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# DETECTIVE

The cover illustration depicts a woman with blonde hair, wearing a vibrant orange, low-cut dress with a sash, looking back over her shoulder with a look of alarm. She is standing in a room with a blue patterned rug and a small table with a green object on it. In the background, a doorway is open, and a pale, bald figure with red eyes and a wide, toothy grin, wearing a red robe and green pants, is crawling or leaning through the doorway towards her. The scene is lit with dramatic, low-key lighting, creating a suspenseful and eerie atmosphere.

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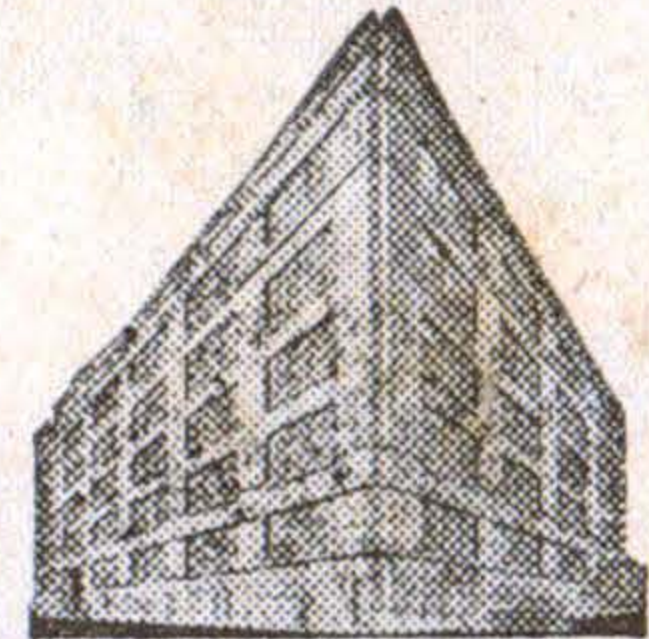
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# DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Edited by James Randall

AUGUST, 1935, ISSUE

Yearly Subscription \$1.75

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The ghoulish deathshad always followed upon the bitter-almond smell of hydrocyanic acid—and flesh bubbled horribly in the stew.

\* \* \* \* \*

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COVER BY J. W. SCOTT

ILLUSTRATIONS BY L. F. BJORKLUND

VOL. 1, NO. 2

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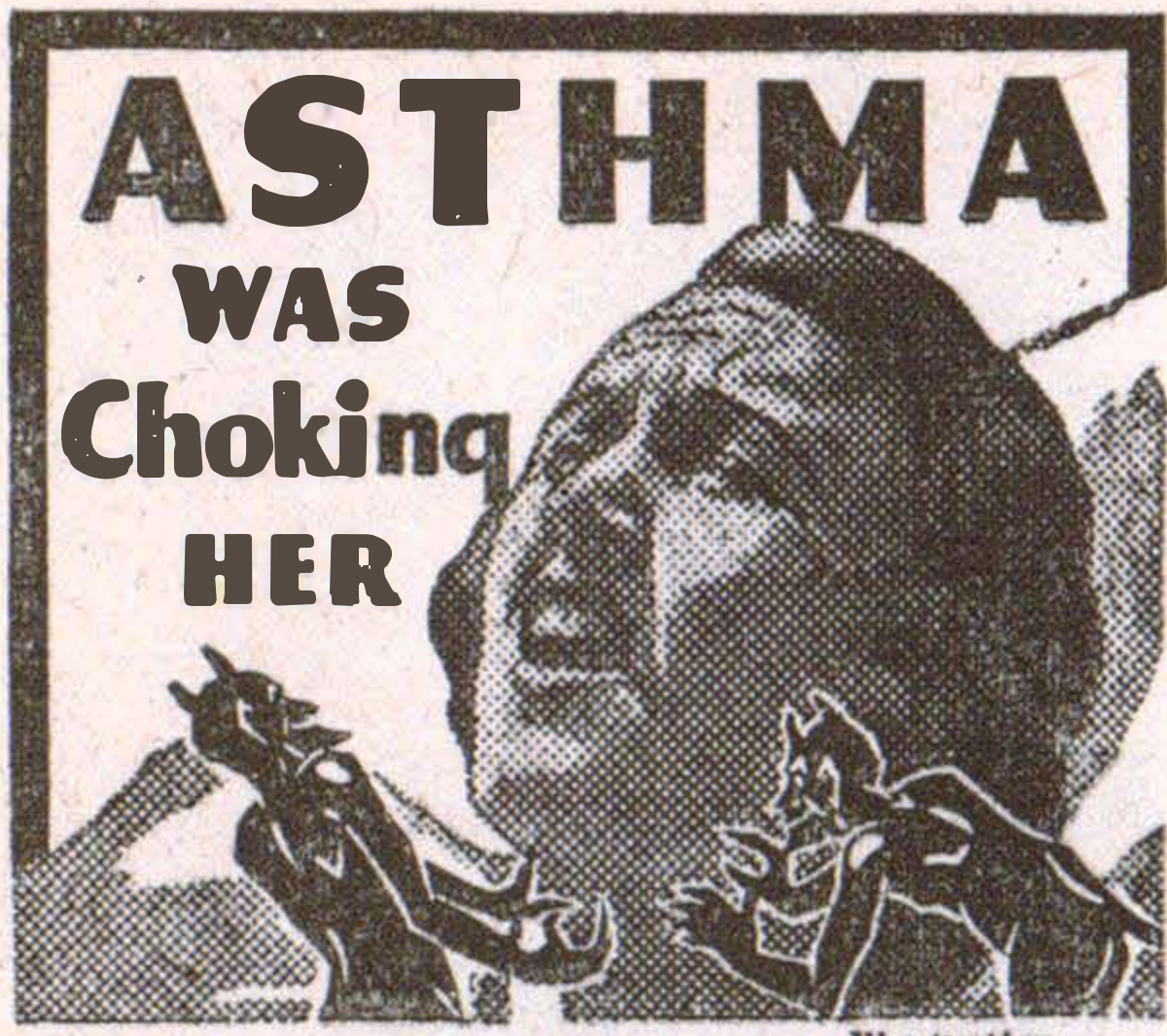
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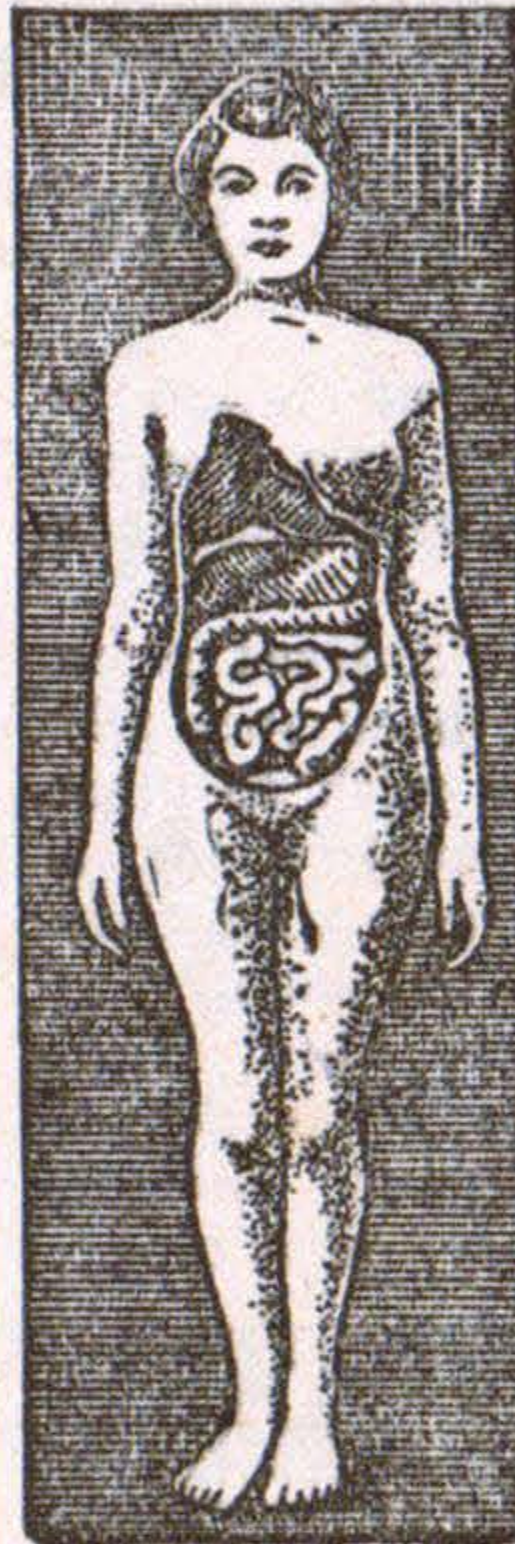
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#### LIST OF PLATES

