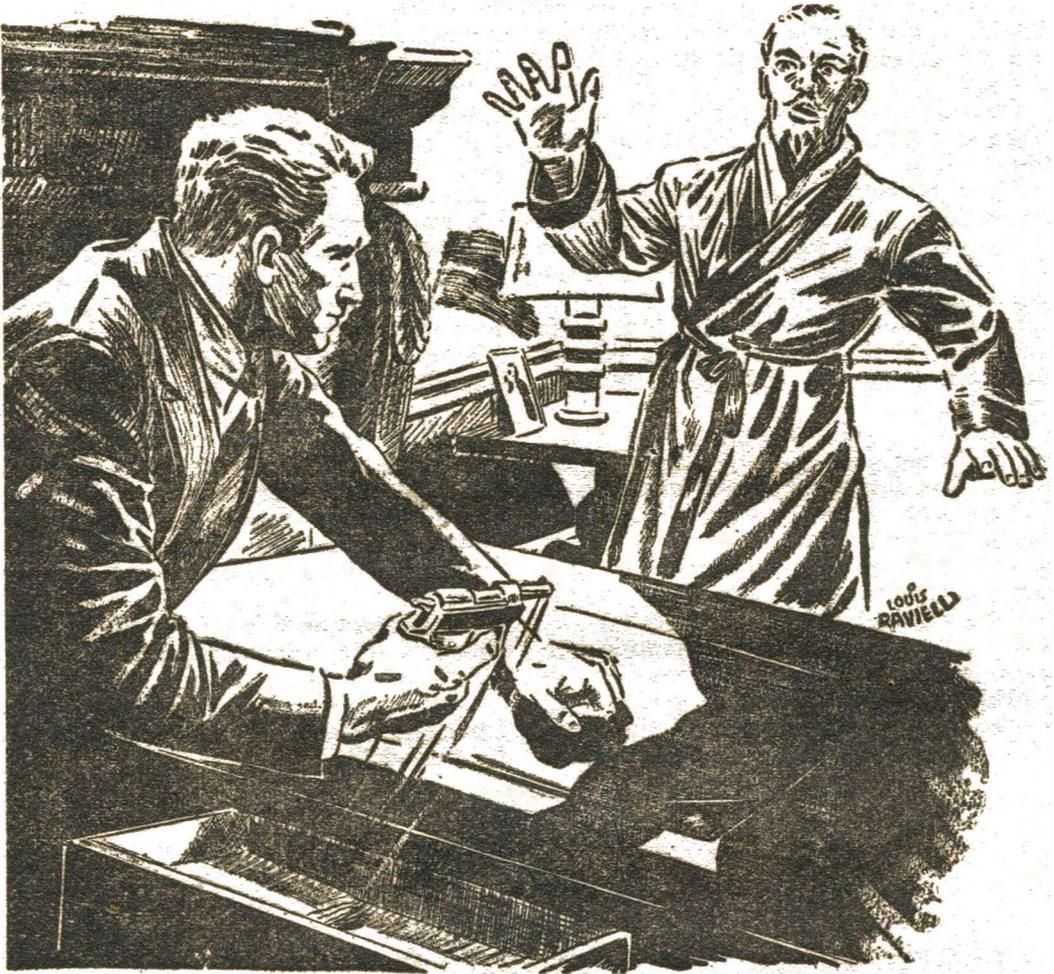


"Professor Selgard's Swiss Watch Was Carefully Timed—for Murder!"

THAT was the conclusion reached by the Phantom Detective after he carefully investigated the sudden violent death of the famous Swiss professor, whose body had been discovered in a summer house by Muriel Havens—when she stopped to pick up a beautiful red flower which lay near the corpse. . . .

Professor Selgard was doing some hush hush work for the government—but the Phantom soon ascertained that this had nothing to do with his slaying. The motive for murder was something so utterly surprising, so sinister and unexpected, that the Phantom was nonplussed. The one outstanding clue was the curious and expensive Swiss watch which Professor Selgard had brought to this country.

The watch tells the Phantom plenty—and how he works out the baffling mystery of **THE CROOKED MILE RIVER MURDERS** will astound you in the gripping novel of that name by Robert Wallace coming next issue. It's a yarn that features the world's greatest sleuth at his best—and you'll marvel at his clever deductions as he tackles a case which presents seemingly insurmountable obstacles.



He jerked his hand out of the table drawer, leveled the automatic and fired

Time Out for Murder

By RAY CUMMINGS

When Larry Drake finally decides to kill John Hutchinson, his step-father, he makes his plans with fiendish cunning!

THE movie somehow couldn't make Larry Drake forget. All the time that the feature film was being shown, he kept thinking about Hutchinson, and shuddering. He blinked in the glare of lights when the picture was finished and hurried from the little theatre. He hadn't realized before that it was

possible he might kill John Hutchinson.

The Towers Hotel, where Larry Drake lived, was about three blocks away. He went into its lower entrance, glanced into the billiard room. The big clock on the wall there showed the time to be twenty minutes to twelve.

"Hello, Larry." One of the guests, a

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fellow named Jack Hanning, stood chalking his cue.

"Hi," Larry said.

They offered to take him into the game, but he refused. He sat nearby, watching. Jack Hanning would remember that he had been here before midnight. Within a minute, Larry got up unobtrusively, sauntered across the room and ducked out the side door. His small apartment was on the 9th floor. He took one of the elevators. The 9th floor hall was unoccupied. When the elevator had gone, instead of going to his own door he took the stairs, ascending them to the 12th floor. The Towers Hotel building had narrowed here. There was nothing here but John Hutchinson's luxurious penthouse apartment.

Larry's chest was tight with his labored breath and his nervous tenseness as he tried the door, found it unlocked, and went in.

"That you, Larry?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come in, Larry. I've been waiting for you. Where did you go?"

"I went to the movies," Larry said. "It just let out."

He put his hat on the little mahogany table of the dim foyer. Hutchinson was seated at an end of the big living room. He was a thin, gray-haired, distinguished-looking man, with a trim mustache and neat goatee. He was President of the First National Bank here in Franklin, but he looked more like a European doctor than an American banker. He had evidently just had his bath and was waiting up for Larry. His hair was wet, plastered to his head, slippers were on his bare feet, and he wore a dressing gown over his pajamas.

"I had a cable from your mother," Hutchinson said as he put down his newspaper. "She arrived safely about an hour ago. Less than three hours and a half in the air. Incredible almost, isn't it, when you can remember going there by boat?"

"Sure is," Larry said.

JOHAN HUTCHINSON was Larry's stepfather. He had married Larry's mother just a year ago. They had decided, at the start of their marriage, that it would be better not to have the twenty-two-year-old Larry live with them, and so he had his own small apartment three floors below.

"Sit down, Larry," Hutchinson said. "I was just going to send your mother a cablegram, so she'll get it in the morning.

Shall I give her your love?"

"Sure thing," Larry said.

His mother had left that morning, gone to New York and flown to Bermuda, to visit her sister who was ill. Larry threw his long muscular length into a reclining chair, facing his stepfather. Queer, how tense he was! It was as though now, here alone with Hutchinson, he was poised upon the brink of something momentous.

Somehow he couldn't meet his stepfather's intent gaze. His eyes roved the room uneasily. It was a big, paneled room, with heavy Oriental rugs and soft-piled drapes—a modern room with the lavish aura of wealth upon it. A big mahogany table with books, magazines and a lamp on it was beside Larry.

Beyond it Hutchinson sat in a leather chair near his big modern radio on top of which was a large electric mahogany clock. There was a standing floor lamp there, its circle of soft illumination spreading down on Hutchinson, the radio and the clock. Five minutes of twelve.

"You wanted to see me?" Larry asked.

Hutchinson sat up in his chair with a brisk alertness. "You're right, I do want to talk something over with you. Might as well get it over with, Larry."

"Get it over?" Larry stammered. "What do you mean?" Thoughts are crazy things. They come so fast, sometimes, and without you wanting them to come. He and Hutchinson were alone here, in this lone apartment on the roof of the towering building. You could hear the wind sweeping the city, and now there was the pound of the rain of a sudden summer storm. Even a pistol shot, up here now, would hardly be heard down below. Certainly it wouldn't be noticed. A pistol shot! Larry's right hand, dangling beside his chair, went slowly toward the drawer of the big mahogany table.

"You—" Larry was stammering, "you sound—suppose you tell me what you mean." He forced himself to meet his stepfather's gaze.

"I guess you know what I mean, all right," Hutchinson retorted. "You haven't fooled me, Larry. Not for months." His raised hand checked Larry's angry exclamation. "You fooled your mother, of course. That's natural. Mothers are like that."

Let him talk! Find out what he knew! Maybe he was only bluffing. Larry's groping hand reached the table drawer, opened it an inch or two. The table was

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between him and Hutchinson, who couldn't see what Larry was doing. And then Larry flung a furtive glance into the drawer. The pearl-handled automatic was there, his mother's revolver! Hutchinson had insisted that she keep it here, always loaded, because the apartment was so isolated that he didn't like her alone and defenseless in it, even in the daytime.

"You—you seem to want to pick a fight with me," Larry said. "This is something new."

"Of course it is." Hutchinson's thin-lipped smile was ironic. "I didn't want to jump on you, and get your mother all upset, not just at the start of our marriage. You're not *my* son, thank heaven, but you're hers and she loves you, thinks you're wonderful, and—"

Larry started to climb out of his chair. Like the fellow in the movie, he had no plan. But it seemed, dimly as he thought of it, that everything he was doing now was utterly inevitable. He heard himself saying:

"Do you think I'm just going to sit here and take it?"

"Sure you are. If you know what's good for you, you'll hear me out. When I met your mother, she was a widow working in a shop, supporting a twenty-year-old-son."

"I was trying to get a job and I couldn't," Larry retorted. "You know it very well. Mother and I explained the whole thing."

Hutchinson waved it away. His little dark eyes were gleaming, but still his lips were faintly smiling. "That's not important anyway. The point is that I made you a teller in my bank. You're bonded—Don't look so indignant! I know, because I've looked into it, that you haven't stolen any of the bank's money. Not yet."

"So what?" Larry demanded.

AND then it came like a bombshell, and yet Larry had known all evening that it was coming, ever since at supper time when he had come home to his own little apartment down on the ninth floor and found that his locked bureau drawer had been pried open.

"Your mother can't run a checkbook," Hutchinson, the smug little poppinjay, was saying. He figured he was clever, toying with his stepson the way a cat toys with a mouse, batting it around and then killing it. Killing it! But it wouldn't be Larry who got killed. Not Larry!

"I don't know what you're getting at," Larry muttered.

"Oh yes, you do! Your mother gets her checkbook all mixed up. And the last month or two she's been overdrawing pretty heavily and she couldn't figure out what she possibly could have done with the money. Women are like that. Getting curious, I examined some of the paid checks. You passed them through, and I must admit they are indeed very neat forgeries. So this afternoon while you were at the ball game, I took a look through your apartment downstairs."

"You did!" Larry was standing close against the table. His hand slid into the drawer, gripped the automatic. "You have been spying on me!"

"Correct! And in that bureau drawer I found your tools for practising forgery, including your experimental tries at your mother's signature. I don't suppose your mother will let me send you to jail."

The fellow in the movie hadn't meant to do it! The thought went stabbing through Larry's mind as he jerked his hand out of the table drawer, leveled the automatic over the table and fired. Then he knew he had fired too low. Hutchinson was staggering to his feet. The big floor lamp had flickered, but now its light still was on Hutchinson, on his face contorted with horror.

"Larry! Why Larry—you—"

But the second shot cut into the gasping words, the bullet ripping into Hutchinson's forehead. For just a second he teetered on crumpling legs, before going down. In Larry's mind as he staggered back there was nothing at first before his eyes but a blur of red. Then his vision cleared, and he wasn't frightened, just triumphant. With his step-father out of the way, how simple everything seemed! His mother had been poor, before their marriage. Nothing but what promised to be a liability. But now she was rich! Half a million to juggle with! What a stake to play for, and he hardly realized it.

For a moment he stood, getting his breath, and now all his thoughts were calm and clear. It was just twelve o'clock. He must get back to the billiard room in a hurry. His fingerprints, if they were found on anything here, wouldn't be evidence, because he was here so much. But they mustn't be on the automatic. Larry was still holding the weapon in his hand. He wiped it off carefully with the tail of his jacket and dropped it on the floor. He

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closed the table drawer. No one would know that the automatic belonged here.

Only one clue was needed. Hutchinson had died now at midnight. There would have to be a clue to show that he had died later, at a time when Larry would be back in the billiard room, with a perfect alibi. Hutchinson's wrist watch—that would do it! Hutchinson had a big waterproof wrist watch of which he was very proud. He wore it most of the time, and sometimes forgot to take it off when he took a shower.

The body was sprawled on the floor, with its left arm outstretched, and Larry saw that the watch was there, strapped on the left wrist. With an end of his pen-knife he tapped the crystal carefully until it smashed and the watch stopped. Carefully Larry set the hands forward to twelve-thirty. That would do it.

In another minute he was out of the apartment. The elevator only came up to the eleventh floor. Larry walked down the small flight, and just as he was emerging into the hall, while he was still on the lower steps, the elevator door opened and one of the hotel bellhops got out. He saw Larry coming down.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Drake. Is Mr. Hutchinson ready for me?" He was a young fellow named Jimmy. He liked Larry, whose tips had always been lavish. "He told me to come up at twelve o'clock to get a cablegram."

Larry's heart leaped. What an escape! Suppose the boy had come just a few minutes earlier! And he must be stopped from going up there now! Larry held his poise. He smiled.

"Cablegram? Oh, yes, I remember. He mentioned it, but decided not to send it." He reached in his pocket, pulled out a dollar bill.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Drake."

The elevator was waiting. Larry edged the boy toward it. "Okay, Jimmy. He was taking a bath. Cablegram was to my mother in Bermuda and we decided to send it in the morning. Jimmy, there's something you can do for me."

THE elevator was taking them down now. Larry began to breathe easier. But he must keep Jimmy with him, not take the least chance in the world of the boy going up to Hutchinson.

"Come on down to the billiard room, Jimmy. We'll want some drinks from the bar."

"Why, sure thing, Mr. Drake."

It was all perfect. Jimmy would be able to tell the police all about being down in the billiard room, serving drinks to Larry and his friends. Twelve-thirty came and went. It seemed interminable. At a quarter to one Jimmy was still in the billiard room.

"I believe I'll send that cablegram, Jimmy," Larry told the boy presently. "Wait while I write it, will you?"

At the hotel desk, with Jimmy waiting, he puttered over it for ten minutes or so. Then he and Jimmy phoned up to the penthouse to see if Mr. Hutchinson wanted to add to the cablegram. Disturbed that there was no answer, they presently went up. The penthouse door wasn't locked. They went in, stood transfixed, gazing at the mute, horrible scene in the living room.

The house detective didn't dare do anything. He kept the excited guests from coming up the penthouse stairs, and he stood in the foyer with Jimmy and Larry and the hotel manager until the police arrived. . . .

Later they questioned Larry at quite some length.

"You say he hadn't been feeling well?" the detective sergeant said.

"Yes," Larry answered. "He told me so. And he seemed nervous, jittery somehow, which was queer because he usually wasn't like that. Always seemed in good health."

"I see," the sergeant nodded. He was a big, bluff, pleasant sort of fellow named Durkin. He had arrived in a rush with several of his men. Larry and the bell-boy had told how they had come up here, discovered the murder. Durkin had listened quietly. He had left Larry standing in the foyer while he poked around the living room. Now he was back, talking to Larry again.

"You say you and this boy found the apartment door open?" he said to Larry. "Unlocked," Larry said. "Not open."

"The way he was actin'—nervous like that—maybe it was because he was expectin' a visitor," one of the uniformed men said.

"Maybe," Larry agreed. "But he didn't mention it to me." It was clever, this casual stuff.

"You went to the movies tonight, then came up here?" the Sergeant said.

Larry nodded. "I stopped in at the billiard room, to see Jack Hanning. I was

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here watching the games until Jimmy and I came up here. I just took time out to come up here for a few minutes about midnight. Mr. Hutchinson had said we should send a cablegram to my mother. Then he decided to wait until tomorrow." Larry turned to the bellboy. "You saw me coming down, Jimmy. About midnight, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, five past," the boy declared.

"How do you know that?" the sergeant demanded.

AT THE question the boy grinned. "I know it all right. Mr. Hutchinson, he told me to come at twelve o'clock. He was a nut on everybody bein' right on time. I figured I'd get a bigger tip if I wasn't late. He often said, 'Jimmy, you're punctual—that's the way I like things.' Then he'd grin and give me a nice tip. So I was bothered, I was on another job, had to be five minutes late gettin' up there."

This boy was just grand.

"So you were up here from about five minutes of twelve to five minutes after," the sergeant said to Larry.

"That's right," Larry agreed. "Then Jimmy and I went back to the billiard room and stayed there."

It was all exonerating Larry of any suspicion, because already these policemen had noticed the broken wrist watch which marked the murder time at half past twelve. Larry was in the billiard room at that time. There was no argument on that. The tautness inside Larry was all gone now, and his mind swung to the future. He and his mother, with plenty of money for the rest of their lives. Those forged checks would never be discovered. Or if they were, nothing would connect them with Larry. At supertime tonight he had emptied that bureau drawer and destroyed its contents.

"Okay, so now we got the time straightened out," Durkin said. There was a queer little smile playing on his thin lips. And his voice was queer as he added, "C'mere, Drake. Take a look at something peculiar."

Something peculiar? What did that mean?

"What is it?" Larry said.

The sergeant was shoving him now, and all the men in the room were staring at him. What was this?

"This broken wrist watch don't mean much," one of the men said suddenly. "The killer could easily break it and set the watch. That's an old trick."

The room swayed around Larry, but he steadied himself. Easy now! Don't let them bluff you! Two of the men, bulky, uniformed fellows, had been standing in front of the radio. They moved away now as the grim sergeant shoved Larry forward.

"Plainest thing in the room," Durkin was saying ironically. "Take a look at the electric clock on top of the radio, Drake."

The electric clock. Larry stared at its big face. The hands marked ten o'clock!

"The time is just two A.M. now," Durkin said. He pointed down to the base socket beside the radio, where the clock, the floor lamp and the radio were plugged in.

"The first bullet went wild and hit that socket," Durkin said. "Cracked the bakelite multiple plug but didn't put it out of business. But what it *did* do was interrupt the current for a fraction of a second. Like when you jar a socket that's loose, the light'll wink off and right on again."

Larry remembered it, the floor lamp winking as he fired that shot and Hutchinson had staggered to his feet. But what of it?

"And when the current went off, the electric clock stopped an' started again an instant later," the sergeant was saying. "That's a big, handsome pre-war clock. I heard about one make of them bein' peculiar like this, but I never seen it before. When it stops and starts up again, it's got a fifty-fifty chance of *runnin' backward!* And that's what this one's doin'!"

Running backward? Larry stared numbly, and even now as he watched, he could see that the hands marked not quite ten o'clock!

"So that clock's been runnin' backward while regular time was goin' forward," Durkin went on. "Two hours back from midnight makes the clock say ten o'clock, and regular time two o'clock, which is what it is! So the murder time was midnight, while you were here with him, Drake. We've got you! No argument on that!"

No argument at all. And Larry had been so careful to prove that he was here just at midnight!



Caswell's fist lashed out and Donald collapsed

A GRAIN OF POISON

By NORMAN A. DANIELS

The District Attorney's young medical consultant follows an arsenic trail that leads him to a surprising discovery!

SERGEANT HICKMAN made a wry face. "Doc," he said, "if old man Paige knew what you were doing to his stomach, he'd sure blister you with cussing."

Jim Caswell, M.D., attached to the District Attorney's office as medical consultant, grinned slightly. He was at work analyzing the viscera of a dead man. It

was a routine business in this laboratory.

Detective Sergeant Hickman straddled one of the high stools and lit a cigar. Hickman was fifty, gruff at times and a generally efficient member of Homicide. He liked Dr. Caswell. Saw in him the makings of an excellent medico-detective and wanted him to get out of that line. Caswell was thirty-three, tall enough to

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be called rangy, and powerful enough to have made the intercollegiate boxing bouts and nearly win the championship.

Sergeant Hickman said, "Doc, when are you going to give up this line? Man, you could hang out a shingle and do well. Doctors are still scarce. Yet you work for the D.A. on a salary that's only a fraction of what you'd make in private practice."

Dr. Caswell held up the beaker and studied its contents a moment. Without looking at Hickman, he said, "Sergeant, you know very well why I took this job and why I'm keeping it. I have some sort of an official status. I can get around, ask questions—even make an arrest if necessary."

Hickman growled, "Yeah—I know. The death of your father. But Doc, that happened six months ago or more. And it was suicide. I investigated the case myself. So did a lot of other good dicks, because your father was an important doctor and we wanted to be sure. It was suicide."

Dr. Caswell transferred some of the liquid in the beaker to an evolution flask and inserted the double-holed rubber stopper firmly. He talked as he worked.

"Murder, Sergeant! Planned, deliberate murder! Dad was stretched out on his examination table in the office. On a shelf above it was a bottle of chloroform lying on its side and dripping slowly down onto an anesthesia mask over Dad's face."

"Suicide," Hickman grunted. "No murderer would take a chance of his victim dying so slowly, or rolling off the table, or moving enough so the drops of chloroform would miss the mask. And he was sick, wasn't he?"