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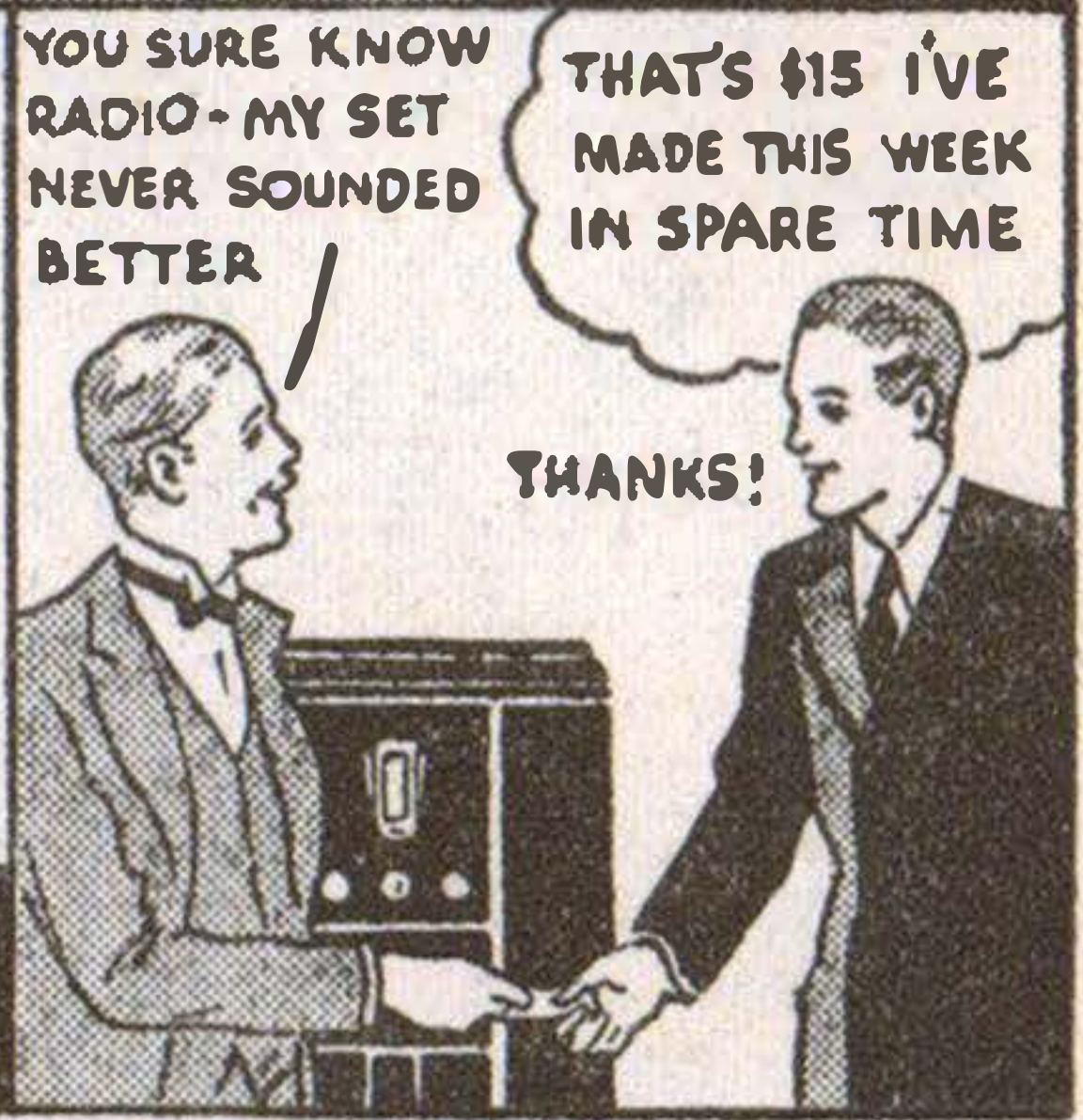
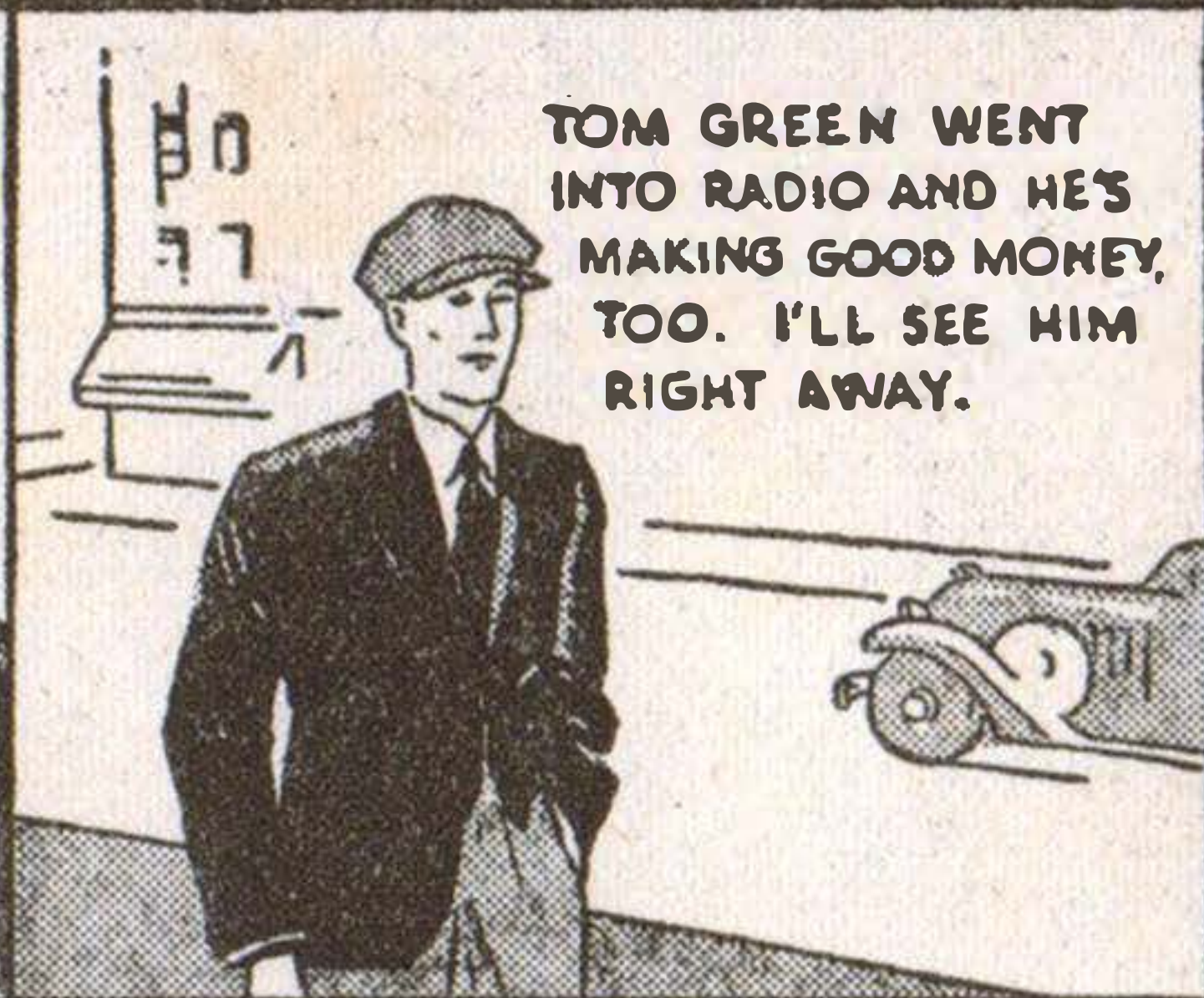
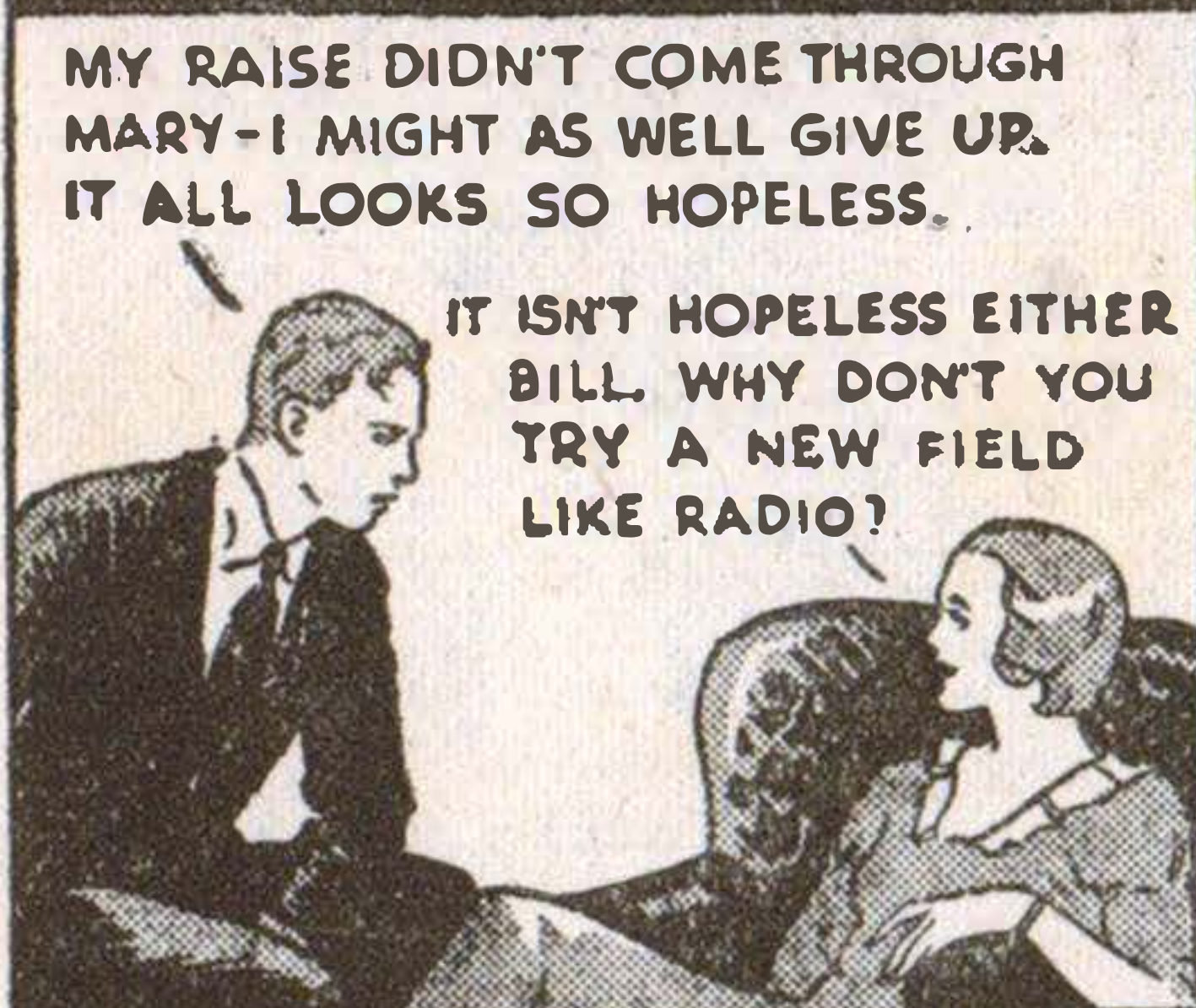
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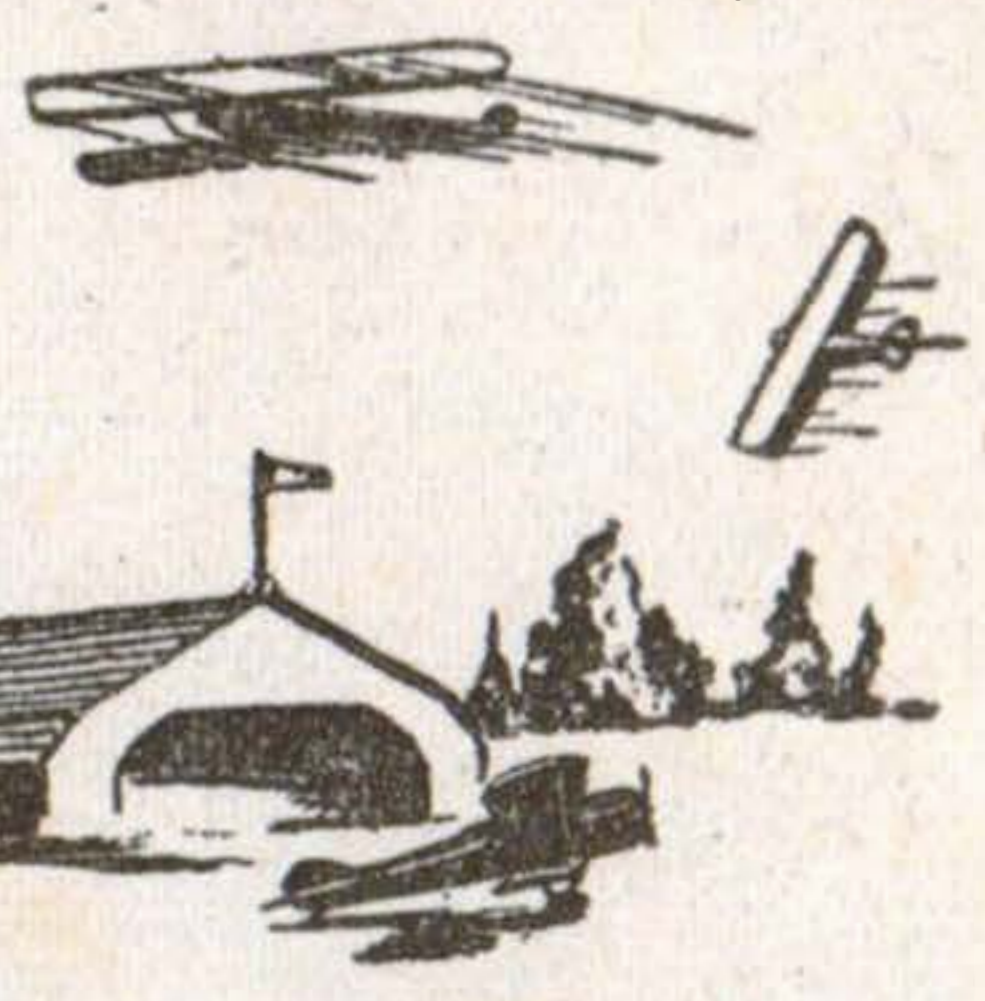
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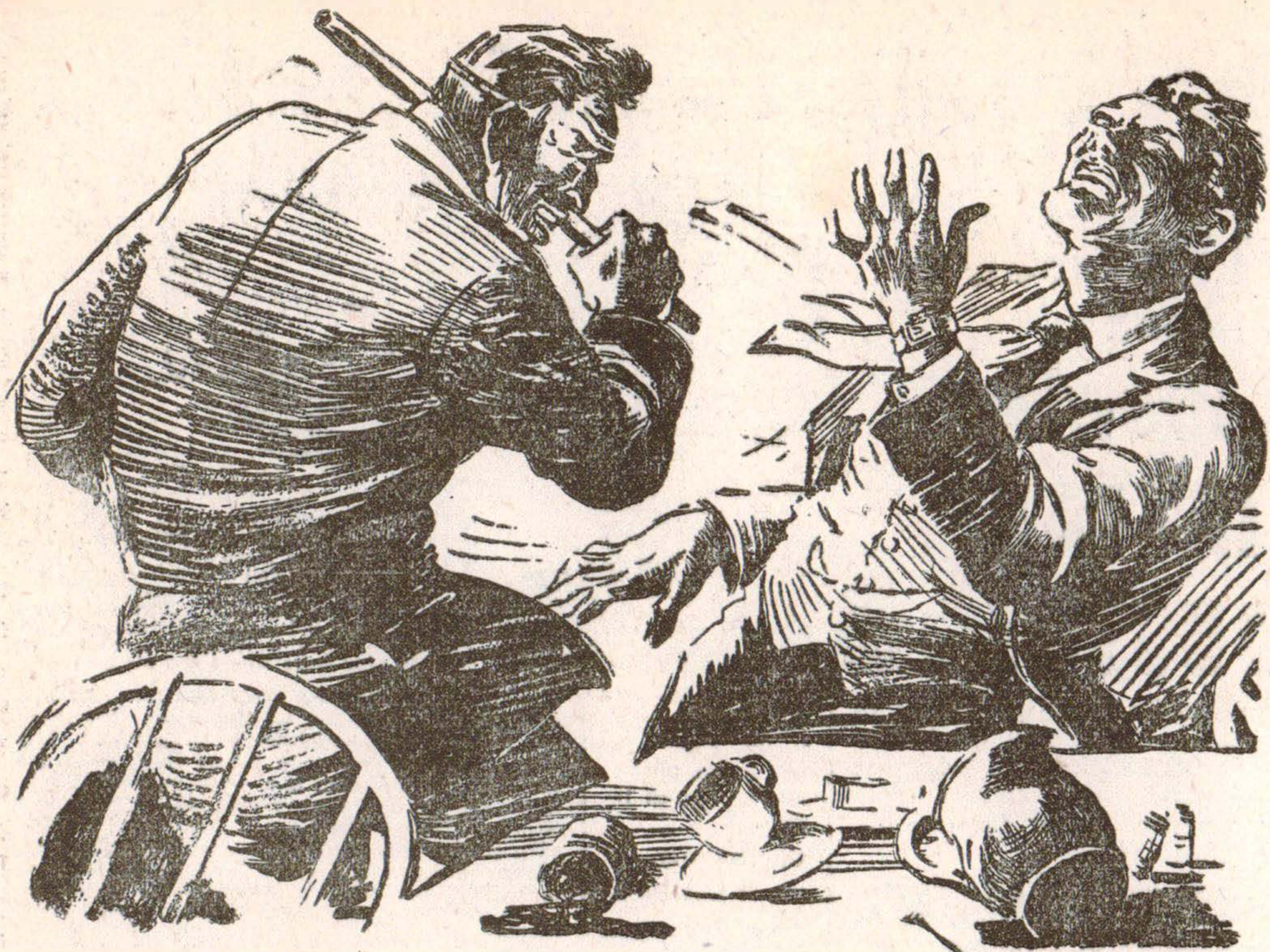
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# DEATH STALKS THE NIGHT

By HUGH B. CAVE

**T**HE inner sanctum of Naigler, Ekhart & Ellson, Inc., lay in darkness, except for a warm amber glow which played over the massive door of the company's safe. The hands of a square clock on Alvin Naigler's private desk stood at fourteen minutes after 2 A. M.