"He'd been ill for years and it never got him." Caswell worked on the rest of apparatus. "And don't kid yourself. When the murderer left Dad's office, his victim was dead. The dripping chloroform was just a prop. Dad wasn't young. A determined killer could have held him and administered the chloroform without any trouble."

Hickman scrambled off the high stool to make way for Caswell as the apparatus became longer and stretched across the lab bench.

"And you took this job," the detective said, "to find out who knocked him off. Well, I admire your persistence, Doc. How far have you gotten?"

Caswell smiled wryly. "About half an

inch. Frankly, I haven't even discovered a semblance of a motive. That's what makes it so tough. Dad had no enemies. Not a single one. He owned nothing any killer could possibly want. Yes, I took this position so I'd be able to work on Dad's murder, but I like the job."

Hickman watched him pour sulphuric acid down a glass funnel into the flask. There was at once a violent reaction. Dr. Caswell began to explain.

"Gene Paige's stomach—or a part of it—is in the flask. If it contains arsenic, the acid converts it into a gas. This gas is passed over a drying chemical in that tube. From there it progresses to another tube which I'm now going to heat. This heat breaks down the gas to free the arsenic and it is deposited in the tube as a bright film that looks like a mirror. As a further check, I'll set fire to the steam of hydrogen as it issues from the end of the apparatus. While it burns, I'll hold a piece of cold porcelain against the flame. The presence of arsenic will produce a black stain on the porcelain."

"And sixty-two-year-old Mrs. Maloney goes to the chair." Hickman sighed. "Do I hate homicides involving old people like that?"

Caswell nodded. He put down the stained bit of porcelain. "Well—there it is. Arsenic without the slightest question. I'd better have another talk with the old lady and then we have another unpleasant job."

Hickman winced. "You mean digging up that girl who died eight or nine months ago when Mrs. Maloney worked in her house as a cook, too?"

"That's right. Sergeant, you get the exhumation order and the men to do the work. I'm going to have another talk with Mrs. Maloney and—much as I hate to do it—charge her with murder."

DR. CASWELL proceeded to the city jail. He was admitted to the women's section and waited for the prisoner in one of the plain, simply furnished offices. She entered and had a warm smile for him. Caswell shuddered. How could a man climb into a witness stand and swear a nice old lady like this into prison for the rest of her few remaining days?

Mrs. Maloney was sixty-some years old. A bit wrinkled, but still handsome enough to indicate what her youthful beauty must have been. Her eyes were washed out

A GRAIN OF POISON

some, but still alert and her lips could smile.

"Why, it's Dr. Caswell," she said. "Come to see me. It's quite lonesome being locked up. I'm glad to have a visitor."

Caswell gulped. "Mrs. Maloney, please sit down. I'm here on official business. First of all, it's only fair to warn you that I just discovered the presence of arsenic in Gene Paige's body. He was murdered."

She said, "Oh my! How awful. And everyone thinks I did it. Isn't that silly? Why would I have wanted to kill Mr. Paige. That is, practically. I said to myself a dozen times I wish he'd break his neck. He was that kind of a man. Always fussing and cussing out Mr. Corday. I don't know why they put up with him."

"Yes, I know. Look here. Mrs. Maloney, I'm going to give you all the facts. You'll see how the evidence has piled up against you. When I'm finished, I want you to think carefully and then tell me if you are guilty or innocent."

She grew a little white, but nodded her head resolutely and Caswell began. "Fifteen years ago you worked as cook for a family named Perkins. The master of that household died."

"But he was—"

Caswell held up his hand. "Let me talk first. Then you can say anything you like. You stayed on that job for five years. Next you went to work for Mrs. Chandler, a widow. She died two years later. Then you worked for an old man named Ankrum. He died a year later. Your following job was cook for the Stevens family where the daughter, Barbara, died less than a year ago. And last of all, you worked for the Corday family, where Gene Paige lived as a guest or boarder or something."

"Yes, you're quite right," the old lady admitted. "Those were my jobs and in every family somebody died. But except for Barbara Stevens, the people were very old, very sick, and people do die, Dr. Caswell. I just happened to be there."

Caswell decided to be extremely frank. "Arsenic was found in Paige's stomach. We are exhuming the body of Barbara Stevens. If arsenic is found in her body, you're in trouble, Mrs. Maloney. I doubt the other bodies will show much if anything. They have been interred too long. Now I've told you the truth. Did you poison those people?"

"I did not, Dr. Caswell. I've never harmed anyone in my whole life."

Caswell felt lower than ever. "They found a packet of arsenic in your kitchen, Mrs. Maloney. People are saying you're a chronic poisoner. They think you just have a mental quirk which compels you to ease old and sick people into a merciful death."

"I know what they are thinking and it's wrong," the old lady insisted with spirit. "You won't find any poison in Barbara Stevens' body. She was sick a long, long time. Your father took care of her for years. He was a smart man. He'd have known if she'd been poisoned."

Caswell didn't bother to tell her that death from some poisons gives symptoms of half a dozen diseases. He spent another half hour trying to make her talk. She didn't because, as he began to guess, she had nothing to talk about. Mrs. Maloney was innocent.

That conviction grew stronger and stronger in Caswell's heart. Yet, what he believed would do her little good. The District Attorney would act quickly. Especially if poison was found in the body of Barbara Stevens. The D.A. was tough and ruthless. An old, kindly looking lady wouldn't make him temper the quality of his prosecution.

Caswell said, "I'll do all I can for you, Mrs. Maloney. Go back now and perhaps you'd better try a little prayer. I'm going to need help on this."

HE REPORTED to the D.A.'s office, **HE** heard from Sergeant Hickman to the effect that the remains of Barbara Stevens would be ready in two hours, and then Caswell went to the Corday home where Gene Paige had met his death.

It was a comfortably big house occupied by Corday, his socially prominent wife, their lazy, pool-shark son, Donald, and Mrs. Corday's brother, Larry Farrel. Corday ran a nylon weaving mill, was reputed wealthy and had come up in the world very rapidly.

Corday was forty-five, quite bald and pink-faced. He listened to Caswell's story in silence. When the doctor finished, Corday shook his head sadly.

"I'd give anything to believe otherwise, Doctor, but I think there is sufficient evidence now. Mrs. Maloney is just an old lady with the distorted idea of helping people painlessly over the barrier of death. We've heard of cases like her before."

"Too many of them," Caswell replied. "Tell me again, just what happened at

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that last meal Gene Paige ate."

"We had creamed chicken. Gene liked his with curry and nobody else would touch it when that spice was added. So Mrs. Maloney always made his portion separately and served it separately. We ate, retired to the living room and Mrs. Maloney did the dishes rather quickly that night. She said she wanted to go to a movie where some favorite star of hers was playing. About ten, Gene became ill. He died at six the next morning."

Dr. Caswell asked, "What was Gene Paige's exact status in this household?"

"A guest. A paying guest. Not that we needed his money or wanted it, but he insisted on paying. You see, I worked for him. He originally owned the factory I now operate. I bought it five years ago. He retired, but he had no one in this part of the country so I invited him to be our guest. He came to my home and stayed."

"His estate goes to some niece on the Coast, I think?"

"Yes. She didn't even bother to come East for the funeral. Frankly, Doctor, Gene Paige was almost impossible to live with. A cranky, cantankerous old man who could be vindictive as sin. It was only because of our past association that I permitted him to live here. Sometimes we could hardly stand him."

Caswell looked at his watch. "Well, thanks for answering my questions again, Mr. Corday. I'm doing an autopsy on the body of a girl who died some months ago when Mrs. Maloney worked for her family. I'll let you know the results."

Corday nodded. "I hope you don't find any poison, Doctor. They can say what they like about Mrs. Maloney. Poisoner or not, I still like her. My wife started the ball rolling, you know. She gets around quite a bit and after Gene died, she began hearing about other deaths when Mrs. Maloney had worked there. Naturally, if she is guilty, we couldn't permit such a woman to remain loose."

Caswell arose and offered his hand. "You're quite right, of course. She is a menace if she's guilty. I'll let you know."

Caswell went back to the lab and began his gruesome work once more. By dinner time he had determined that there were ample traces of arsenic in the body of Barbara Stevens. Things looked blacker for Mrs. Maloney.

Sergeant Hickman ate dinner with him. Hickman said, across the table, "Listen, Doc, you're taking this too much to heart.

Sure the old lady is guilty. We'll never know how many people she killed. But she's nuts, Doc. They'll just keep her locked up for the rest of her life. She hasn't much longer anyway and they'll make her comfortable."

"How'd you like to die in an asylum?" Caswell derided. "Maybe she is guilty but doggone it, Sergeant, I'd like more proof. There is something I want to do. I'll need your assistance, but the less you know about my plans the better. They aren't exactly what a detective or member of the D.A.'s staff should try."

"Name it," Hickman offered.

"Tonight, bring all members of the Corday family to Headquarters for some questioning. Keep them there an hour at least."

Hickman whistled. "You're going to bust into that house, eh? It's no use, Doc. We already found the old lady's supply of arsenic."

"We found somebody's supply of arsenic. Sarge—we place Mrs. Maloney's guilt on the fact that she worked for all those people who died. Especially Paige and Barbara Stevens. But Corday knew both of them. He was a good friend of the Stevens family and of Barbara."

"You won't get any place, Doc, but I'll have them down for questioning. When they leave, I'll ring the Corday house so you can scam in time. Okay?"

CASWELL winked and grinned. At nine o'clock he reached the Corday house and found it all dark. He was no burglar, but he had a good share of common sense and figured there was an outside chance of a window being left open. There was—on the second floor. He had to abandon all his professional dignity, scramble up a porch pillar and onto the slanting porch roof. He crawled over this, reached the window and found it led into a bathroom. He squeezed through it, took out a small flashlight and shaded the lens. Then he went to work.

He inspected the medicine cabinet first. He grunted when he found a bottle of what appeared to be some barbiturate preparation with his father's name as the prescribing physician. He hadn't been aware that anyone in this family had been a patient of his father's.

Working as rapidly as possible, he searched most of the rooms, concentrating upon the living-room-bedroom suite which had been occupied by Gene Paige.

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The elderly victim of arsenic poisoning may have sold his business to Corday, but he certainly retained an interest in it for his desk was filled with papers concerning the factory. His bank books were missing, of course. The executor of his estate had them, very probably.

Caswell absent-mindedly closed one of the desk drawers with too much force and it slammed. The sound was very loud in the quiet house. He laughed because he was a sloppy burglar but, thanks to Sergeant Hickman, everyone was out of the premises.

Caswell started on another drawer. He was bending over the papers it contained when he sensed someone in the room. He looked up. His small flash sprayed a man with light. Donald Corday stood there with a gun in his fist. He had never been a handsome type and with his lips drawn back in a snarl, he looked less human than ever.

"Well, well!" He gave his best sneer. "If it isn't Doc Caswell turned burglar. What's it all about, Doc? And don't move. I could shoot you down and get away with it easy. What are you looking for?"

Caswell shrugged. "Some motive for the murder of Gene Paige. I rang the bell, but no one answered. The front door wasn't locked so I just walked in."

"You're a blasted liar. The front door is always bolted from inside. We use the back door in entering and leaving because the garage is out back. Doc, I'm beginning to think I'd better put a slug through you."

"If you murdered Mr. Paige, I think you'd better do just that. If you didn't, you're nothing but the idiot I've always taken you for. Put that gun down."

"In a pig's eye, Doc. I'm going to find out what you were hunting."

Caswell regarded Donald Corday carefully for a moment. The young man stood near the door, within quick reach of the wall switch. The only light in the room came from the wide sweep of Caswell's flash. He snapped it off.

Corday hit the wall switch fast. In time to see Caswell trying to stuff a paper into an inside coat pocket. Donald moved forward, the gun steady.

"Stand up, Doc. Put your hands way out. I'm going to find out what you were stealing."

Caswell spread his arms wide and held them there. Corday moved in. He reached for Caswell's pocket and was too intent

on locating that paper. Too close to the man he menaced also, for he couldn't see Caswell's right fist start a short, swift journey toward the back of Donald's neck. It was a punch calculated with scientific precision not only to put Donald out of business, but instantly to stun him so he'd be unable to yank the trigger. Caswell knew his anatomy.

Donald gave a yelp. Caswell's left fist traveled down and upwards. Donald landed in a chair and stayed there. Caswell picked up the gun from the floor. He put it into his pocket.

"That paper means nothing. It was just an excuse to get you within punching distance," Caswell explained. "Now you're thinking you will notify my boss about this. Go ahead. Twenty minutes after you do, you'll land in the cooler for possessing a dangerous weapon and threatening me. Good night, Donald."

HE WALKED out of the house, feeling highly disgusted with himself. When it came to planning and executing a burglary, he'd take vanilla. And for all his pains he'd learned nothing. He stopped at the nearest phone booth, called Hickman and warned him not to phone the Corday home.

Hickman said, "Donald never showed up even though his old man claimed he was on the way. Looks funny to me, Doc. As if he was left behind because they had an idea the house was going to be frisked. I'll turn 'em loose. And, Doc, something new turned up."

"I'm all ears—if your new clue means anything, Sarge."

"Larry Farrel—Mrs. Corday's brother—was left ten grand in Gene Paige's will."

"But at the time Paige was killed, Larry Farrel happened to be in Chicago on business," Caswell mused. "He's the only member of the family who has an alibi and it looked good to me."

"Yeah, I know, but I thought I'd mention it anyway. See you in jail, Doc. That's where we're both heading if you keep up this kind of stuff. Letting the kid get the drop on you. Tush, tush."

"Don't make my face any redder," Caswell implored. "And keep your fingers crossed. I've got an idea."

Caswell took a taxi straight home. To the apartment he and his father had occupied since his mother died many years ago. One room had been his father's combination home lab and library. It was now

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crowded with the articles taken from his office after his death.

Caswell went to the case history file and looked for a card on some member of the Corday family. He found one—in the name of Donald Corday. It indicated he'd consulted Caswell's father twice. Each time he was given something to combat insomnia. That checked with the bottle of medicine found in the medicine cabinet.

Caswell then looked for the file on Barbara Stevens. There was no card and no file. Not a trace of the fact that she'd been a patient. Yet he knew very well that she had. His father had been in attendance at her death and certified it, yet there were no records.

One thing about old Dr. Caswell, he'd been painstaking in his care of case histories. His son sat down slowly with a thumping headache brought on by something he'd never hoped to run across. A connection with his father's strange death.

For one hour he sat there, slumped deep in a chair and letting his brain go off on all sorts of tangents. He once reached for the telephone to call Sergeant Hickman in, but decided not to. This might fall into fragments and the repercussions be serious. Hickman didn't rate being dragged into the mess.

Young Doctor Caswell finally made two phone calls, to bankers he knew well. The first couldn't help him out at all. The second suggested he contact John Bissel, treasurer of the Security National Bank. Bissel, it turned out, was attending some social affair at a hotel.

CASWELL taxied there as quickly as possible. It took his identification as a member of the D.A.'s staff to crash the party, but he soon cornered John Bissel and swore him to secrecy.

"The Corday family keeps its accounts at your bank. I want to know about them."

Bissel, like all bankers, squirmed at such questions, but finally answered. "I'd have to study my records, Doctor. Off-hand, I'd say that Mitchell Corday's finances were excellent. His business is very good. The son, Donald, maintains a small balance but seems to be okay. There is another member of the family—I can't think of his name."

"Larry Farrel, Corday's brother-in-law," Caswell prompted.

"Oh, yes. He works for Corday, but he

is also trying to build up a sideline. He borrowed quite a bit of money from us six months ago. Two notes came due last week. He succeeded in stalling us on them for a few days more."

"How much—are those notes for?" Caswell held his breath.

"Quite a sum, if I recall correctly. About twenty thousand dollars."

Caswell said, "Mr. Bissel, you knew my father. You were his patient. You know me. I'm going to ask you to do something highly unethical, but it may bring a murderer into the open. I want Farrel pressed—and pressed hard—for payment of those notes. Give him twenty-four hours. Will you do this?"

Bissel hesitated. "Will I be helping the District Attorney's office or just you personally?"

"Both," Caswell replied hopefully.

"For you I'll do it. I don't like the D.A. Particularly the way he's persecuting old Mrs. Maloney for murder. Of course, she's no killer."

To make his request stick, Caswell added, "If you do this, you'll also be helping her, Mr. Bissel."

"See me late tomorrow afternoon, Doctor. I'll do it for you."

Caswell went home then and tried to sleep. It was impossible. He finally got up, went to his father's room and smoked a chain of cigarettes. He wondered what kind of a detective he was. In the first place he'd started the ball rolling, had no idea what it would pick up or who it would bowl over—if anyone. He had no idea as to who might be guilty of Gene Paige's murder. He was whistling in the dark, hoping someone might be driven into the light of open suspicion or plain guilt.

The next morning he reported to his office and found no trouble awaiting him. Apparently Donald Corday had kept his sore jaw shut. That was one item in Caswell's favor.

There was a great deal of routine work. The D.A. was indicting Mrs. Maloney for the murders of Gene Paige and Barbara Stevens. The case was getting plenty of publicity.

In the afternoon, Caswell went to the Stevens' home. He didn't know these people, but they accepted him at face value because they'd known and respected his father so long.

Caswell said, "Mrs. Stevens, now that you know your daughter's body contained

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arsenic, how do you feel about Mrs. Maloney?"

"Poor woman. She must be mad. Of course we suspected nothing—and by 'we' I include your father, Doctor—because Barbara had been ill so long."

"Of what?" Caswell asked quickly.

"Why—a complication of diseases including a very serious case of anemia. Your father had treated her for more than three years."

"Anemia," Caswell said slowly, savoring the word as though it meant sunlight, and happiness and life, instead of slow despair. In a way it did, too—for Mrs. Maloney.

CASWELL went to the bank soon afterwards. John Bissel reported that he'd put the pressure on Corday's brother-in-law and been promised the cash for those notes before the end of banking hours.

Farrel didn't have much more time to show up. Caswell discreetly withdrew to an adjoining office and waited. Farrel made the deadline by ten minutes and he was a study in rage.

"I've banked here for years. My brother-in-law maintains his personal account here. My credit reputation is good and yet you forced my hand on those notes. Very well, here is your money. I'm closing out my account and I shall try to persuade my brother-in-law to do the same."

Farrel was red-faced, pompous and full of indignation which Bissel's best banker manner couldn't change. A sheaf of hundred dollar bills changed hands. Farrel got his notes and went away, talking to himself. Caswell observed all this through a narrow opening. Now he flung the door wide and went up to Bissel's desk. He ran the currency through his fingers and then returned to the other and more private office.

He made phone calls to various banks and asked whether or not anyone had withdrawn twenty thousand dollars in one hundred dollar bills only. Such a transaction isn't common and on his fifth try, Caswell got an affirmative reply. It had been Farrel, which didn't surprise him naturally, but the account that money came from did.

At six o'clock that night, Dr. Caswell and Sergeant Hickman drove up before the Corday home. Caswell took a long breath.

"Sarge, this is going to be the biggest

bluff we ever tried to pull. If it works, we'll land a big fish. If it doesn't, I'm going into private practice very fast. You're taking orders from me so you won't be involved. All set?"

The Corday family was getting ready to dine. Caswell hoped he'd catch them at such a moment. Young Donald Corday favored him with a scowl and thoughtfully rubbed his jaw in fond memory of the doctor's potent fist, but he said nothing.

Caswell walked up to Larry Farrel. "You're under arrest, Mr. Farrel. On suspicion of murder. I'm very sorry but certain facts have come into our possession and they point toward you."

"Murder?" Farrel shrieked. "Murder of whom?"

"Gene Paige. Now take it easy, Mr. Farrel. I doubt you are involved because Mrs. Maloney is so certainly the one we're after. Still, we have to take cognizance of tips even if they are anonymous. Especially when they pan out to some extent. We learned that you bought arsenic some weeks ago. There is a signature in a druggist's book. Yours."

"That's a lie. Somebody is framing me," Farrel cried.

"I think so, too," Caswell said sympathetically. "But you'll have to surrender to Sergeant Hickman and go with him to Headquarters at once."

Mitch Corday said, "I'll have you out in an hour, Larry. Don't worry about a thing. This is all nonsense. Why, you were in Chicago when Paige was murdered. These stupid cops haven't a thing on you."

Farrel dramatically extended both hands. "Very well, put on the cuffs."

Caswell laughed. "Oh, come now, Mr. Farrel, it's not as bad as that. I'm sure you can explain your way out of this nicely. Okay, Sergeant, take him away."

In the car Farrel continued to swear his innocence. Caswell soothed him. "You'll be locked up for a little while. Until we can compare your handwriting with that on the druggist's poison book. Someone could have used your name."

THEY took Farrel to a precinct instead of Headquarters and he was promptly searched and locked up. Half an hour later he was given an unsavory dinner which he ranted about. Then Sergeant Hickman had the cell door unlocked and entered with a large tray.

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"Your family sent this over. They remembered you missed dinner and figured the food in this hotel wouldn't be so hot—which it isn't. Wouldn't eat here myself, if you want to know the truth. Well—fill up, Mr. Farrel. Things are looking pretty good for you. Maybe you'll get out in a couple of hours."