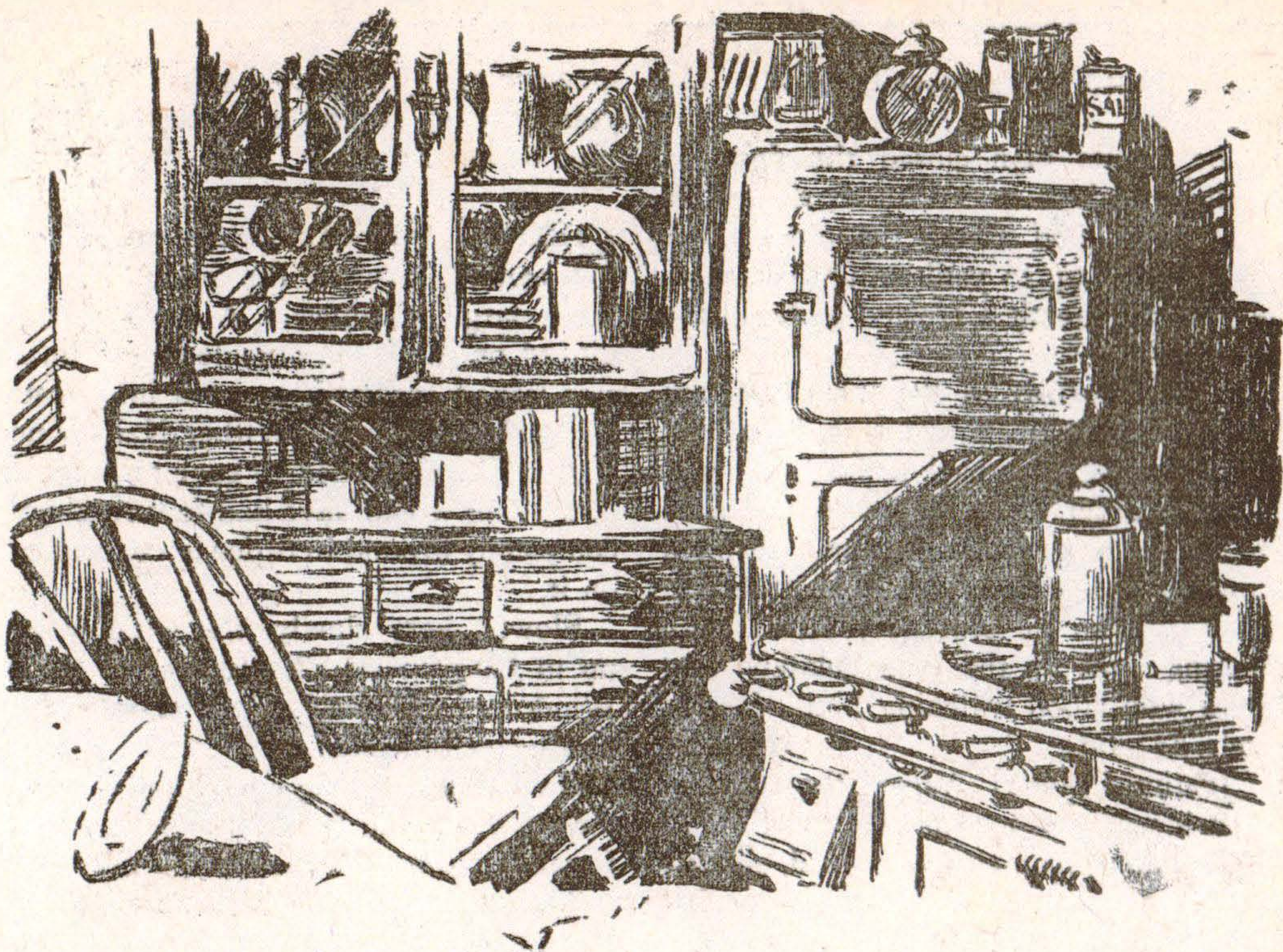
In the center of a small moon of light, tapered fingers worked patiently on the smooth dial of the safe, a slender, immaculately dressed figure knelt Sphinx-like beside the safe door. In the silence of the office, the only audible sounds were the slow even breathing of the crouching intruder and the muffled clicking of metal tumblers as did the dial revolved under pressure.

The fingers ceased their patient labor. A low sigh of satisfaction escaped the thief's lips. The safe door swung open.

The intruder leaned backward, produced gloves from a pocket of his coat and slid his hands into them. Directing the flashlight's beam into the safe's interior, he swept a probing hand over the many compartments, lifting papers, pamphlets, rubber-banded packages from their pigeonholes. Selecting those of value, he leaned back again, calmly transferred the loot to inner pockets of his coat.

From still another pocket he took a thin leather wallet, opened it, and with gloved fingers lifted out one of a dozen small white cards. Carefully he placed





the card upright in the central compartment of the safe, aimed the light at it and studied it with unblinking dark eyes.

The card bore an engraved scarlet figure of a woman holding in her uplifted hand a pair of balanced scales. Beneath the figure appeared a single scarlet word: JUSTICE.

Silently the thief put a gloved hand on the safe door, closed it, wiped door and dial with a silk handkerchief. He stood up, inhaled deeply and adjusted his clothing before moving away. He wore evening clothes.

He took a cigarette from a box on Alvin Naigler's desk, cupped a glowing match in his gloved hands and strolled to one of the three curtained windows. The cigarette gleamed red in the dark as he inhaled; the red glow revealed a lean, good-looking face, sensitive lips, dark hair and dark-gleaming eyes. Standing at the window, the man gazed down on the street below—Washington Street, the aorta of a dozing city.

Dispassionately he watched the small, buglike figures of occasional pedestrians,

the twin eyes of occasional slow-moving automobiles. Then he turned, walked quietly to the door of the outer office. Pacing over the sill, he made his way through darkness toward the door leading to the corridor.

Then, very suddenly, he stood stock still, eyes narrowed as he stared at the closed barrier. From the corridor outside—the seventh-floor corridor of what a certain group of hypocritical money-lenders had been pleased to call the Integrity Building—came the drone of a moving elevator.

The dark-eyed young man stepped back, leaned against a desk. The drone of the elevator ceased; steel doors muttered open and clanked shut. Slow footsteps advanced along the corridor outside.

The young man moved again, drew a small black automatic from a pocket of his evening clothes and flattened himself against the wall, within arm's reach of the door. The footsteps stopped on the far side of the barrier. The knob turned; the door opened.

A short, plump man, more than middle-



aged, paced methodically over the threshold.

The plump man closed the door by leaning against it. With business-like steps he walked across the outer office and reached up to yank a light-chain as he passed beneath a frosted globe in the ceiling.

In the doorway of the inner sanctum he stood on wide-spread legs, breathing heavily, noisily, his back toward the lean-faced intruder who stood near the wall. He made a grumbling sound through scowling lips, turned slowly as if bewildered. Then he stiffened, stared with blinking eyes at the immaculately clad figure who stood watching him. Explosively he said:

"Justin Wayne! What the devil— Then it was *you* who phoned me!"

The young man came forward, slid his automatic unobtrusively into a pocket and left his hand in with it. "I didn't phone you, Naigler."

Alvin Naigler stood motionless again, gaping. He stared, let his irate gaze sweep the young man's lean body from foot to head. "Then what the devil are you doing here? Confound it, someone called me on the phone and told me to come here! At this hour of night! If you didn't do it, what are you here for? How'd you get in? Who *did* phone me?"

"I didn't come here to answer questions, Naigler."

"No? Well, we'll see about that! Come into my private office. There's something queer about this confounded business. I—" Naigler paraded into the inner sanctum, switched on a light and dumped his fat form into a swivel-chair beside the desk. He folded his hands over his protruding stomach, thrust his head out belligerently as the young man sat quietly in a straight-backed chair on the other side. "Now then, explain yourself!"

"You talk as though I were one of your employes." A vague smile crossed Justin Wayne's sensitive lips.

"I'm talking as man to man! Damn it, Wayne, I hardly know you! You're a

member of my club, that's all. What are you snooping around my office for at this time of night?"

**B**EHIND Naigler's chair, some distance behind, loomed the middle of the three large windows. A dark shadow moved on the ledge outside as the financier leaned forward, scowled into Justin Wayne's calm face. Neither Naigler nor Justin Wayne turned to gaze at the window; both would have had to turn almost completely around in order to concentrate on it.

Slowly, very slowly, the window slid up in its grooves. There was no noise. Windows in Alvin Naigler's private sanctum never squeaked.

Naigler was saying again: "Well, what the devil are you here for? That's what I want to know. Who let you in?"

The window stopped moving. Justin Wayne said quietly: "I let myself in, Naigler. I've taken the liberty, also, of removing some eighty thousand dollars in bonds from your private safe, and leaving a small scarlet-and-white card in payment."

Naigler sat very still, stiff as a fat-bellied wooden doll. His face paled. His eyes opened wide, gaped; he put a trembling hand to his perspiring forehead and said in a thick whisper, without taking his gaze from Wayne's face:

"A—scarlet card?"

"Scarlet and white, Naigler."

"You—you mean—" There was terror in Naigler's voice. "You mean this scarlet thief the papers are talking about—is *you*?"

"From now on, Naigler, that will be our secret. Yours and mine." Wayne was still smiling, still holding one hand in a pocket of his evening clothes. "It's an expensive secret. Eighty thousand dollars, to you. So of course you'll keep it religiously. If you think otherwise, I have certain papers in my pocket, papers that came from your safe, which fall into the hands of the police whenever I do. And that might be embarrassing."

Naigler put his feet under him and



swayed out of his chair. His face was the hue of boiled lobster, his small blue eyes bursting from their sockets.

"By God, Wayne, I'll—"

He said no more. From the window behind him came a sound of low, guttural laughter, a sound that stifled the words on Alvin Naigler's lips and caused him to jerk his plump body around with a gasp of utter amazement. Justin Wayne turned, too, and then stood utterly without motion, too astonished to do more than stare.

He stared into a gloating face that was pressed hard against the window-glass: a spectral face, glaring with ghoulisn hunger, its small eyes glowing in shadowed sockets, its curled mouth hooked in a grin of obscene triumph. For an interlude of five terrifying seconds, Wayne gaped at it, saw every detail of the sunken flesh, the chalky smoothness of its hairless pate. Then the face moved.

The window was already open, open wide enough to admit a jabbing hand and part of a thin arm. Even as Justin Wayne took an abrupt step forward and reached for the automatic in his pocket, the hand jerked upward with a sudden twitching movement, swift as a striking snake.

Wayne saw a gleam of metal in curled fingers, saw a polished steel rod leap forward across the desk-top. A thin stream of white liquid stabbed through space and whipped like a hurtling spear-shaft into Alvin Naigler's amazed face.

Naigler's scream was a tocsin, so shrill and thin that it threatened to burst Justin Wayne's eardrums. The financier stumbled back, sprawled over the desk and clawed at his face with both hands. Wayne saw a serpent of white foam boil through the man's spread fingers, eating flesh. Moans of agony fought their way out of Naigler's convulsed throat. The face at the window vanished with a jangling cacophony of weird laughter.

Leaping forward, Wayne put an arm around the stricken man's shoulders, said hoarsely: "What is it? Good Lord, what's happened—"

There was no answer. Naigler lay limp

in his arms, gaping sightlessly at the ceiling. The man's plump face was a bloated, bubbling mass of acid-eaten flesh, unrecognizable.

Naigler was dead.

JUSTIN WAYNE stared with horrified eyes into the dead man's mutilated features, lowered Naigler into a chair and turned to face the empty window. Grimly he paced forward, pushed the window higher and leaned over the sill. Beyond the sill, a stone ledge ran along the face of the building, midway between earth and heaven, high above the street below. The ledge was empty.

Not so the street. On the far sidewalk, a man was standing wide-legged on the curb, pointing upward with a rigid arm and shouting in a high-flung hysterical voice. The man's outcry reached Wayne's ears in a jumble of incoherent syllables, distorted through distance. A passing cab groaned to a stop; the driver flung the door open, leaned out and looked up. From a nearby street-corner a uniformed policeman came on the run, pounding the sidewalk with heavy feet.

Wayne rocked back into the room, stood swaying. His gaze fastened momentarily on Alvin Naigler's contorted body, swept aside and focused on the massive safe in the corner—the safe where less than half an hour ago Justin Wayne had placed a small scarlet-and-white card.

That safe door was closed again now; opening it would require slow, patient labor, cool nerves. Wayne strode toward it, stopped, put a trembling hand to his forehead; his fingers came away cold with sweat. He turned, ran swiftly to the door and made his way through the outer office. Closing the hall door behind him as he stepped over the threshold, he stood motionless, listening.

Harsh, rasping voices found their way up through an elevator shaft, boomed hollowly in the upper level. A sudden droning sound smothered them, as one of the many elevators began rapidly to ascend.

Wayne swung about, ran silently down



the corridor. Reaching the stairs, he hesitated again, peered down and then up. Cold perspiration made a wet mask of his face; his fists were clenched, gloved fingers threatening to bite through their protective covering of suede. He took the stairs two at a time, climbed swiftly, noiselessly to the floor above, heard the clank of elevator doors on the level he had just quitted.

Slowly then he continued his ascent, made his way to the topmost floor of the building. The upper level of the Integrity loomed thirteen stories above the street; breath labored through Wayne's tight lips as he prowled along the thirteenth-floor corridor and pushed open a metal-faced door marked Fire Exit.