Farrel lifted the napkin covering the tray of steaming food and sat down to eat with considerable relish. Twenty minutes later he was screaming. Caswell unlocked the cell door and hastily examined the man. He called for a stomach pump and used it energetically. Then he administered an evil tasting drug. Farrel gagged on it. Caswell shook his head sadly.

"Sergeant," he told Hickman, "order an ambulance. Very fast. This calls for drastic measures. And take this tray of empty dishes to my laboratory. Be careful of them. I want to examine each dish."

Farrel's eyes were very wide and round. "Doc, what is it? Poison?"

"I'm afraid so. It's only fair to warn you that, well—perhaps—"

"Am I going to die, Doc?"

"I don't know yet. Fortunately we caught you early, but poison sometimes does funny things."

"Curse him!" Farrel raged weakly. "Blast his soul. Doc, my brother-in-law did this to me. He sent me the food. Smart guy. He knew I'd be hungry. Sure, I'd be found dead and they'd say I had some poison concealed on my person and I took it when I realized the jig was up. Well it's not up. If I die, so does my fancy brother-in-law. He slipped Paige that poison, not Mrs. Maloney. He started the stories about Mrs. Maloney being a poisoner. It was all his scheme."

"Paige had something on him, didn't he?" Caswell asked quietly. "That's why he had to shelter Paige and put up with his tantrums. Paige sensed Corday might take steps and passed on to you the information which he held over Corday. There must be papers. Where are they?"

"Look—among my possessions. There's a cigarette case with a trick opening. You'll find a safe deposit box key in it. The Third National Bank. You'll see I'm right and don't let Corday slip through your fingers. Don't let me die, Doc. Please!" . . .

Dr. Caswell sat in the D.A.'s office and looked years younger. Hickman was there too, smiling and thinking of a lieutenant's

badge. Mrs. Maloney was smiling, too, and listening carefully.

Caswell said, "My suspicions against Mrs. Maloney were strong until I discovered that one of her alleged victims, Barbara Stevens, had been my father's patient. Yet I couldn't find a trace of a record on her case. I have always maintained my father was murdered and not a suicide. Now I've proven it with Corday's confession. Corday planned all this very carefully and spent months doing it.

"He took complete advantage of circumstances. He had a cook who'd served several families where deaths had occurred. Corday was smart enough to realize that when Paige died of arsenic poisoning, he'd have to prove someone in another family served by Mrs. Maloney had also died of the same poison."

THE D.A. said, "But Doctor, even you stated that Barbara Stevens died of arsenic poisoning."

"I said I found traces of arsenic in her body. That's as far as I committed myself. The truth is, my father administered the arsenic we found in her body. As a medicine. It's used in treating a condition like hers. He built up the dose as she became accustomed to it. Her death was perfectly normal, not homicidal. But Corday knew she'd been taking arsenic. Just how I'm not certain. Perhaps from a druggist. One drug store served both families. And he knew the Stevens family.

"Then I found out that Donald Corday was a patient of my father's, too. I suspected him strongly, but he had no motive. Neither did the elder Corday until I tricked Farrel into thinking Corday had sent over some poisoned food to get him out of the way. And that Corday had used Farrel's name in procuring the poison. It was a dirty trick, but homicide is a dirty business."

The D.A. said, "So Corday had to silence your father to get the case history on the Stevens girl."

"That's it," Caswell said. "This Gene Paige once owned the business Corday purchased. Corday took him into his home, which was quite unlike Corday to do. Besides, Paige was a cantankerous, fussy old man who never got along with anyone and yet he was made a welcome guest. I wondered why. I wondered if Paige had anything on Corday and it turned out he had. Corday had cheated

(Concluded on page 110)



Johnny's camera dropped as he staggered backward

THE MAN NEVER MOVED

By ROGER FULLER

The department was running in circles, hunting a killer, but fat Sergeant McCreary just sat still and got results!

DETEKTIVE-SERGEANT Patrick Edward McCreary eased his huge bulk into a chair that threatened momentarily to collapse.

"This time," he said, "they give me a job I can really sink my teeth into. It's the Johnny Renner case." He sighed deeply. "I always liked Johnny. I, personally, will take a lot of pleasure in goin'

over the guy that knocked him off. When I grab him."

Detective-Sergeant Patrick Edward McCreary is my friend, one of my best, and I have a deep respect for his ability, but I'll admit that this was one time when I didn't feel much of a surge of hope on hearing that the fat sergeant had been assigned to the case of Johnny's murder.

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When young Renner had been killed, the best brains of the city's police force had been let loose on the job of finding the killer, and all their combined efforts had come to naught.

That had hurt, because Johnny Renner was a friend of mine, even if we spent most of our time together arguing about who should do what. You see, Johnny was a photographer on my paper, the *Courier*, and we worked a lot of jobs together. When a reporter and a photographer team up, they're bound to argue about who should set up the pictures and get the cut lines and stuff like that, but that sort of bickering doesn't mean they're not the best of friends.

Johnny had started with the *Courier* as a dark room boy, a chemical mixer. A kid in that spot gets as much hazing as the old-time printer's devil used to, but Johnny was able to take it, with his big grin and his sandy hair that wouldn't stay down to his scalp with anything less than liquid cement. When the war came along, Johnny went into the Navy and the next we heard darned if he hadn't worked his way up to Chief Petty Officer in Navy Photographic.

He came back from the fighting with a bank of ribbons and a flock of battle stars on his chest and, of course, he couldn't go back to being a dark room boy after that. Joe Argin, our photographic chief, gave him a box and he didn't take long getting to be our top man.

As far as I knew, he had only two faults. He was a gambling fool and he liked the ladies a little too well—if that's possible. With that Jimmy Stewart grin of his and his swimmer's build, he made all the conquests he could handle, but he didn't have as good luck with the cards, the dice or the horses. He was always broke and generally on the cuff for too much money.

THAT'S why, when Johnny was found dead in an alley one dawn, with a .32 slug in his skull, the police thought at first he might have gotten in so deep with a gambling outfit that he couldn't pay off when they put the screws to him and, because he was sort of a hot-headed youngster, might have threatened to blow the whistle on the gambling racket in our town, if they didn't stop dunning him.

I was all for that theory, at first, because I knew personally that Big Lou King, one of the city's leading gamblers, had made some pretty nasty cracks at

Johnny only a couple of days before Renner was found dead. I had been working a job with Johnny and we were having coffee in a one-armed joint when King had happened on my pal and had told him in no uncertain words that if he didn't get up some scratch there might be some unpleasantness.

"You going after Lou King again?" I asked McCreary now. The fat detective hunched his shoulders.

"I'm goin' after everybody," he said. "They got a million theories about this job and I'm gonna try 'em all out. One thing, I sure got plenty of ready-made groundword to operate on this time."

"Yeah," I said. "And all that groundwork adds up only to the suspicion that Johnny Renner met with foul play."

McCreary turned his blue, somewhat mournful eyes in my direction. "You sound sorta bitter," he said, plaintively. "You know the boys done the best they could."

"Maybe," I said. "And maybe somebody higher up told them to lay off the Johnny Renner case."

McCreary gave me a long, level look. Then he hoisted his mammoth bulk off the creaky chair and started lumbering toward the door.

"I thought you were smart," he said, over one shoulder. "I thought you were smart enough to know that nobody fixes a murder rap in this town, and I don't care what kind of a big shot he is."

"Not even if he's a fire commissioner, with a brother named Gus?" I asked, sourly.

McCreary paused at the door, one pudgy hand on the moulding. I'd stung him with that fire commissioner crack and I'd intended to. But we'd been friends for a good many years and worked a lot of jobs together, so he turned back into the tiny press room, after a minute's indecision, and submitted his chair to another test.

"Look," he said. "I don't like Commissioner Weldon any more than you do, and I got more reason than you, maybe, to think his brother, Gus, is a heel. But I still say that Weldon couldn't hush up the Johnny Renner case. Maybe he tried, but if he did, it didn't get any further'n the Captain's office. I know that gee I work for, and I know that once the Bureau gets a job, a murder job, nobody's goin' to give it the hospital zone treatment."

He took one of the thick, black cigars

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that edged his upper vest pockets and snapped his lighter. I happen to know that the lighter is solid, 18-karat gold, the gift of a debutante who one night found herself jammed up with a Kansas City mobster who thought our town would be soft pickings for a city slicker—until he met up with McCreary and made the mistake of thinking fat men couldn't move quickly.

The big detective-sergeant blew a cloud of poisonous smoke in my direction and leaned as far forward as his middle would permit.

"Look," he said, persuasively. "You were one of Johnny Renner's best friends. Suppose you tell me about Gus Weldon—*Captain* Gus Weldon—and the paper box fire. Lemme see if I got my story straight. You gotta remember, they kept me on this Craven killing till today."

I lit a cigarette in self-defense, against the smoke screen McCreary was laying down. "Did you get a pinch in the Craven job?" I asked him.

He shook his head ponderously. "We knew Grief Mangoni did it," he said. "But he's got an alibi that put him in Central City at the time of the job."

"Some bunch of cops," I sneered. "They know Grief Mangoni's done a dozen or more jobs in this town and they haven't been able to pin a bicycle robbery on the guy."

"He's clever," McCreary admitted.

Well, he wasn't exaggerating there. Grief Mangoni had come into town from Detroit or Milwaukee or one of those Lake cities about three years ago and had proceeded to sew up the minor rackets solidly. He had been clever enough not to encroach on Big Lou King's gambling territory, but he had routed out the small fry racketeers and taken over their punch board, pin ball, sports pool, and policy businesses. Some people said he was mixed up in miggles—marijuana—queer money, lurid ladies and even hot merchandise, but for my dough he was just an organizer who never made the mistake of dabbling in anything that would bring the federal people down on his neck.

HE WAS a tough cookie, though, when anybody tried to muscle in on anything he owned. It was no secret that several—I'll say, offhand, five—killings of out-of-towners were Grief's doings. All the victims were minor league racket guys who obviously had tried to cut them-

selves a slice of cake, thinking Grief was strictly small-time and finding out differently. Grief was mechanically hauled in on each job and, as mechanically released for lack of evidence.

This last killing that had been attributed to Grief Mangoni, however, was different. The man who had been killed was Angus Craven, and Craven had been no out-of-town hood. Craven was a fairly successful lawyer with political ambitions and he was running for alderman on a reform ticket when somebody caught up with him with a sawed-off shotgun, fired from the window of a black sedan with stolen plates, at two-thirty in the afternoon on a crowded downtown street.

The lawyer had been sounding off about Grief Mangoni, promising to run Grief right out of town, and giving out stories to the papers that he was going to name names, give facts and figures at a rally that was to be held about four hours after he was killed.

Craven had hardly hit the sidewalk—along with five other people, two men, two women and a kid—before the cops had the net out for Mangoni. They found him in Central City, with a lot of people willing and eager to swear he'd been there all day and couldn't possibly have fired the shotgun that killed Craven and wounded the five other people.