Iron steps led sharply upward, ended in a latched bulkhead. Cold air swept across the building's flat roof and sent a shiver through Wayne's lean body as he raised the bulkhead above him. Closing it again slowly, so the heavy trap would make no telltale thud, he walked swiftly across the gravelled roof, reached the Washington Street edge and peered down.

The street below was massed with cars, with a mob of milling pedestrians. Abruptly Wayne stepped away from the roof's rim, turned on the balls of his feet and ran to the far end of the building.

The Integrity Building hung two stories higher than the structure adjoining it. Between the two lay a ten-foot chasm. Wayne's lunging body made a whistling sound through space, landed with a bone-jarring thud on the adjoining level.

Stumbling erect, he limped hurriedly forward, clawed open a second bulkhead, lowered himself painfully onto a flight of pitch-dark stairs, and drew the bulkhead shut above him.

He descended slowly, let himself out through a rear doorway five minutes later, and limped down a refuse-littered alley which made a right-angle turn and brought him out on Tremont Street. His evening clothes were soiled, crumpled, looked as if he had slept in them.

Affecting the walk of a slightly drunken

gentleman of the evening, he steered an uneven course to a cab-stand, returned the critical stare of a scowling driver, and said thickly: "Chestnut Hill. Forty-three Parkman Street."

Less than half an hour later he hunched himself out of the cab, slapped a bill into the driver's outthrust hand, and strode up the concrete walk of his own home.

## CHAPTER TWO

THE house was a large one, looming high above a wide expanse of lawn which extended far back from the street. Like other homes in Chestnut Hill's residential sector, it had an air of aloofness, of aged dignity.

Ascending the stone steps, Wayne thumbed the bell, stood waiting. A scowl crossed his sensitive lips when his summons brought no response.

Quickly he drew keys from a pocket of his crumpled evening coat, leaned forward and fumbled with the lock. Footsteps sounded on a hardwood floor; the door opened and a dark face stared out, frowning. The frown vanished. The servant peered in bewilderment at Wayne's soiled attire, wrinkled his forehead as he drew the door wide and stepped aside.

"Get you out of bed?" Wayne demanded.

"Yes, sir. That is, I thought you'd returned some time ago. I—I was half awake, and thought I heard someone about the house."

"What?"

"Probably it was my fancy, sir. I may have been dozing, and—"

Wayne pushed past, strode down the hall. Lights were burning dimly in a high ceiling; shadows filled the long corridor and lent the house an atmosphere of gloomy bigness. Pacing into a living-room off the main hall, Wayne pulled the chain on a table-lamp, tossed his hat on a chair. He jerked around, stared at the servant who had admitted him.

"It's been a bad night, Jonsen."



"You've had trouble, sir?"

"Plenty. Stir up a drink, then sit down and I'll tell you about it."

The servant walked across the room, took glasses from the lower compartment of a mahogany cabinet. Wayne watched him, smiled at the man's quiet efficiency. For several years Ven Jonsen—former pickpocket, second-rate actor, gentleman thief and confidence man—had been Justin Wayne's most excellent valet. Jonsen's former mode of living had enabled him to understand and fully appreciate the maggot of adventure that continually gnawed at Justin Wayne's vitals.

Jonsen returned, placed a long cool drink in Wayne's hand. He sat down, stared expectantly into his employer's face. His own face was calm, comforting to Wayne's jaded nerves. Externally, Ven Jonsen was merely a slender, stoop-shouldered man with no outstanding facial characteristics; but there was something about him, a smoothness, a commendable lack of inquisitiveness, that made him invaluable.

"A young lady called this evening," Jonsen said. "She left her card." He leaned forward, took a small white card from the table and held it forward.

Wayne took it, scowled over it. "Miss Geraldine King." His eyebrows bunched down, came together over his nose. "Never heard of her. Have you?"

"She said she would return later. Perhaps tomorrow. She was remarkably good-looking, sir. Tall and exceedingly slim, with dark hair and a manner of knowing what life was about."

Wayne nodded, flipped the card to the table and nursed his drink. "Tonight, Jonsen, I made a mistake."

"Yes?"

"I closed a safe door when I should have left it open. Tomorrow, when the police open that safe, they'll find one of the scarlet thief's calling-cards, and—"

"Yes, sir?"

"Tonight, in the same office, Alvin Naigler was murdered."

Jonsen's eyes widened; he leaned forward abruptly, drew a slow breath

through thin lips. "You mean the police will think—"

"That the scarlet thief did the job."

"Good Lord, sir!"

"Yes. And tonight, Jonsen, I had a look at the man they call the 'Acid Killer.' A good look."

"You—know him, sir? You know who he is?"

"I wonder." Wayne stood up, turned his glass in lean fingers as he paced the carpet. He swung about quickly, narrowed his eyes as he peered into the servant's intent face. "You didn't go out tonight, Jonsen?"

"No, sir."

"Been right here all the time?"

"Yes. Right here in the house."

Wayne scowled, continued his pacing. Stopping before a window, he leaned there against the sill, turned unblinking eyes on the valet's face. "Jonsen, if I were to call you a liar—"

THE words died on Wayne's lips. He pivoted sharply, stood rigid at the window and stared out across the expanse of lawn that lay faintly illuminated by a street-lamp outside. He heard again the sound that had silenced him: a soft, stealthy footfall on cement. Then his eyes widened; he stepped abruptly backward, rasped in a low voice:

"Turn out that lamp! Quick!"

Jonsen lurched from the chair and put a groping hand on the lamp-chain. The room was suddenly in darkness. Standing at the window, Wayne pressed his face close to the glass, clamped both hands on the sill and drew breath until his chest was enormous. In a whisper he said: "Good Lord!"

Outside, where cement ran into grass, a stooped shape prowled furtively forward, advancing on bent legs that supported a twisted, massive body. A heavy black overcoat enveloped the thing's ungainly torso, gave it an appearance of being bloated, shapeless. Abnormally long arms reached almost to the smooth surface of the lawn.

But Wayne stared at something else,



at the thing's face. Vaguely visible under the downturned brim of a shapeless felt hat, that face was black, all black. It had tiny slits of eyes, glowing like cat-eyes in the semidark. No other features were invisible in that mask of midnight blackness. The unnamed prowler, advancing ominously across the lawn, had no mouth, no nose, nothing but a glowing black ghoul-face that extended from the shadows of his low hat-rim into the voluminous folds of his black coat.

Straight toward the house he came, with slow steps that carried his hunched body in a swaying movement from side to side. The glowing slits of eyes focused on the window where Wayne stood rigid. Behind Wayne, Ven Jonsen tiptoed across the carpet, reached out to put a hand on Wayne's arm.

"What is it, sir? What is it?"

Wayne jammed a hand in his pocket, brought out his automatic. Turning, he ran swiftly across the room, plunged along the hall to the front door. He closed the door behind him, leaped from the stone steps and moved silently toward the corner of the house.

As he turned the corner, the window he had just quitted lay fifty feet in front of him. Beneath it, staring up at the curtained aperture, stood the black-clad prowler. Even as Wayne paced forward, hugging the shadows of the wall, the crouching shape straightened, reached up a white, clawlike hand to grasp the windowsill.

Then, as if possessed of a sixth sense, the creature whirled, stood on wide-spread legs and glared straight at Wayne. With a sudden hissing intake of breath the man spun backward, leaped away from the window.

Wayne's gun came up in stiff fingers, hung level and focused on the man's lunging body. But the move was mechanical; his trigger-finger failed to tighten. With a deep-throated growl, he flung himself forward, gave pursuit.

Fast as he was, the black-garbed monster leaped crookedly over the lawn away from him. The thing's heavy coat bal-

looned out, hung like a flapping carpet in the wind. Head down, face lowered on his chest, the monstrous creature raced with incredible speed toward the rear of the house, seemed to hesitate a split second before sweeping from view.

Breath sobbed through Wayne's lips as he hurled himself forward. The gun was still clenched in his outthrust fist; his lean body was bent at the hips, shoulders driven forward. Reaching the corner, he clawed the wall, rocked on one foot and lunged forward again.

Directly in front of him, a stooped black shape leaned from the shadows of a wall-niche. Wayne had no chance to skid to a stop. Flinging up both arms, he made a desperate effort to hurl himself sideways. Even as he did so, a pair of bare arms leaped from the voluminous folds of the creature's black coat; a rod of polished metal swept up in the man's clawlike hands.

Once before, Wayne had seen a metal rod like that—had watched it split a foaming serpent of acid into the face of Alvin Naigler. This time the rod acted differently. It swung up, made a whining sound in the air as it descended again. Savagely it ground down on Wayne's head, eating through hair and scalp.

Wayne stood swaying, fighting to retain consciousness. A low moan sighed from his lips as he pitched forward and fell in a heap against the monster's braced legs. He saw the strange black face bending above him, saw the gleaming eyepits glowing down at him from a black mass of darkness. Still moaning, he made a feeble effort to push himself to hands and knees.

The rod descended again, made a loud crunching sound against the side of his head. Wayne's tortured body went limp.

Dizziness gripped him when he regained consciousness. Mechanically he put a hand to his head, drew the hand away and stared at his fingers; they were sticky, covered with blood and shreds of hair. Groping to his knees, he rocked unsteadily, looked around him out of blurred eyes.



Evidently he had been out a long time. The yard was deserted; lighted windows of the house seemed less brilliant because of a gray murk of dawn that had eaten through the darkness.

WAYNE got to his feet, leaned against the wall of the house and groaned aloud. He wondered vaguely why the black-faced killer had failed to destroy him. Limping across the lawn, he made his way slowly, painfully to the front door.

It occurred to him then that something was wrong. He had been unconscious at least an hour, probably longer; yet Ven Jonsen had not found him, not helped him.

The front door was open. Stumbling on the threshold, he steered an unsteady course down the corridor, called Jonsen's name hoarsely. There was no response. The living-room was empty. Jonsen's drink stood on the table, unfinished.

Wayne rocked around, narrowed his eyes in bewilderment. He called again, waited for an answer and got none. Frowning, he walked out of the room, paced down the hall to the kitchen, through the kitchen to the servants' quarters in the rear. Jonsen was not there.

"Queer," Wayne muttered. "Queer—"

He began a careful investigation, returning first to the living-room, then inspecting every room on the lower floor. Ten minutes passed before he found what he sought.

It lay in the study—his own private study where even Ven Jonsen was sometimes forbidden admission. Pushing the door open, Wayne stood suddenly stiff and stared with widening eyes. A light was burning above the table in the center. Beyond the table, near the far wall, the limp body of Ven Jonsen lay sprawled at the edge of the carpet, one leg doubled beneath him, contorted as if in agony.

Above the valet's sprawled form, the door of a small wall-safe hung significantly open.

Wayne made long strides across the room, dropped beside the thing on

the carpet and peered into Jonsen's face. His hands found the valet's limp shoulders, clung there and felt a slow rise and fall of the man's body.

Jonsen's face was turned toward the ceiling. His eyes were half open, gleaming dully beneath drooped lids. His forehead bore a snakelike line of blood, where fingernails had raked the flesh. Across one temple extended a livid red welt, where something had partly devoured the skin and dissolved the down-hanging ends of dishevelled hair. An odor of bitter almonds clung to the man's body.

Wayne raised the unconscious form from the floor, carried it down the hall to the living-room and lowered it onto a divan. Brandy, trickling through Jonsen's parted lips, brought a stirring of facial muscles, a twitching of eyelids. More brandy made the eyes blink open, helped them to move into focus. A groping hand found Wayne's arm, clung there.

"I—I didn't have a chance, sir," Jonsen whispered.

Wayne nodded grimly, thrust a pillow under the man's head and stood erect. "Take it easy. I'm going to find out what happened."

He returned to the study, paced slowly to the wall-safe and stood before it. The carpet under his feet was acid-eaten; dark stains marred the wall-paper as high as his knees. Bending down, Wayne sniffed at the stains, caught the same unpleasant odor that had emanated from Ven Jonsen's clothing. Straightening, he poked a hand into the safe, brought out a fistful of papers, stared at an empty brown envelope.

A guttural oath escaped his tight lips as he examined the envelope more closely. Grimly he returned the stuff to the safe, closed the door, turned and walked back across the room.

On the table, a small scarlet-and-white card stood propped against the lamp-base, apparently placed in that position to attract attention. Wayne stopped, reached out slowly and took the card between his



fingers. The scarlet maiden returned his stare; the word JUSTICE, beneath her feet, brought a savage glint to his narrowed eyes. He turned the card over, saw lines of pencilled script on the reverse.

The handwriting was neat, precise, almost as mechanically perfect as print. The words mocked Wayne with their leering significance. He read them slowly, took in every syllable.

"It is unfortunate, Justin Wayne, that a person of your ability and one of mine may not join forces. It would be a pleasure to work with you. Since such a fusion is obviously impossible, I am taking the liberty of associating myself with you in identity, for my own protection. My thanks to you for the privilege."

No signature. No need of one. With the card gripped hard in his clenched fist, Wayne made his way down the hall to the living-room.

Ven Jonsen was sitting up on the divan, holding a crumpled handkerchief to the scarlet welt on his temple. At Wayne's entrance he made an attempt to stand up, slumped back again and groaned in his throat. Wayne stood over him, said quietly:

"Feel better? Feel well enough to tell me what happened?"

"I'm—not sure what did happen, sir. I mean about the stuff that devil fired at me. Out of a tube it came, and if I hadn't put both arms over my face very quickly— Look here."

WAYNE looked and nodded. Both of Jonsen's sleeves, from elbow to wrist, were eaten the way the carpet in the other room was eaten. The way Alvin Naigler's face had been eaten.