Thinking of Grief Mangoni made me sore. We'd had a pretty nice little town before Grief came there and before Will Weldon was appointed fire commissioner and named his brother, Gus, a captain in the fire department. And now there were killings on the streets and the cops were getting nowhere and it looked like our community was going to get a name like Cook County had in prohibition times, or Harlan County had during the mine strikes.

"What we need in this city," I said nastily, "is a couple of good private detectives like that Moody Hackett in New York that I've read about, who aren't scared of the City Hall when they start out on an investigation."

McCreary's face turned purple, for a second, and I thought he was going to hit me with that club of a fist he carried with him. I've seen the fat man swing that short thick arm almost languidly and knock a bigger, rangier man kicking with just a tap. That had been when McCreary wasn't mad, too. When he was riled up—brother!

He glared at me and then the purplish tinge faded and he relaxed in his chair. He dragged at the cigar and sent out a cloud of greenish-gray smoke.

"Okay," he said, resignedly. "I guess you got a right to squawk. Johnny Renner was your pal and the Bureau got nowhere on his case. But all I'm askin' is the details of the day before he was found dead. You was with him most of the day. Lemme hear from you just what happened."

I'd been through this before, a dozen times. Other cops had asked me what Johnny Renner had done and what he'd said and how he'd acted till it was like reciting multiplication tables to give McCreary the story.

"I got an assignment to cover the cornerstone laying of that new hospital out in the west end," I said. "It was about noon when the city editor gave it to me. He told me to get Johnny and cover it. Joe Argin told me Johnny—"

"Who's Joe Argin?" McCreary asked. "He's head of our photographic department," I said. "When I got the assignment I walked back to Photographic and asked Joe where Johnny was. Joe told me Johnny had reported in late three days running and he was getting the I.P. job for penance. So I—"

"Listen," McCreary interrupted. "I'm a cop, not a newspaper guy. What's the I.P. job?"

"Inquiring Photographer," I explained. "You mean that col-yoom that has little pictures of people and they ask 'em what they think of the atomic bomb and is your wife jealous and stuff like that?" McCreary asked.

"Yeah," I said. "That's it." "I read it every day," the fat detective said, solemnly. "Next to the comics, I think that's the best thing in the paper."

"All right," I said. "Anyway, I found out Johnny had the I.P. job and he was taking his shots at Fifth and French. So I went to the corner. . . ."

IT WAS a windy day and the girls' skirts were around their knees and higher, so Johnny had one eye on the camera finder and one on the scenery. He stood there, his grin working despite the fact that he hated the I.P. job, and snapped his pictures and asked his questions and the women he interviewed worshipped him with their eyes and looked as though they either wanted to adopt him or run away

with him to some South Sea island.

I edged up to him as he was taking down some comments made by a woman whose turkey red coat made her look like a channel buoy and waited till he got through with the old gal and stuffed his notepaper into his pocket.

"What's the burning question today, kid?" I asked.

"Hi, Never-Sweat," he said. "Today, the panting public has to learn whether these dames' husbands are good-natured in the morning before they have a cup of coffee. Pulitzer Prize stuff, this is."

"We got a job together," I said. "Where's your car. I'll wait in it."

"I'm about through," he told me. "I got eight shots and Joe will only throw out five, so I'll need a couple more and we'll blow."

"Rush it up, kid," I said. "We got to be at this place at—"

"Hello, Johnny," she said. She was covered with the skins of wild animals, all mink. She was small and beautiful and her voice was something off a doctored sound track. I looked at her and at Johnny and you could see the sparks flying between their eyes.

"Hello, Mil," he said, in sort of a choked voice.

"See you tonight?" this Mil asked him. "You know you couldn't keep me away with untamed tigers," Johnny cracked. "I suppose he's—"

He left the sentence dangling. The girl in mink gave me a sidelong hinge and then looked back at Johnny. Her nose wrinkled when she said:

"Atlanta. Be back Saturday." I sidled away, then, and walked up the street, to keep out of the way of any further conversation. Because, by then, I knew who Mil was and I didn't want any part of this business, even as a friend of the family. Mil was Mrs. Mildred Wickley and her husband was Ben Wickley of Wickley Aircraft. Ben Wickley had made an airplane magnate out of a barnstorming fly-guy, but while he could handle three or four thousand employes, he never had been able to handle his beautiful and—sad to say—notorious, wifey.

Everybody had wondered for a long time why Ben Wickley hadn't given his wife the bounceroo long ago but I guess he was nuts about her still, after all the proof anybody ever would need had been given him that Mil was something less

than the model mate. Mil might be on the town, but Ben still was jealous, as touchy as a high school kid with his first date. Jealous—and dangerous.

I waited till the girl in mink left Johnny. Renner made a couple more snaps and walked up the street toward me, smiling broadly.

"A very special dish," he said.

"Johnny," I told him, "some day a husband is coming back from Atlanta or Omaha or Tuscaloosa and you're going to be found dead in an alley."

That's what I said, and Johnny only a couple of hours away from a cobblestone alley with his blood drying black on the dirty paving blocks!

He laughed and we walked up the street to where his tired coupe was slumped at the curb. He got in and lit a cigarette, after offering me one. I was taking my first inhale when the whine of sirens began quavering along Bridge Street, parallel to Fifth. Johnny jerked erect and shoved his head out of the window at his side. Ahead of me, over the tops of the tall buildings to our left, I saw a billowing smoke smudge, rising, thickening, spreading. It was a fire and a big one. And it was right in our laps.

JOHNNY twisted the key in the lock, stamped on the starter. Somebody was trying the handle of the door on my side. He was a dumpy man with a dark face, in a gray, snap-brimmed hat. He got the door open about two inches before I grabbed the inside handle and held it.

"Them pitchers you was takin' back there at the corner," the guy began. "I want—"

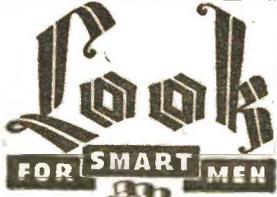
"Sorry," I said. "We've got to go to a fire now. If you want a print, call up the *Courier* and they'll sell you one."

"But—"

Johnny let out the clutch pedal with a snap and we bounced away from the curb. The guy in the grey hat pulled back his head to miss getting his noggin creased and I could hear him cuss us out as we drove away.

The cop at the corner was blowing his whistle, waving traffic to the curbs, his face a bright crimson. Johnny slowed until a water tower thundered past the intersection on French, then spun the wheel of his car to fall in behind the big

[Turn page]



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truck. The police whistle squealed but he kept on going. A fireman was clinging to the side of the tower and he was wig-wagging wildly toward the side of the street, but Johnny ignored him. I gritted my teeth and hung on.

Johnny followed the tower at about fifty as it turned into Bridge Street and went racing southward under the elevated tracks, toward the place where the street ended, all at once, in a wall of mushrooming smoke.

He parked a block from the fire and we tumbled out of the coupe.

I was running up the sidewalk with him and he was talking to himself in his excitement.

"Pull the slide," he was saying. "You can't stop flame at more than two-four."

His case was bouncing at his hip as we ran toward the fire. He collided with a fireman and went down on one knee, scrambled up and kept running. The hose lines were weaving their pattern across the street. Sirens howled and then diminished to surly growls as more trucks wheeled up.

The steady thump of pumps began to sound, jarringly.

There was a tall man in a white slicker and white helmet and that was Captain Gus Weldon. My pet hate, and Johnny's. He was in every newspaperman's book as a four-flusher, a rumdum with a big voice, who blamed his men when things went wrong and took all the credit when things went right. He was the commissioner's brother, the guy who couldn't make a decent living if he had a job that paid ten thousand a year and required him to make one right guess a year, with leap-years off.

"Get that tower pipe in here," Gus was yelling. "I want it in here. Get that big stick in here, too."

"The el won't let us raise," somebody told him. "You can't get either of 'em up where you need 'em. You'll have to use the alley, Chief."

"Don't tell me," Gus Weldon hollered. "She'll go. Get 'er in here."

He waved his arms, beckoning the water tower and the big ladder truck closer to the building that was afire. He looked like he was posing for a picture and Johnny obliged.

He held the Graphic up to his puss and snapped it.

"For the love of Mike," I objected. "You giving that guy publicity?"

"I've got a reason," he told me.

It was then that the first scream ran cold fingers up and down my spine. I looked up and there was a window, crowded with heads, showing in the rent in the smoke curtain. As I goggled, the curtain closed.

"Fire!" a woman shrieked, from behind the smoke.

I'm an old-timer. I've been in newspaper work since the days when the UP and AP came over a wire, instead of a teletype, and a reporter used to have to go out and dig up his story and come in and write it and, like as not, write his own head for it, if the rim didn't want to be bothered. Yeah, I'm an old-timer, but that scream and the throb of the fire behind that voice, certainly threw me off balance.

For a second, I forgot I was supposed to get in there and find out who, when and where. I stood there, looking at that shifting curtain of smoke and my knees felt weak and my mouth was dry and my stomach turned over.

IT WAS a paper box factory, I knew now, and that factory used to hire old ladies, not many of them under sixty, who sorted scrap paper into different grades that were sent through some kind of reclamation process. The women worked on the fifth floor. The building had been labelled "fireproof"—meaning that the walls and floors wouldn't collapse if the interior was gutted—and there were no outside fire escapes.

I looked at Johnny. He had his camera ready, waiting for a break in the smoke curtain that would let him get a shot at the heads in the window. He was a good photographer and that meant that life, to him, was something that had to be put into the right focus, with the right aperture. Tragedy, comedy, love and hate, all the situations and emotions were, first of all, possible pictures to Johnny Renner.

I shook myself loose from my freeze and started out to get details of the fire. A few minutes later I turned to see the big ladder truck backing, its engines booming. Captain Gus was directing the huge vehicle into a tight spot beneath the elevated tracks and I could see some of his lieutenants arguing with him, and Gus shaking his head.

There was the grating of gears as the ladder began rising. Sharp cries went up from the street, to mingle with the yells

from the windows. There was the ripping sound of splintering wood as the ladder grated against an el pillar and rammed into the ties overhead.

I watched the extension ladder quiver and buck, move an inch and then stick. Inside the building there was the dull roar of flames. The screams at the window, behind the smoke, grew weaker. I watched Captain Gus Weldon look up at the jammed ladder. His face twisted.

"Take it around the alley," he said, finally, as though it hurt him to admit he'd been wrong. "Try the side."

The men working the ladder raced the motor, clashed the gears, wrenched the ladder first one way and then the other. They attacked the base of the big twin poles with hand cranks, bending their backs into their heaves, groaning, cursing, straining.

"She's wedged," one of the firemen grunted. "She's stuck tight. She won't move."

"Get the tower pipe around to the side," Gus stormed. "Do something!"

One of the firemen gestured helplessly at the tower truck. I saw then that the ladder truck, hauled into place by Gus's directions, had blocked the alley the tower needed to get to the side of the burning building. With the ladder jammed in the el ties above, the water tower was helpless, an impotent giant.

I watched Gus Weldon's face go grey. His eyes darted from one face to another, shifted to look up at the building. There weren't any more screams, by this time.

Weldon's head went down and he began stumbling over the hose lines, away from the fire. I watched Johnny raise his camera and take another shot of the fire captain leaving.

"That ought to get him, and his brother, too, maybe," I told Johnny. "With your pictures to back up my story, maybe the mayor will have to give Gus the boot, and his brother along with Gus."

Johnny patted the leather plate case he had slung over his shoulder. "I'll bet Gus and his brother would give plenty to have this plate," he said.

I nodded and turned to go back to the job of covering the fire. . . .

I ground out my cigarette in the littered ash tray.

[Turn page]

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"That's the story, McCreary," I said. "That's the way it happened."

He had pulled out the disreputable black notebook he always carried, some time during my recitation. He had a stub of a pencil that was so short that it disappeared entirely in his thick fingers, and he was making his usual hieroglyphics in the notebook. That done, he looked at me, his eyes squinting.

"And nobody saw Johnny after that, huh?" he asked me.

"I saw him till the fire was over," I said. "He sent in his plates by a copy boy Joe Argin sent out. So Gus Weldon's hoods, or the commissioner's, didn't get that picture of Gus making his tragic mistake with the ladder truck, after all."

"You think it was Gus or his brother, then, that put Johnny Renner on the spot, trying to get that plate back," McCreary said, thoughtfully.

I shrugged. "It's pretty obvious, isn't it?" I asked. "You know that when he was found, he had his plate case strapped over his shoulder, but it was empty. His camera was empty, too."

"Uh-huh," the fat detective admitted. "But there's one thing about the Weldon theory I can't quite swallow."

"What's that?" I asked.

McCREARY looked at the chewed end of his cigar. "Johnny wasn't found till five o'clock the next morning," he reminded me. "By that time, the *Courier* had been on the street for more than twelve hours, with the front page pictures of Gus and the ladder truck."

"The first edition was the only one that front-paged those shots," I said. "Later, we made over the front page to show the Craven killing."

"Uh-huh," McCreary nodded. "But what I'm getting at, is this. Why would Gus put the finger on Renner when the damage was already done?"

"Revenge," I said. "Those pictures ruined Gus Weldon and, from what I hear, it means his brother will be resigning from the fire commissioner's job within the next couple of days. The heat that went on because of the story, with the pictures, means the end of the Weldons."

"Sure," McCreary nodded. "But the revenge motive ain't setting with me any

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better than most of the others."

He lit the gold gadget again and applied it to the end of his cigar. He looked at me through the greenish grey smoke and spoke around the butt in his mouth.

"The records I got," he said, "says you say you saw Ben Wickley, right after the fire."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"Johnny with you?" the fat man asked.

"No," I said. "Johnny left the fire before I did. Photographers clean up their art a lot faster than a reporter cleans up the story. I worked on that fire till almost seven o'clock, getting identifications of the women who burned to death, checking the building commission, things like that."

"Johnny say where he was going, when he left?" McCreary asked. "He was through work, wasn't he?"

I nodded, conscious of McCreary's bright eyes on me. "He—he said he was going to drop in on Mr Wickley," I admitted.

"That was before you saw Ben," McCreary said, nudgingly.

[Turn page]

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"Sure," I told the detective. "I didn't see Ben Wickley till about eight-thirty. I was having dinner at the Wamgumbaug Club. Ben came in with a traveling bag in his hand. He stopped at the bar and had two drinks. I heard him tell the bartender he had expected to fly to Atlanta but cancelled his trip on account of bad weather."

"In other words," McCreary said, "it was the old story of the husband making an unexpected return."

"Something like that," I admitted.

McCreary looked at his cigar as though it was a loathsome thing, which, indeed, it was.

"Have you ever figured it this way?" he asked me. "Maybe Ben Wickley walked in and found Johnny and his wife together. Ben's got the reputation of being a pretty tough guy, when he's sore, and everybody knows how jealous he is of that wife of his. Suppose—"

"Naw," I said. "That's out."

He looked at me, his eyebrows up. "So you did call Johnny then," he said. "You didn't tell the other officers who worked this case about that."

"I didn't see any sense to it," I said. "I didn't want to drag Mil Wickley into the case, unless I had to."

"Well," McCreary sighed. "It looks like you got to. What happened?"

"I waited till Ben Wickley left the Wamgumbaug Club," I said, "and then I called his home. She answered the phone. I told her that if Johnny Renner was there, to tell him to get out; that Ben Wickley was in town and on his way home."

"And what did she say to that?" he asked me.

"She said she didn't know what I was talking about, at first," I said. "Then, when I said I was serious, she told me Johnny Renner had never come to her house. She admitted, after awhile, that she had expected him, but he hadn't arrived."

"Think she was telling the truth?" McCreary asked.

"I think so," I said. "There wasn't any point lying to me, after she admitted she had had a date with Johnny."

THE fat detective-sergeant finally gave up his struggle to keep the cigar go-

ing. He laid it regretfully in an ash tray and folded his hands over his stomach and put his eyes on the grimy, fly-specked wall just over his head.

"The way I figger," he said, after awhile, "is that Johnny Renner was knocked off right after he left the fire. He was headed for his car, with his plate holder thing still over his shoulder and his camera in his hand. That alley where he was found might have been on the other side of town, but I think he was killed right near the fire and dumped in the alley later."

"His car was parked where we'd left it," I said, "but that doesn't mean much. It had a flat tire and the battery was dead. He might have got to the car and said to heck with changing the tire, and started to walk to Mil Wickley's. It's not too far."

"Could be," McCreary said, briefly.

"And if he was killed right after leaving the fire," I went on, "doesn't that prove that Gus Weldon arranged it, if he didn't do it himself? Gus didn't know

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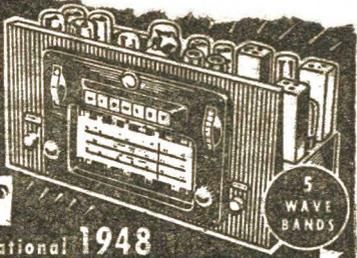
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Johnny had sent his plates in."

McCreary's forehead was wrinkled by a frown. "Why wouldn't he know?" he asked. "Gus Weldon has been a fire captain for a good many years. He's seen how you boys work fires. I'd think Gus would know you sent your pictures in to make editions, unless he was a complete dope."

Well, McCreary had me, there. Gus Weldon was a camera hog of the first water. I remembered then that there had been times when he'd asked Johnny or some other photographer if a certain picture of him could be sent into the office in time to make the final edition.

"Yeah," McCreary said, comfortably. "Gus would know Johnny didn't have that plate on him. If that there copy boy who carried the plates in had been rubbed out, I'd think it was Gus. He had the motive, all right. He'd been getting away with a lot, but Johnny's pictures showed everybody in town that he was whatcha-call-it criminally inefficient in the box factory fire."

"There's revenge," I said.

McCreary shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. "Gus Weldon was pretty well knocked out by what he'd done. Remember, there were fourteen

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old ladies that died in that fire. He'll have nightmares the rest of his life, I guess. He wasn't interested in revenge."

I took another cigarette. "We're not getting anywhere," I said. "Maybe you ought to get out and dig up some clues."

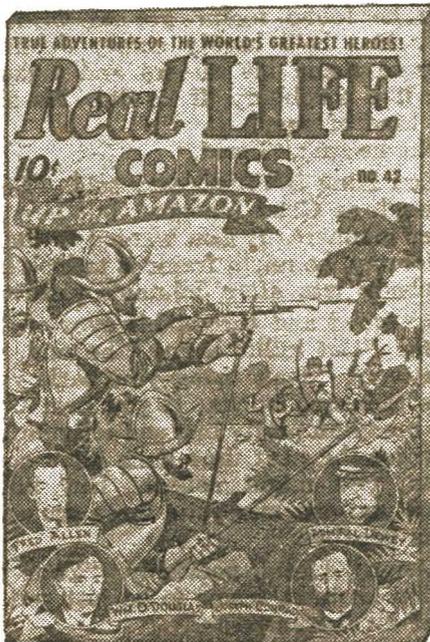
His eyes were mildly indignant as he looked at me. "Ain't you ever heard of deduction?" he asked me. "The way I read it, a smart cop sits and figgers the whole thing out, without movin'. That's me, if I can do it."

I repressed a snicker. McCreary solved his cases by patiently plodding along, gathering up the scraps that other, faster cops had overlooked. And now, apparently, he was going to Philo Vance it, and I couldn't see him in that role.

"All right, then," he said. "We'll throw out Gus Weldon, for the time bein'. That leaves Ben Wickley and Big Lou King. Lou says Johnny was into him for three thousand bucks and wouldn't or couldn't

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pay. He says he ate dinner at home and went to his club at nine o'clock. He has witnesses that say he was at the club from nine till four the next morning, but he can't dig up a witness for his whereabouts at the time Johnny Renner got his, a little after six o'clock as near as the medical examiner can figger.

"Ben Wickley says he don't even know Johnny Renner. He says he got back to town around four, worked at his office till seven-thirty—and we got witnesses to that—and went home, after stopping in at the Wangumbaug Club, where you saw him."

"If Johnny was killed 'around six," I said, "that puts Ben Wickley in the clear."

McCreary hunched his shoulders. "Maybe," he said, "but I seen medical examiners miss the time of death by twelve hours, so don't put too much dependence on Johnny gettin' his at just that time. It could've been an hour later. It could've been after Ben Wickley left his office, after you seen him at the Wangumbaug Club."

HE SHOOK his head again. "But I scratch Ben Wickley, too," he said. "Ben's a rugged guy. He might kill somebody he found foolin' around with his wife. But he'd hardly empty Johnny's plate case and his camera and make it look like a robbery, if he did. He ain't that kind of guy."

"No, he isn't," I said. "Lou King is," McCreary said. "Lou's as tough as Grief Mangoni, but he's got better manners. If Lou wanted to knock off Johnny, he might frame it to look like somebody was after Johnny's pictures."

He sighed and turned his eyes on the ceiling. "But killin' a guy," he said, ruminatively, "don't bring you back your three thousand bucks. If you beat up a guy, hurt him pretty bad and tell him it'll be worse the next time if he don't come across, you might collect. But killin' means you can kiss your three thousand bucks goodbye."

"Listen," I said, peevishly. "Your deduction business seems to be just getting rid of all the suspects."

"It's better to work without a lot of phoney suspects," McCreary said, calmly. "Clear the rubbish away, and you got a

straight shot at the real killer."