"When you went out after the man, sir, I stood at the window, watching you. I saw him make a run for it; then I started for the front door, to follow you and lend a hand. Then I heard the two of you making a fight of it out back, and

I hurried out through the kitchen, toward the rear door. Then—"

"Yes?"

"Well, sir, I didn't make it. The chap came in through the rear door and put a gun on me before I knew what was up. He ordered me to take him to your private study. So I took him."

"And you opened the safe for him?"

"He made me, sir."

"You know what he took from the safe?"

"No, sir. I'd no sooner got the door open, and turned around to face him, when he gave me a horrible kind of laugh and jabbed that tube out of his coat. I did my best to get out of the way of it, but the thing spit some kind of ghastly acid at me. If I hadn't flung my arms up to protect my face—" Jonsen closed his eyes, shuddered. "Even as it was, the stuff burned into me and laid me out. I think the fumes—"

Wayne stood wide-legged, scowling. He peered again at the scarlet-and-white card in his hand, dropped the card on the divan and said curtly:

"The man who tried to kill you, and probably thought he did kill you, came here for just one thing: to get a supply of those cards. He could have taken stuff more valuable, but didn't. From now on, Jonsen, any murders committed by our friend will probably be credited to the scarlet thief."

"You—you mean that you'll be accused of—"

"Not I, Jonsen. The scarlet thief. But if the police should ever discover that Justin Wayne is the scarlet thief—" Wayne clenched his hands, left the thought unfinished. "If you need a doctor, I'll get one. But we'll be better off if we keep this affair strictly to ourselves. What about it?"

"It'll be all right, sir. Quite all right."

"Any idea what kind of acid was used on you?"

"No, sir. I'm not well versed in such things."

"Check. Better put some kind of salve on those burns, and get some sleep. It



happens to be—" Wayne peered at the clock on the mantel—"almost seven A. M."

"And you, sir?"

"I'll set myself up with a bracer. Got work to do. For one thing, I want to do some thinking about the woman who called here last evening. Miss Geraldine King—" Wayne mouthed the name as though it incurred memories. "Something about that name—" He stiffened, jammed both hands against his hips and caught a sharp breath. "By God, I *do* know what she wanted!"

Eagerly he thrust a hand into an inner pocket of his crumpled evening clothes, brought out a small black notebook with leather covers. Opening it, he scuffed the pages slowly, found the one he sought and peered down at a list of penned names. The handwriting was his own.

Eight names in all appeared on the page. Six of them, at the top, were neatly scored through. The seventh was Alvin Naigler; and Wayne walked quietly to a desk, took up a fountain-pen, and scored that name also.

Then he stared at the next name on the page and narrowed his eyes over it. Under his breath he again mouthed the name of Geraldine King, the girl who had sought an interview with him. She was, he remembered, the step-daughter of a wealthy financier named Vernon Dore.

And the eighth name on the list of the Scarlet Thief was that of Vernon Dore.

### CHAPTER THREE

**W**AYNE put the book away, hooked an arm around Ven Jonsen's shoulders and helped the injured man along the corridor to the servants' quarters. Returning alone to the living-room, he poured and downed a drink of whiskey, sat staring for a while at the message inscribed by the black-faced killer. Then he went upstairs to his own room and removed his crumpled evening clothes.

At ten o'clock, after taking a shower, shaving, and attiring himself in a neat

gray business-suit, he left the house, walked down Parkman Street to the Avenue. Sunlight, gleaming on clean sidewalks and on manicured lawns, made his memory of the black-faced fiend a distorted fantasy of departed darkness. Acid murderers had no place in the sunswathed, tree-lined by-streets of Chestnut Hill's residential sector.

Wayne sucked a cigarette, made his way leisurely down the hill to the square, walked into a restaurant and nodded to the waiter, who came forward to lead him to a booth. The waiter brought a newspaper, returned later with grapefruit, toast and coffee, as if he had performed the same routine many times before.

"I see, sir, they've found out at last who's been killing off all the higher-ups. That is, they've finally got a clue and—"

Wayne nodded, studied the paper's glaring headlines. He propped the paper against a sugar-bowl, read it while working on the grapefruit. A vague smile crossed his lips and vanished again.

#### ACID KILLER IDENTIFIED AS SCARLET THIEF CLAIMS FOURTH VICTIM IN MIDNIGHT MURDER

Alvin Naigler, Noted Broker and Financial Magnate, Slain After Mysterious P hone Call Lures Him to Office in Integrity Building. Police Find Definite Clue and Promise Speedy Action.

"At approximately 2 o'clock this morning, in an office on the seventh floor of the Integrity Building, the vicious killer who has become known as the Acid Murderer claimed his fourth victim, and left behind him the mutilated, acid-scarred body of one of this city's most noted financiers, Alvin Naigler.

"After luring Naigler to his death by a telephone call which, according to the murdered man's wife, was made shortly before 2 A. M., the killer apparently waited in Naigler's office and murdered him upon his arrival. Naigler's death follows those of three other prominent busi-



ness men and politicians, all of whom were slain in the same manner during the past two weeks. Police claim that the murderer used hydrocyanic acid, the fumes of which are deadly poisonous.

"This time, however, the police report the finding of a definite clue as to the killer's identity. Investigation revealed that the murderer, before luring Naigler to death, apparently broke open a safe containing the private papers, etc., of the firm of which Naigler is a partner, robbing the safe of approximately \$80,000 in cash and bonds and leaving behind a 'Scarlet Thief' calling-card, of which the police have already collected four, on other occasions.

"According to State detectives, the finding of the Scarlet Thief's card cannot possibly be coincidence, nor could the card have been placed in the safe as a false clue. The robbery has every indication of being the real work of the Scarlet Thief, and police say that no other criminal in this part of the country uses the Thief's peculiar methods.

"The Thief was seen by passersby to leave the office by a window which gives access to a stone ledge running the length of the building. Witnesses recite a story of seeing the thief emerge from the window, crawl along this ledge seven stories above the street, and make his escape into an adjoining office . . ."

THE rest was repetition, but Wayne read it through, missed no single word of it. Finishing his breakfast, he folded the paper, wedged it into his pocket and stood up. The irony of the situation brought a dull glint to his eyes, a grim smile to his thin lips. Without haste he left the restaurant, walked back to the big house on Parkman Street.

Approaching the house, he slowed his pace and stared intently at a car parked by the curb, in front of the concrete walk. The car bore police registration plates; its motor was purring. Half-way up the walk, a man was striding toward the steps of Justin Wayne's residence, obviously intent on seeking admission.

Wayne paced stiffly forward, relaxed again when he recognized the man's thick-set frame, massive shoulders. Glancing again at the car, he recognized also the man in the driver's seat. Quietly he strolled up the walk, said "Good morning, Commissioner," and smiled into the face of his caller as the thick-set man swung around to confront him.

"Oh, it's you." There was a note of relief in the big man's voice. "Startled me. Look here, Wayne; I want to talk to you."

"Frank, too?"

"I brought him along to back me up. Know you don't like him, but—" The Commissioner jerked his big head up as if it were heavy; glaring at the parked car, he bellowed: "Frank! Come here!"

"Better come in, both of you," Wayne shrugged.

He opened the door with his own key, ushered the two men into the living-room. He knew them both well. The Commissioner of Police was John Joseph Holtz, a red-faced, oversized individual with an army-trained bass voice and a good-natured way of getting things done. The other, Jason Frank, was a detective of importance, despite his appearance of being a recently-admitted immigrant unable to speak English. He and Wayne had entertained a strong mutual dislike for years, bitter on Frank's part, casual on Wayne's.

Jason Frank scowled at Wayne and maintained a sullen silence. He was a small man compared with his superior; his clothes were expensive but looked cheap, needed pressing. He needed a shave, had on a white shirt with a soiled collar. Wayne felt an urge to lean forward and straighten the man's mud-brown necktie.

"Wayne—" It was Holtz speaking. "You're going back on the job. Frank here naturally doesn't favor the idea, but this business has us stumped, all of us, and we're taking a ride from the papers. We need a man with new ideas."

"You fired me once."

"And I'll do it again, after this case is



settled. Trouble is, you don't value money. The salary we paid you didn't mean a thing. You own this place and—well, I'm fool enough to come begging, Wayne. You're the best man we ever had, barring none." Holtz shot a glance at Jason Frank and smiled at the slow flush that climbed out of Frank's shirt-collar.

"Now look here, Wayne. This acid killer or Scarlet Thief, or whatever you want to call him, has murdered four wealthy men and robbed others. There'll be more victims on his list, waiting to be exterminated. We've got to prevent it. *You've got to!*"

"Sounds very simple."

"It isn't. It's the vilest case we've had in ten years. The fiend even has nerve enough to warn his intended victims beforehand. You've heard of Vernon Dore, haven't you? The banker?"

"The name is familiar."

"Well, look at this!" Holtz clawed a crumpled envelope from a pocket of his coat, shoved the letter forward.

Wayne opened it, unfolded the enclosed paper. The paper bore neat rows of penciled script, the same script that had been inscribed on a small scarlet-and-white card even now reposing in Wayne's pocket.

The note was addressed to Mr. Vernon Dore, 17 Andrew Street, City. "Dear Sir: In the name of JUSTICE, you are next. The time: Tomorrow night. The place: Wherever you may be at midnight. Sincerely—The Scarlet Thief."

Wayne said softly: "Tomorrow night, midnight." He turned the envelope in his fingers, studied the postmark. The note had been mailed yesterday afternoon. Tomorrow night, midnight, meant tonight.

He handed the letter back to Holtz, thought suddenly of the small black book in his pocket. Strange, that both he and the man impersonating him had decided to visit the same man at the same hour! Very strange. . . .

"Up until the time of Naigler's death," Holtz said thickly, "we were working on two separate cases: the Scarlet Thief

and the murderer. Now we know they're one and the same. All we need to find out now is: *Who* is the man? That's why I'm here, Wayne. You've got to help."

"The answer is no, Holtz."

"What?"

"I've no desire to be mixed up in it."

HOLTZ made a rumbling noise, glared with narrowed eyes and pushed himself slowly erect. Jason Frank, speaking for the first time, said dryly: "Afraid of the possible consequences, Wayne?"

"Not at all, Frank. Not at all. But I'm not needed, with brilliant men like you already on the job. I'd be imposing."

Holtz said savagely: "Well, think it over. Give me a ring when you make a final decision. I won't accept this refusal as final."

"Afraid you'd better."

"No! I'll have you drafted into service!" The Commissioner put his feet under him and strode to the door, motioning Frank to follow. "I'll be expecting a call, Wayne, and soon. Don't disappoint me."

Wayne smiled, saw a glint of triumph in Jason Frank's small eyes as the two men left the room. The outer door closed noisily. Wayne leaned against the living-room table, let the smile fade from his lips.

"So Vernon Dore is next on the killer's list also. Tonight, at midnight."

He sat down, thought about the letter Holtz had shown him. Later, when he straightened and walked slowly to the door, he turned again as the phone on the desk began droning. Impatiently he picked the instrument up, growled into it. The voice that answered could have been either masculine or feminine, it was so low-pitched, so honey-smooth.

"Mr. Wayne? I am aware that you have just been visited by the police, and that you have decided to refuse their request that you assist them. A very wise decision, I assure you. Should you at any future date entertain a change of heart, let me warn you that the first thing they will discover—the very first thing—



will be that Justin Wayne and the Scarlet Thief are the same individual. Is that clear?"

Wayne stood stiff, one hand hard and white on the desk-edge. His face lost color; the muscles of his throat stood out like fishlines, as if forced by a rush of blood from within. He gripped the phone savagely, thrust his mouth close to the disc. Before he could growl out the words that fumed on his lips, the honey-smooth voice was again talking.

"I suggest, too, Mr. Wayne, that you postpone your intended visit to the home of Vernon Dore, until I have fulfilled my promise to call upon him. It would be embarrassing if I were to find you there and be forced to deal with you as I intend to deal with him. Is that clear also?"

Wayne said grimly, with an effort to control himself: "Are you finished?"

"Except for one thing, Mr. Wayne. It is about your servant, Ven Jonsen. I intended to kill him. Please inform him that I shall do so at my earliest convenience."

The phone clicked. Wayne lowered it, stood glaring at it. Slowly his face regained its natural color; his jaw muscles relaxed. Pacing quietly to the liquor cabinet, he poured himself a stiff drink, downed it, then walked out of the room and paraded down the corridor to the servants' quarters at the rear.

No sound was audible in the room occupied by Ven Jonsen. Pushing open the door, Wayne stepped over the sill, saw that the butler was asleep on a single twin bed in the corner. He paced forward, hesitated before putting a hand on the man's shoulder. Jonsen's face, turned toward the wall, was still pale, still marred by acid burns gleaming dull red under applications of salve.

The valet woke when Wayne shook him. Staring up, he blinked his eyes, mumbled incoherently in his throat.

"Better get up," Wayne said. "I'm going out. Expect to be out quite a while. It won't do to leave the house open to intrusion."

"Yes, sir." Jonsen sat up and rubbed sleep out of his eyes. "What time will you be back, sir?"

"I wonder."

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"Nothing. I was just talking to myself." Wayne strode to the door, put a hand on the knob. "Better get up right away, Jonsen, and be very careful about sleeping in the near future. You're in line to be exterminated by our good friend of the acid tube."

Quietly he closed the door behind him, walked back along the corridor.

THE killer's letter to Vernon Dore had been mailed to 17 Andrew Street, City. Wayne, driving his own car, turned into Andrew Street shortly after eleven o'clock and braked the small coupe to a stop in front of a big brownstone house that had a number 17 gleaming in brass beside the door.

He took the steps slowly, pressed a knuckle against the bell and waited. A maid opened the door.