"And who's that?" I asked.

McCreary stirred uncomfortably in his chair. "I ain't sure," he admitted, "but I got an ideer. People been overlookin' things in Johnny's case."

"What, for instance?" I asked.

"Well," McCreary said, "nobody's paid much attention to the fact that Angus Craven was killed the same day Johnny Renner was. It could be what-cha-call-it, coincidence, sure, but it could be that the two killin's were hooked up."

"How?" I asked McCreary scornfully.

"I was with Johnny up till a little while before he was killed. We were working that fire and Johnny didn't even know Craven had been killed till somebody told us, there at the fire."

"Uh-huh," McCreary said, amiably.

"Another thing nobody's paid much attention to is the little guy you said tried to talk to you about a picture, when you were starting for the fire."

"Him," I said disgustedly. "He was one of those dopes in a street crowd that probably horned in on the picture of the gal that was answering the I.P. question and wanted a print of himself, gawking over the old gal's shoulder."

"Could be," McCreary said, nodding. He looked at the ceiling again.

"Fifth and French," he murmured. "St. Christopher's is on one corner of that intersection, ain't it?"

"Right across from where Johnny was working," I said.

"And they got a big clock in the steeple, ain't they?" McCreary asked. And—"

He turned his eyes back to me and I saw they were strangely excited now.

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"What happened to them I.P. pictures Johnny took?" he asked me.

"They were sent in to the office," I said. "They were printed about three or four days later."

McCreary's face fell. "I musta seen 'em then," he grunted. "But I didn't see anything—say, if people gawk over the shoulders of the people whose picture is bein' taken, how come you don't see 'em in the picture that comes out in the paper?"

"An artist paints out the backgrounds," I explained.

He pointed a pudgy finger at the phone on my desk. "You call whoever has charge of them pictures," he ordered. "Tell 'em to take the paint off the backgrounds—they can do that, can't they—and rush over the pictures Johnny took that day, just before the fire. All of 'em."

They weren't long in getting the prints over to us, with the background paint taken off. I handed the pile of wrinkled prints to McCreary and he shuffled through them.

It was the sixth one he hit that stopped him. He peered closer at the print and then straightened, a big grin on his face.

"Deduction," he said. "Boy, I'm gonna be able to save myself a lot of trouble, a lot of footwork. All I have to do now is sit down and think things out, like I done this time, and I pick up a killer. A two-time killer, at that."

McCREARY slid the print across the desk at me. There was a woman grinning into the camera from under her dizzy hat. Beyond her there was an onlooker, goggling at the lens. And beyond the kibitzer—beyond him there was a car, just passing behind the women, close to the curb.

And looking out of the car window was none other than Grief Mangoni.

"See the clock?" McCreary asked. He sounded plenty satisfied with himself. "See what time it says? And Grief Mangoni had a swell alibi that put him in Central City at that time."

He heaved himself out of his chair and started for the door. I chased him.

"It's simple," he said. "Grief knew he was in that picture. He sent a stooge back to get it from Johnny, but the fire interfered. He went on and knocked off Craven and then found out the stooge

hadn't got that picture. He couldn't get past the fire lines at Johnny. He had to wait till Johnny left the fire. Not knowing about newspaper work, he didn't know the plates had been sent in. He knocked Johnny off, took all the plates, dumped Johnny out in the alley and then headed for Central City to get ready for the pinch he knew was coming."

He was in the Bureau room by that time, and heading for the Captain's office, the print in his hand.

"Come on," he said. "I need you to tell the Captain when this picture was taken."

Well, it turned out just the way McCreary had doped it. Apparently Johnny had been scouting the fire zone, seeking new angles for camera shots. Mangoni had seen him, parked his car at the alley entrance and, when Johnny passed near, the gangster let him have it.

Mangoni proved not to be quite so tough as he'd thought he was, when the police confronted him with the evidence. He yodelled, but loud, when they showed him that picture. Right now, he's waiting for another court to turn down his appeal, which it's bound to do. He has no out at all.

And McCreary's "new method" of working cases didn't last long, either. I just saw him, trudging along the street with the sweat pouring down his round face.

"I thought you were going to work everything by deduction," I said. "The way you handled that Johnny Renner case was perfect. You never made a move, till you had the killer."

"Cases like them," McCreary said, mournfully, "are few and far between. Most of the time, it's like Winston Churchill said, blood, sweat and tears to be a cop. And sore feet."

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A GRAIN OF POISON

(Concluded from page 92)

and stolen to get possession of Paige's factory and Paige found it out. He made Corday toe the mark and Corday got tired of it.

"But Paige sensed that Corday might take steps so he told Larry Farrel the story, because Farrel didn't like Corday very much and was a type to work closely in a case of this kind. I proved it by forcing Farrel's hand and making him go to Corday for a lot of money. Corday gave it to him. He had to, because Farrel knew the truth. But Farrel was scared of Corday, too, and when he thought he was poisoned, he talked."

"Very unethical, Doctor." The D.A. pressed his fingertips together piously. "But Corday is making a deal for his life and we won't have to go into court."

"A deal nothing," Caswell grunted. "Okay in Paige's murder maybe, but he also killed my father. Don't forget that."

The D.A. said, "I agreed to a deal on the murder of Paige, but I'll see that he gets the chair for killing your father. In trying that case we won't have to bring in your very fancy methods of getting a confession from Farrel. I can keep any reference to it out of the trial. But, Doctor, I feel that what you did was—well, shall we say—"

"Don't say it," Caswell chuckled. "I planned to resign as soon as I'd tracked down my father's killer. I want to take over his practice anyway."

THE PHANTOM SPEAKS

(Continued from page 8)

expression of feeling in this important matter.

If you are not a member, now is your chance to sign up. Just send along a letter of application. State your name, address, age and sex. Enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope with your application so we can forward your membership card immediately. I'll see that your card goes out to you promptly.

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have one, you may ask for it with your letter of application. and at the same time enclose fifteen cents in stamps or coin to help defray the cost of mailing and handling this attractive bronzed emblem.

Now and then people ask us about any official connection they may gain as a result of membership in this group. Being a member of the FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM does NOT confer any special rights or privileges with regard to local or Federal law enforcement agencies. Our sole purpose in this club is to express, tangibly and collectively, the unity of the right-thinking, law-abiding readers who regularly follow the exploits of The Phantom Detective. Membership is also an indication of the willingness and desire of each and every one of you to cooperate with the authorities who work with us to make our Country the powerful Nation it is.

IN THE MAIL

THIS month we've received a number of interesting and provocative communications from all parts of the United States and Canada, and quite a few of them from abroad. We're always glad to have the reactions of our readers, whether they come to us on crested stationery, which some of them do, or on one of Uncle Sam's penny postal cards. Many readers have their definite opinions about the stories appearing in THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE, and they are helpful to us in deciding whether we are really satisfying them in the magazine. Here are several typical examples.

The first one is from Brookline, Massachusetts, and takes up an angle that has seldom been considered by a reader, and [Turn page]

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because of its novel subject might be of interest to you.

I have finally plucked up courage to write you—because—as I see it—your co-workers in the printing of your Phantom stories are constantly—consistently and may I say—unfortunately pulling the same boner—or shall I say—committing the same grievous and very disconcerting error.

They, and through them, you—persistently put a picture of the most salient feature of shall I say—Chapter five or six, or seven on page 3—before even chapter one has run its gamut—and again a few pages later—a most important pictured detail of chapter 12 or 13 or 14—spank in the middle of chapter 4.

This has the very unfortunate function of directing one's mind from its present reading to a future guessing, and interrupts a mighty enjoyable trend of reading.

Your stories are so excellently done, that pictures, if you deem them necessary, and I surely believe they are superfluous, should unquestionably and unequivocally be placed in their proper setting—that is, directly in the chapter which they portray.

Please do not think me presumptuous—I am simply an ardent, avid reader of detective and mystery stories—and have found your Phantom an intensely interesting and enjoyable character, and I detest seeing my interest in the least bit distracted by mis-application. With no offense intended, I am sincerely yours, Louise S. Levensohn, 710 Washington St., Brookline, Mass.

Thanks for your letter, Miss Levensohn. We'd like to hear how other readers feel about this matter. We always ask the artists to handle their illustrations in such a way that they will not "give away" important clues in the story.

Here's another interesting note, from C. Spencer, 61 Lowhill Crescent, Lowhill Estate, Wolverhampton, Staffs, England:

I have only read one of your novels but I think it is the best I have read in a long time. It is "The Tidewater Murders" and I very much would like to



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read "The Chinese Puzzle" but have not been able to obtain a copy.
I am bedridden and have a wife and nine children. Sure, we are having hard times—but we keep smiling.

Thanks for your note, Mr. Spencer. I like your spirit and I certainly hope that things will improve for yourself and your family, so that you can enjoy more of the good things of life.

A short but sweet note from James J. Hankin, Toledo, Ohio:

The Phantom tops 'em all. He's the cleverest detective in all fiction and he gets my vote every time.

And a word from Edward Malins, Poughkeepsie, N. Y.

"The Chinese Puzzle" is my favorite Phantom mystery to date. It's truly an ingenious and baffling crime puzzle that gave me some real thrills. Another story I enjoyed very much was "The Angel of Death."

There is room for another short note here, and we find a suggestion on future issues from Philip Greely of Quincy, Massachusetts.

You are tops with me as a sleuth. I like your adventures because they're all different. In other magazines all the stories sound just about the same. Instead of short stories in the back of the magazine, I wish you'd have a long novelet about some character such as the Black Bat from BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE Magazine.

Thanks for letting us have your reaction. Now and then we use novelets in the PHANTOM DETECTIVE Magazine. But it would be rather difficult to engage an author to do a series of these, since space limitations would not always permit our including a novelet in addition to the long novel in each issue. If you're a Black Bat fan, the only suggestion I can make is that you follow his adventures in BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE.

Glad to have all the kind comments from you folks. Keep them coming in. Please address them to The Editor, THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Good luck to you until we gather here again next issue.

—THE PHANTOM.

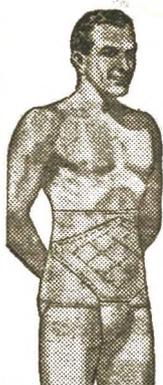
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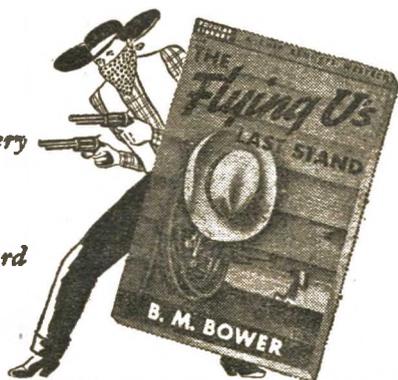


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