"The name is Wayne. To see Miss Geraldine King. I rather imagine she expects me."

Miss Geraldine King, when he looked into her face a moment later, stared at him intently and seemed to hesitate before extending her hand. She was, Wayne decided, hardly the type of girl he had expected. Lowering his lean body into a chair in the parlor, he sat facing her, estimated her age at about twenty-two, and realized that she was unusually easy to look at.

She seemed worried. Her loveliness was somewhat marred by unmistakable lines of anxiety; her dark brown eyes—they were very dark brown—were ringed with equally dark circles which plainly indicated lack of sleep.

"I'm glad you came," she said simply.

Wayne thought of the death-threat received by this girl's stepfather, thought of the strange coincidence which had made Vernon Dore's name the next and last on the list of the Scarlet Thief. He said:



"Yesterday you came to see me, Miss King. I was out."

"Yes."

"I'm wondering why you came."

"Because—" She leaned toward him, clamped her hands hard on the arms of her chair. "Because I needed help, Mr. Wayne. And I knew you by reputation."

"I don't have a reputation for being helpful. Not any more."

"You mean, you're not a detective?"

"Not since quite a while," Wayne smiled.

The girl leaned back, closed her eyes a moment and opened them again. "Then I may not expect any assistance?"

"I wouldn't say that." Wayne took a long look at her, dropped his gaze when he saw a slow flush coloring her throat. "This morning the Commissioner came to see me and asked me to take back my old job. I told him no. But—" He scowled, pushed himself erect. "May I speak to your stepfather, Miss King?"

"He isn't here."

"Not here?"

"He has gone away, for protection."

"You mind telling me where?"

"I can't. I don't know. He just went."

"You mean you're alone here?" Wayne frowned.

"Except for the servants. But I don't mind that, Mr. Wayne. Dad is the only family I have, and he has often gone away for weeks at a time, leaving me to myself." She made an attempt to smile. "I'm quite able to stand it, really. As for tonight, the police have promised to send several men to make sure that nothing happens."

Wayne nodded, reached mechanically for his hat. He liked Geraldine King. Liked her looks and the sound of her voice, and the straightforward evenness of her manner. Something he had not expected to find in the daughter—stepdaughter, rather—of a man who had altogether too much money and was not too particular about his methods of acquiring it.

He thrust his hand out, exerted pressure as the girl slid her fingers into it.

Yes, he liked Geraldine King.

"I've a call to make," he said. "You're the cause of it. See you later."

He would have closed the outer door behind him, but she opened it again and stood on the threshold, watching him as he descended the steps. He went down the walk with long strides, without looking back. Had he peered around, he might have seen a furtive movement near the wall of a low, tile-roofed building, obviously a garage, which stood less than fifty yards from the house proper. But neither he nor the girl looked in that direction.

THE garage doors were open. In the doorway, half masked in shadow, stood a short, squat figure whose abnormal torso gave him the appearance of being a crouching spider-shape. Crooked legs held that squat body erect; gaunt hands clutched the side of the door-frame.

The man wore a heavy black overcoat, its collar upturned to conceal the lower part of his face. The turned-down brim of his hat hid most of the upper portion of his face, leaving only a narrow expanse of featureless blackness.

Two slit-like eyes hung in that black void, glowing like cat-eyes in darkness. They were focused unblinkingly on Justin Wayne, missing no single part of Wayne's slow parade down the walk to the waiting coupe.

Then, as Wayne's car droned away from the curb, the glowing eyes changed their line of direction and fastened hungrily on the girl who stood in the house doorway. Even before Geraldine King stepped back over the sill and drew the door shut, the watching shape moved stealthily from its place of hiding.

Slowly, furtively, the ghoulish monster prowled along the side of the garage. Then, crouching so low that his deformed body seemed to flow along the ground, he ran with short, quick strides toward the house where Geraldine King had told Justin Wayne, only a few moments ago, that she was *alone* except for the servants.



## CHAPTER FOUR

JUSTIN WAYNE leaned across the desk of Commissioner John Joseph Holtz and said evenly, in the sanctity of the Commissioner's private office: "The answer is yes, Holtz. With reservations."

Holtz nodded, took a large cigar from his mouth. "Knowing you, I expected at least a dozen reservations." His smile indicated that he was perfectly willing to accept whatever terms Wayne handed down.

Wayne said: "I'm willing to work for you, provided I'm allowed free rein and no questions asked."

"I don't care a tinker's damn how you work, so long as—"

"I bring you the man you want, eh?"

"Yes! I've got men working for me now who are supposed to be detectives! But good Lord! Take Frank, for instance. I—"

"I wouldn't take him as a gift." Wayne stood up and strolled to the door. "Listen. Are you sending some of your men to Vernon Dore's home this evening?"

"Already sent 'em," Holtz growled. "Two of 'em left ten minutes before you walked in here. Two more will go out later. If the killer walks into that house tonight, he'll get the surprise of his life!"

"Jason Frank is there?"

"Frank? No." A scowl crossed the Commissioner's large mouth. "He's messing about on his own. I dropped him off at a corner drug-store, after we left your place this morning. Said he wanted to make a phone call."

Wayne's feet froze under him. He stood stiff, caught a quick breath that swelled his chest. His mind shot back to a honey-smooth, almost feminine voice that had threatened him over the phone, not more than five minutes after the departure of Holtz and Jason Frank. "A phone call?" he said slowly.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, Holtz. Nothing." Wayne relaxed, glanced at the clock on the wall and realized that the morning had ticked

away. "I'll keep in touch with you. In case I'm needed in a hurry, Ven Jonsen usually knows where I'm at."

Closing the door behind him, he walked down the tile-floored corridor, made his way out of the building to where his car was parked in a space reserved for employees only. It occurred to him then—and he relaxed with the thought—that the rapid passing of time made little difference now. With detectives already on duty at the home of Geraldine King, there was no need for him to go there until later. He needed rest. Unless he was mistaken, the coming hours from midnight to dawn would call for steady nerves.

HE drove slowly, guided the car through downtown traffic and out Boylston Street. His thoughts were centered on Commissioner Holtz's casual statement that Jason Frank had used a telephone that morning. Coincidence, possibly, and yet . . .

Wayne's eyes were narrowed in deep reflection, his mouth hooked in a scowl, when he braked the car half an hour later before the big house on Parkman Street. He used his own key, closed the house door behind him, made his way into the living-room and flung his hat onto a chair.

The liquor cabinet lured him forward. He poured amber liquid into a thin glass, cupped the glass in one hand and strolled into the corridor.

It occurred to him that the house was abnormally still. That Ven Jonsen, usually Johnny-on-the-spot, was remarkably slow in making an appearance.

He downed his drink, paced the length of the hall and strode down the carpeted corridor that led to the kitchen, to the servants' quarters in the rear. The stillness of the place affected his nerves, curled his lips with anxiety.

He stopped at the foot of a staircase that led up through the rear of the house. The kitchen door, closed, lay just beyond. Slowed by a sense of impending disaster, Wayne moved toward it.

Behind him, in the shadows of the stair-well, something moved.



Wayne opened the door, stood on the sill and peered into the room beyond. The chamber was empty. He took a cigarette-case from his pocket, selected one of the white tubes, held a match in his cupped hands. Pushing twin shafts of smoke through his nostrils, he took a step forward, called out irritably: "Jonsen! Where the devil are you?"

Behind him, in the passage, a crouching shape detached itself from the gloom of the stair-well and snaked forward on soundless feet.

Again, louder, Wayne called the valet's name. The rasp of his voice filled the kitchen, smothered the soft creak of the threshold as the menacing shape behind him slowly closed the gap. He shrugged, pushed the cigarette to a corner of his mouth, reasoned that Ven Jonsen had probably returned to bed, suffering from the after-effects of the acid-burns which had come so close to killing him.

That thought alone saved Wayne from annihilation.

He turned wearily, to leave the kitchen and make his way to the servants' quarters. Turned, and stood utterly rigid, gaping into the face of the hunched shape that stood confronting him.

Wayne's breath stuck in his throat; his eyes bulged in their sockets, stood out like glass buttons in a face that lost every trace of color and turned ghastly white. For an interlude of endless seconds, he stood transfixed, staring into the gloating ghoulish face before him. Then, instinctively, he hurled himself aside, flung both arms up for protection.

A white serpent of seething liquid leaped at that instant from the black hulk of the monster's crouching body. Like a living snake the foaming stream swirled through the space where, only a split second before, Wayne's rigid body had stood rooted in the floor. A snarl of rage curled the fiend's ghoulish lips as the acid-stream missed its mark and boiled furiously against the far wall. Next instant, Wayne regained balance, lunged forward with both hands outthrust.

The killer was quick, but not quick

enough to whirl on crooked legs and turn his hellish weapon on Wayne's hurtling body. The acid snake had already lost force; it died a drooping death even as the creature stumbled backward. Wayne, leaping upon the man in a headlong charge of desperation, caught a momentary glimpse of the bubbling metal tube which had flung forth the stream of horror.

The tube swung up to meet him, crashed viciously against the side of his head as he flung out a hand to ward it off. Given a moment's respite as Wayne staggered sideways, the ghoulish monster scuttled back, lurched crookedly for the door.

Blood streamed down the side of Wayne's face, blinded him. A stench of bitter almonds seared his nostrils, ate its way into his brain and stuck there, strangling him. He rocked on braced legs, jammed a hand into his pocket and groped for the gun that lay there.

**T**OO late, the gun came clear, leaped up in his fist. With blurred eyes that drooled at the corners, he saw the hunched shape of his intended murderer leap like a monstrous crab to the threshold and whip its ghoulish head around to glare at him triumphantly. Wayne's gun-hand refused to obey his will; his arm, numb from the elbow, hung stiff as wood in front of him.

From the distorted lips of the fiend in the doorway came a guttural laugh that cackled its way into Wayne's brain, mocking him.

Dully he realized that the acid fumes in the room were burning their murderous way into his body, turning his lungs to fire, blinding him. He stumbled forward, felt his knees collapse under him. The hideous corpse-face in the doorway was still there, still gloating—still the same sunken spectral mask, the leprous white, bald-pated countenance of horror which had glared through the window of Alvin Naigler's office, the night Naigler had died. The same fiendish face which, since the night of Naigler's death, had



obviously been concealed under some kind of featureless black mask . . .

With an effort, Wayne raised his tormented body erect again, aimed the automatic at the precise center of the monster's face. The face receded before him as his finger pressed the trigger; when at last the gun belched fire, the doorway was empty.

Sobbing, Wayne swayed forward, fought the almond-scented fumes that burned into him. He heard footsteps receding along the corridor, heard a low vibrant peal of obscene laughter, and the dull thud of a door closing.

Then, holding himself erect by will-power alone, he stumbled blindly over the threshold, closed the door of the death-room behind him, and took a dozen slow steps along the hall before his racked body crashed to the floor.

## CHAPTER SIX

**D**EVILS of agony were doing a *danse macabre* inside his skull when he regained consciousness.

Forcing his eyes open, he peered around him, made an attempt to sit up. Sickness welled inside him, and he slapped a hot palm across his swollen lips, moaned dully in his throat.

How long he had lain there, he had no idea. The house was still as silent as when he had first walked into it. A faint, unpleasant odor of almonds filled the corridor.

He realized vaguely that his last conscious act, closing the kitchen door, had saved him his life. The kitchen was probably even now filled with fumes of death which, had the barrier been left open, would have filtered into the corridor and murdered him while he lay unconscious.

Groaning, he put both hands flat on the floor, pushed himself to a sitting position against the wall. When he groped to his feet, sickness welled over him again; sluggish blood moved inside him, carrying its load of poison. He stood retching, clung to the wall for support. Minutes passed before the blackness went

away, leaving him strength enough to stagger along the hall.

In the living-room, he went to a window, pushed the window up in its grooves and leaned over the sill, sucking great breaths of fresh air. Then he dragged a chair to the aperture, lowered himself into it and sat there with cool clean air caressing his hot face and rustling the white curtains in front of him. Sunlight streaked the carpet, made a lake of pale gold at his feet.

He tried to think. Questions ran through his throbbing head. Where had the ghoulish killer fled to, after leaving him for dead? How—how had the fiend obtained entrance to the house in the first place, with Jonsen supposedly on the job? Where was Ven Jonsen now?

The questions had no answers. The cool air from the window, finding its way into his poisoned lungs, brought weariness. Wayne slumped down in the chair, let his head loll. After a while he slept.

When he came to again, it was darkish outside and the air from the window was uncomfortably cold and penetrating. The clock on the mantel said twenty minutes after seven. He stood up, walked to the liquor-cabinet, filled a tall glass with charged water, shook salt into the water and drank it before it stopped hissing.

Seven-twenty, and the house was silent as a tomb, with no sign of Ven Jonsen. Wayne scowled, made his way wearily to the servants' quarters. He found Jonsen's door closed.

Turning the knob, he pushed the door open and stepped across the sill. Then he stopped, said almost inaudibly: "Good Lord!" Slowly he paced forward and stared at the sprawled shape on the bed.

Ven Jonsen's feet, wedged against the bed-end, were held there by steel bracelets that encircled the ankles; the bracelet chain, hooked around an iron upright, anchored the man's legs in position and left them no freedom of movement. His arms were secured the same way, drawn stiff as sticks above his head, both wrists locked. Jonsen's body, stretched full length, lay as if staked out.



Those crimson acid-burns still marred the man's forehead, extending like fire-snakes into his hair. But this time there was something more. A soiled handkerchief covered his mouth, gagging him. Beneath the knotted gag, a torn square of sponge lay between his dry lips, wedged there. Even now, though the gag had undoubtedly been forced into place long ago, a faint odor of chloroform hung about the man's face and mouth.

Wayne bent closer, put a probing hand on the valet's chest and grunted with relief at feel of a slow heart-beat. Anxiously he removed the gag, flung it aside. The steel bracelets refused to yield when he gripped them in curled fingers, exerted pressure.

For a moment Wayne hesitated, scowled down into the unconscious man's face. Then he strode out of the room, paced down the hall to the living-room and took brandy and a glass from the liquor-cabinet. Bending above the bed, he forced the liquor between Jonsen's puffed lips, waited impatiently for a reaction.

Minutes passed before the valet's facial muscles twitched with returning consciousness. More minutes dragged by, interminably long, before the man blinked his bloodshot eyes and stared up into Wayne's face. After that, Wayne left the room, returned with hammer and screw-driver, and worked on the bracelets, while Jonsen lay in a semistupor, apparently only half aware of what was going on.

Wayne worked slowly, stopped every few minutes to lean back and wipe perspiration from his forehead. A long time passed before Jonsen interrupted him. Licking dry lips, the valet made an attempt to speak, choked on the words, then finally got out:

"That—~~isn't~~ necessary, sir. You'll find keys on the table there."

Wayne straightened, stood scowling. "What?"

"On the table. He left them there, sir."

WAYNE paced across the room, found that the valet was not mistaken. He picked two keys off the table, returned with them. A moment later he tossed the opened shackles aside, sat on the bed and rubbed Jonsen's arms and legs to bring back circulation. Jonsen said weakly:

"I—I guess I'm not much good, sir. This makes the second time I've let you down."

"What happened?"

"I'm not sure, sir. Not exactly. Some time after you left the house, I began to feel ill. I came in here and lay down. I must have gone to sleep, and the next thing I knew, there was a man standing in the doorway. He had a gun, and he had the most ghastly face, sir—like the face of a corpse. He threatened to kill me unless I did just as he said. He—" Jonsen's eyes rolled in their sockets. "He made me stretch out. Then he put the bracelets on me and threw the keys on the table. Then—then he took a bottle and a sponge out of his pocket and—"

"And neatly chloroformed you," Wayne growled. "And after that, Jonsen, he waited for me to return, and did his best to murder me. What I don't understand is, why he didn't murder you."

"Why what, sir?"

"This half-way business doesn't gibe with what I got over the phone," Wayne grumbled. "The fiend told me then, without any hedging, that he intended to do for you. For both of us."

Jonsen lay very still, staring at the ceiling. His face, already pale, turned a shade paler. He said slowly: "Something must have gone wrong, sir. He probably meant to come back and—and finish me after he did for you. Then—then you somehow managed to live through the acid fumes and—"

He stopped abruptly. Wayne, staring at him, groped erect and stood stiff as wood, then slowly reached down and clamped a hard hand on the man's shoulder. Very quietly, ominously, Wayne said:



"How long have you been lying here, Jonsen?"

"I—I don't know, sir."

"But you know about the acid fumes that damned near killed me!" Wayne's words were a grim accusation, loaded with significance.

Jonsen's eyes went wider, showed white. He mumbled weakly: "Yes, sir. That is, I—I'm assuming that's what happened. Your clothes are burned, and—and there's a noticeable odor, sir."

Wayne glanced down at himself, saw that the death-stream from the killer's acid-tube had left its mark on his clothing. He sniffed, realized that an unmistakable odor of bitter almonds, significant of hydrocyanic, did cling to him. He nodded slowly, but his eyes were still narrowed, his lips still curled in a scowl of suspicion as he walked slowly from the bed.

Turning, he said evenly. "You'd better get up, get straightened out. I've got to leave."

"You're going out, sir?"

"Yes. If you don't feel like staying alone in the house after what happened, lock the place and clear out. Be back here in the morning."

"Yes, sir. But I'll stay."

"Chances are," Wayne said grimly, "you'll be as safe here as anywhere. If the killer wants to do for you, he'll do it anywhere, and me too. That is—" He peered straight into the valet's face and narrowed his eyes with a cold glint that had sinister suspicion in it—"if we don't get him first."

Stiffly, he walked out of the room.

HALF an hour later, after changing his clothes and gulping coffee and sandwiches that Ven Jonsen laid out for him, Wayne closed the outer door of the house behind him and strode down the walk to his parked car. Sliding into the seat, he hooked his arm up, glanced at the watch banded to his wrist. The hands of the watch pointed to five after nine.

It was nine-thirty when he turned into Andrew Street and stopped the car before

the big brownstone house of Vernon Dore. Andrew Street was deserted; an arc-light, blinking above the sidewalk, merely accentuated the shadows, gave the surrounding terrain a gloomy, sinister aspect that brought a scowl to Wayne's thin lips. Pale light was visible behind the drawn shades of the Dore residence.

Wayne hiked slowly up the walk toward the stone steps. In the shadows ahead of him, something moved. He stood stock still, reached abruptly into his pocket as a dark shape detached itself from the wall and stepped toward him. A low voice said raspily:

"Wait a minute, you."

Wayne waited, peered with narrowed eyes as the man approached. Then he relaxed, let a grunt escape his lips. "Forget it, Lacy. Forget it."

Lacy was a State detective on the Holtz payroll. He glared into Wayne's face, said sullenly: "Oh, it's you." He lowered the gun in his fist, said with a shrug: "I got strict orders to make sure nobody gets in here tonight without a checkup. But I guess you're okay. Go ahead."

Wayne climbed the steps and would have pushed the bell. Rasping syllables came to him from beyond the closed door. The voice belonged to Jason Frank.

"I'm telling you, we can't do a thing until you tell us where he went to. Our job is to protect him, not just hang around here in hopes the killer will come here to get him. Come clean, sister!"

A softer voice, one which had long ago impressed Wayne as being decidedly easy to listen to, answered Frank's declaration with: "But I assure you I don't know where he is. I haven't the least idea."

Wayne pushed the bell. The girl stopped talking, and when the door opened, Frank was standing wide-legged, glaring over the sill into Wayne's face. The detective scowled blackly, was plainly annoyed. He said curtly: "Well, what are you after?"

"Merely earning my salary," Wayne murmured.

"What?"

"My salary. Hasn't Holtz told you?"



He paced inside, nodded quietly to Geraldine King. The girl was standing with her back to the wall, one hand gripping the edge of an old-fashioned clothes-rack. Evidently her conversation with Jason Frank had not been pleasant.

"I'm so glad you're here," the girl said. "This house has been a madhouse since early afternoon."

Wayne nodded, heard a rumble of low voices and the drone of a radio from a nearby room. "Your father hasn't returned?"

"No. Mr. Frank was just accusing me of knowing—"

Jason Frank pushed the door shut and said sullenly: "It stands to reason the girl knows where her step-father went to. If we don't find out where he is, how can we give him protection? The man's not here, and it's a sure thing the killer won't come here looking for him!"

"Meaning you believe the killer will know where he is?"

"Well, he seems to know about everything else that goes on!"

Wayne stared at the girl and said: "If you don't mind, I'll have a look around." He walked down the hall, entered the room where the radio was playing. It was the living-room. One of Holtz's men, a slender, dark-faced Italian named Lareno, was talking to a man and a woman who were obviously servants. Lareno looked up and said jerkily: "Oh, hello Wayne. You in on this, too?"

**W**AYNE walked out of the room. When he stepped into the hall, Jason Frank strode toward him, stood wide-legged in front of him. Frank had a hard scowl on thick lips, looked more than ever like an immigrant recently arrived from some Latin American country where men wore sloppy clothes and went in for beards. He had on a brown suit that needed pressing, a red and black tie that looked like colored rope. He said unpleasantly:

"Listen. Are you here to take charge of this party?"

"Not at all," Wayne shrugged.

"No? Well, I doubt it. If Holtz sent you here, that means he expects you to—"

"He didn't send me. Go right ahead and act as if I weren't here."

Frank's eyes tightened with suspicion. "You trying to be funny?"

"Hardly, at a time like this. Suppose you tell me the general layout of things."

"Well—" Obviously the detective was none too eager to talk. "I got three men here besides myself. You make four. Lacy and Farrell are outside, and I aim to stay in here with Lareno and keep my eyes open. If the killer gets in here tonight, he'll have his troubles getting out again!"

"What about the servants?"

"Lareno's talking to them now, both of them. There's another, a gardener or something, but he hasn't been around all day. Miss King says it's possible her father took the guy with him when he did his disappearing act."

"That's everything?" Wayne said.

"That's everything. We got a couple of hours till midnight. What I want to find out is where Dore went to. The girl says she don't know."

Wayne put a cigarette in his lips and lit it. "Chances are she doesn't. I'll talk to her after I've moseyed around." He walked away from Frank, strolled down the corridor and pushed open the first door he came to. He wanted to be alone.

The room he entered was a library. Shelves of books lined three walls; a massive mahogany table filled the center; a pair of Cogswell chairs sat facing a dead fireplace. He closed the door behind him, pushed a light-switch that caused a lamp on the table to throw a sudden amber glare through the dark. Lowering himself into one of the Cogswells, he pulled a small black book from his pocket, opened it, sat staring at it.

The next name on the list of the Scarlet Thief was Vernon Dore.

Wayne stared at the name with narrowed eyes. The furrowed paleness of his face indicated a problem that could be settled only by deep, deliberate con-



centration. The problem had to do with a woman; without her, the answer would be simple.

Minutes dragged, while Wayne stared straight ahead of him, clenched his hands hard around the black book. In the end he stood up, thrust the book into his pocket.

It was not Justin Wayne who paced silently across the room and cautiously drew open the door leading to the corridor. It was not Wayne who stood for an instant on the sill, peering intently into the corridor's semidarkness to make sure that no watching eyes lurked there.

The man who slipped silently over the sill and moved like a gliding shadow into the deeper darkness of the hall . . . was the Scarlet Thief.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

**T**O the Scarlet Thief, the big brownstone house of Vernon Dore was no bewildering maze of shadowed stairways and passages, as it might have been to a chance intruder. Long ago, with his usual attention to detail, Justin Wayne had made preparations for a midnight visit, and had pored over floor-plans and blueprints, memorizing every turn.

Now, moving swiftly down the lower hall, Wayne gained the foot of a staircase leading upward to the floor above. Hesitating a moment, to make sure he was unobserved, he drew black gloves from a pocket of his coat, slid his hands into them, then toed his way silently up the stairs, moving with the surefooted slowness of a prowling cat.

Vernon Dore's private study lay at the extreme end of the upstairs corridor. That study was the Scarlet Thief's destination.

The corridor was deserted, illuminated by glowing chandeliers which hung, one at each end, from the high ceiling. Pacing forward close to the wall, Wayne reached his objective, put a gloved hand on the door-knob and made a thin hook

of his mouth when he found the door locked.

Scowling, he took a slender blue-steel jimmy from an inner pocket, dropped to one knee and went to work. The scowl changed to a grin smile. Straightening, he returned the tool to his pocket, pushed the door open and slid over the sill. His groping fingers found a light-switch. Quietly he pushed the door to behind him, leaving it slightly ajar so that footsteps in the corridor, if they approached, would be audible before they came too close.

Vernon Dore's study was a den. A deep blue carpet covered the floor; above a small brick fireplace in the wall, a moose-head stared leering out over massive walnut furniture, over an abundance of ash-trays and rugged masculine doodads. Wayne took in the details at a glance, caught a sharp quick breath when he saw what he was looking for: a black, knobbed disc set shoulder high in the wall.

He strode forward, stood before the disc and studied it with eyes full of suspicion, put a gloved hand to his face and massaged his scowling mouth. The disc was a safe-door—not at all the type of strong-box the Scarlet Thief had anticipated. A financier of Vernon Dore's status would surely not entrust anything of value to a claptrap wall-box which could be opened with a can-opener!

Wayne ungloved his hand, put sensitive fingers on the safe's single dial. Leaning closer he worked the dial slowly, listened for the click of metal tumblers inside. Less than five minutes passed before the black disc swung open, revealing the aperture beyond.

Wayne thrust hand and arm into the tube, drew out a fistful of papers and pawed through them. An exclamation of disgust rumbled in his throat. He shoved the papers back, slapped the door shut again. With renewed respect for the cleverness of the man he had come to rob, he turned a slow circle, made slits of his smouldering eyes and methodically studied the room's layout.

He needed no blueprints to tell him



that the safe he had just opened was nothing more than a blind; that somewhere in the room, cunningly concealed, would be another safe, a hundred times more difficult to open, containing what the Scarlet Thief had come to remove.

Quietly he went from one wall to another, lifting pictures, replacing them. An examination of the fireplace disclosed the same negative results. Standing wide-legged by the table, Wayne stared at the moose-head above the fireplace, reflected that Vernon Dore was too small a man, too stumpy of stature, and could not possibly reach above the mantel without using something to stand on—an inconvenience which a man of Dore's type would certainly not countenance.

Grimly, Wayne paced across the room and stood before a glass-doored bookcase in the corner. A moment later he was down on one knee, quietly removing the volumes of an encyclopedia on the second shelf from the top. A smile turned his lips when he found what he wanted.

In the rear wall of the case, behind the aperture where the books had been, a square of black metal gleamed with dull significance. Once again Wayne's sensitive fingers went to work.

It took a long time. Again and again he drew his arm from the aperture and rubbed the tips of his fingers over the dark gray cloth of his trouser-leg until they were hot with friction. Tiny beads of sweat formed on his forehead, made snail-tracks down the sucked-in flesh of his cheeks. When at last he rocked back and let a sign of triumph whisper through his lips, his extended arm was numb to the elbow, his body lame and stiff from remaining so long in a crouch.

Eagerly then he slid his aching hand back into its suede glove, removed papers and envelopes from the safe and centered his attention on them. The sound of his own breathing stifled an almost inaudible whisper of footsteps in the corridor outside the door. Had he turned and stared at the threshold behind him, he would have known that he was being watched.

But he did not turn.

In the doorway, a slender feminine figure stood motionless as a carved statue, regarding him with unblinking eyes. Those same eyes, not so long ago, had created a queer throbbing sensation in Justin Wayne's heart; now they were cold, calculating, watching the Scarlet Thief as animal-eyes might have watched an unsuspecting victim.

Yet the girl made no move to interrupt Wayne's labor. Standing there in the narrow aperture provided by the quarter-open door, she took in his every move while he carefully sorted the safe's contents and thrust a selected wad of envelopes into an inner pocket of his coat. Even when he took a leather wallet from his pocket, opened it and removed a small scarlet-and-white card, the girl did not reveal her presence.

**S**ILENTLY, with gloved hands, Wayne slid the Scarlet Thief's card into the safe, closed the door and methodically wiped the dials with a clean silk handkerchief. Without haste he replaced the heavy volumes of the encyclopedia, then pushed himself erect and caught a long slow breath of satisfaction as he peered down at his completed work.

When he turned to the door a moment later, the doorway was empty . . . and Justin Wayne, pacing toward it with a slow smile twisting his lips, had no idea that a slender, dark-eyed girl had stood on that same threshold for fully five minutes, watching the Scarlet Thief at work.

Leaving the room, Wayne closed the door behind him, turned and strode silently along the corridor. At the head of the stairs an instant later, he stopped and stared down at a feminine figure climbing up toward him. Geraldine King, reaching his side, gave voice to an exaggerated "Woof!" from the exertion of her climb, and said with feigned bewilderment:

"Where on earth have you been? I've been looking all over."

"Been messing about on my lonesome," Wayne shrugged.

"Isn't that dangerous?"



"Why?"

"Well, I mean if anything should happen, or those vicious detectives should discover later that anything *has* happened—" She turned a gaze on him that was not merely so innocent as it seemed—"you could easily be blamed for it."

"Meaning just what?" Wayne demanded slowly.

"Nothing at all, silly." She put an impulsive hand on his arm. "I want to talk to you. May I?"

Wayne's reply was a low laugh, mainly a grunt of relief. He leaned against the banister, gazed steadily into the girl's face. When she spoke again, nothing in her voice indicated that she had seen him at work and knew him to be the Scarlet Thief.

"I'm worried about my father," she said thoughtfully. "Jason Frank accused me of knowing where he is, but that's not true. And I'm terribly afraid that the—the person who threatened him will know where he is."

"I wouldn't worry, if I were you."

"But I *am*." She stopped, stared at him. "You mean, there's no danger?"

"Right now," Wayne said quietly, "I think I could tell you the name of the killer, and be reasonably sure of not making a blunder."

The girl's eyes widened. At that moment, as she stood motionless, she seemed very small, very feminine. "You *know* who he is?"

"I have a pretty fair idea. What time is it?"

"It's about eleven thirty."

"Unless I'm mistaken, we'll have a visitor before midnight. Knowing the man as well as I do—in fact, having lived with him—" Wayne shrugged, pushed his lean body away from the banister and put a hand on the girl's arm. "I may be all wrong, of course. I've been wrong before."

She said quietly: "Tell me one thing. Do you think the police are right in believing the killer and the Scarlet Thief to be the same person?"

Something in the girl's voice, in the

way she was looking at him, made Wayne think twice before answering. Suspicion clawed him. His unblinking eyes swept the girl's face, seeking proof that his suspicions were correct. Then he forced a shrug, said noncommittally: "I wouldn't know about that. The police have a lot of queer ideas. Suppose you ask Jason Frank."

"Suppose you tell *me*," she countered, "where Jason Frank has gone to!"

"What?"

"The others," she said, "are all downstairs in the living-room. Mr. Frank is not."

Wayne's mouth screwed into a scowl. He was silent a moment, then put firm fingers on the girl's shoulder, turned her around. "Better join the others. I've got a job to do, alone."

"A job?"

"That crack I just made about being sure of the killer's identity—just cross it off the list. I'm not sure of anything. Go on downstairs, young lady."

SHE went without protest, and he stood wide-legged at the top of the stairs, watching her intently. At the foot of the staircase she turned, glanced up at him as if bewildered. Silently he backed away, made fists of his hands as he pondered what she had just told him.

So Jason Frank had "disappeared." Jason Frank, not long ago, had also made a phone call at a time when someone else—*perhaps* someone else—had phoned Justin Wayne and delivered a honey-smooth threat of annihilation. Things were beginning to dovetail.

But Wayne had other and more immediate things to consider. Geraldine King had acted queerly, had deliberately let him know, without actually saying so in so many words, that she knew significant things about him. He scowled, turned slowly and stared at the door of Vernon Dore's study.

Was it possible that the girl had seen him prowl into that room or out of it?

He dismissed the thought as being ridiculous. If the girl had seen the Scar-



let Thief at work, she would have gone immediately to the detectives downstairs. She owed Justin Wayne nothing.

Wayne walked down the corridor, his head lowered, both hands jammed in his trousers pockets. He had sent the girl downstairs because he needed time to think before confronting her again. But his thoughts were running in circles, getting nowhere . . .

He swung about, paced back toward the stairs, walking stiffly, mechanically, as men pace the floor when suffering from insomnia. Behind him, at the deep end of the corridor where the amber light from the chandeliers did not penetrate, a shadowed form moved away from the wall, snaked forward on soundless feet.

That hunch-shouldered shape had been standing motionless in the wall-shadows for a very long while; had been there even before the Scarlet Thief had slipped silently out of Vernon Dore's study, after removing certain valuables from the financier's safe.

Now, on swift, silent feet, the black-faced watcher glided toward Wayne's shambling form. And Wayne, unsuspecting, continued his slow parade toward the stairs, concerned only with his own mental problems.

Wayne reached the head of the stairs, and stopped. Boot-soles scraped the floor at his back. He swung about, frowning. His frown became a gasping intake of breath as he stared wide-eyed into the menacing face of the thing that lunged toward him.

A knife gleamed in an upflung hand as the monster's hurtling body covered the last few feet of intervening space. Peering at the blade in utter fascination, Wayne got out of its way almost too late. The weapon slashed viciously, made a sharp whine past his retreating face.

Then he regained command of his nerves.

He spun like a top, drove his bent body in a headlong charge at the killer's legs. The knife, descending toward him, stopped with a jerk when his upthrust

hand forked the fiend's knife-wrist. Locked in each other's embrace, Wayne and the black-faced ghoul stumbled along the wall, swayed perilously at the head of the steep staircase.

Below, in the downstairs corridor, quick footsteps echoed between dark walls. Wayne stared, saw Geraldine King running toward the foot of the ramp. Peering up, the girl gave voice to a sudden shrill outcry, turned and began shouting.

Wayne saw no more. A savage leg lashed up, caught him between the knees and hurled him back. For a sickening instant the killer's knife arched above his throat; lunging away from it, he crashed into the newel-post at the head of the banister.

The black-faced fiend leaped after him with a rasp of triumph. Sprawled on the floor, Wayne gaped up into the man's face, made a frantic attempt to roll from under. The blade descended, missed its mark and slashed through the sleeve of his coat, imbedding itself with a dull *ping* in the floor. Hauling it free, the killer slapped a clawing hand against Wayne's throat, aimed the knife for another thrust.

Wayne's knees pistoned up, made a crunching sound in the man's chest. Breath exploded from the fiend's featureless face; the man rocked backward, clutched empty air.

Wayne voiced a sudden snarl of triumph and, from a prone position on the floor, drove both feet savagely into the man's stomach.

Still gripping the knife, the killer crashed out into space, pitched headlong over the rim of the stairs. Before Wayne could grope erect, the man's contorted body was thumping in grotesque bounds towards the lower floor, each vicious impact wringing a new scream of terror from the fiend's throat.

At the bottom of the stairs, the knotted bulk skidded out across the corridor, rolled almost to the feet of Geraldine King as the girl stood on stiff legs with one hand clamped to her mouth.



THEN, with fantastic quickness, the murderer lunged erect, slammed the girl aside and raced down the passage toward the rear of the house. When Wayne reached the foot of the staircase in a stumping, gasping descent, the lower hall contained only the sprawled body of the girl. Heavy footsteps came mockingly from the deeper darkness, and a door slammed.

Wayne took one look at the girl, saw that she was terrified but unhurt. Without waiting to help her up, he jammed a hand into his pocket, clawed out a gun, flung himself along the passage.

His feet pounded the carpeted floor, took him the length of the corridor in a headlong rush. Only an outflung hand saved him from crashing into the door which the fleeing man had slammed shut at the corridor's end. The door jarred open. Stumbling on the sill, Wayne ploughed forward into a kitchen, skated half the length of a smooth linoleum carpet before skidding to a halt.

A frosted glass dome-light provided illumination. In the opposite wall a second door hung open, revealing an extension of the corridor beyond. A light went on in the corridor as Wayne leaped across the threshold.

Midway down the passage, a contorted shape lay sprawled on the floor, arms and legs extended at grotesque angles. Beyond it, Jason Frank was pacing forward with floor-eating strides. The detective saw Wayne, stopped abruptly and stood glaring at him, then said raspingly:

"What's going on here? What is this?"

Wayne's eyes tightened. The sight of Jason Frank standing there in the passage while *another* man lay limp on the floor, brought a scowl of deep bewilderment to his mouth, clashed with the thoughts festering in his brain. He went slowly forward, bent over the sprawled shape at his feet.

Stiffly he reached down, turned the lifeless body over.

A featureless black face with glazed eyes stared sightlessly up at him. From

the man's side, below the heart, protruded the carmine hilt of a knife: the same knife which had come within inches of drinking Wayne's life-blood.

The blood that smeared the death-weapon now, bubbling thickly from a jagged, gaping wound in the man's body and puddling the floor beneath, was the killer's own.

Wayne's probing fingers went to the black face, made contact with a tight-fitting silk mask. Drawing the mask from the dead features, he formed a mental picture of what would lie beneath. There would be a leprous white head, smooth as a billiard ball—a sunken, malformed mass of ghoulish features ugly enough to bring a shudder to any man who had courage enough to examine them closely. . . .

The mask came away in his fingers. Staring down at the killer's uncovered face, Wayne caught a sudden sibilant breath, hunched himself closer and gaped with widening eyes.

The monster's face was not a ghoulish mass of obscenity. It was lean and sallow, and quite normal except for its pallor of death.

*It was the face of Lareno, the Italian detective.*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

WAYNE pushed himself slowly erect and stared mutely across the dead man's body into the narrowed eyes of Jason Frank. Frank said again: "What happened here? What is this?"

"Lareno," Wayne muttered. He was thinking aloud, not talking for Frank's benefit. "Lareno. Good Lord!" His mouth hooked into a scowl; his brows bunched together over thoughtful eyes.

Judging from appearances, the dead man on the floor had accidentally killed himself—either by stabbing himself during his headlong fall down the staircase, or by stumbling and falling on the blade during his wild flight through the corridor. But Wayne was not so sure.



It was also possible, more than possible, that the killer had *met* Lareno in the corridor—met him with a sudden savage thrust of the knife, then transferred that mask of tight-fitting black silk to Lareno's dead face, and escaped. If so, the fiend could have fled in only one direction: the same direction from which Jason Frank had made an appearance only a few minutes later!

Wayne gathered the dead man's body in his arms and said quietly to Frank: "Suppose we find the others and check up on what *did* happen." Stumbling a little under Lareno's weight, he walked back through the kitchen, paraded into the main corridor and stopped by the staircase where the black-masked murderer had hurtled headlong. Geraldine King was standing there, staring. He said to her:

"I'd like to talk to you, in the living-room."

In the living-room he lowered his bloody burden to a divan, turned on spread legs and leaned against the table, ignoring the stares of the servants who sat gaping at him. Geraldine King lowered herself into a chair, sat motionless, gripping the chair-arms. Jason Frank swayed forward, glared down at Lareno and scowled blackly.

"Suppose we do some figuring," Wayne said. "In the first place—" He turned a level gaze on Frank—"all this running around you've been doing needs some explaining."

"Not to you, it doesn't," Frank growled. "I'll *ask* questions, not answer 'em!"

"Oh. So that's it."

"You're right that's it. Seems to me you did plenty of running around, yourself."

"As a matter of fact, I did." Wayne put a cigarette in his lips, sucked it without lighting it. Quietly he turned on the girl. "When did Lareno leave this room?"

"He was gone when I came here after talking to you upstairs," Geraldine said.

Jason Frank growled: "And that proves what?"

Wayne's answer was a shrug. He put a match to his cigarette, looked levelly at Frank over the sputtering match-head. One thing was certain: the fiend who had attacked him in the upstairs corridor and then raced wildly through the kitchen in an effort to escape, had not come into the house from the outside. With two of Holtz's best men on duty out there, no man could have entered without being seen.

The would-be murderer, then, was one of three men: Wayne, Lareno, or Jason Frank. The fact that Lareno had been found in the corridor, apparently killed by his own hand and still wearing the black facial covering, pointed to him as being the monster. The police would accept such an answer if they could find a motive for Lareno's madness. But the police could be wrong.

Turning quietly, Wayne faced Geraldine King and said: "If Frank has no objections, I'd like to speak to you alone a moment."

Frank said nothing. The girl rose, followed Wayne into the corridor. Wayne's hand found her arm and closed there over warm flesh.

"Listen." He lowered his voice so that Frank, if listening, would hear only a wordless murmur. "After what's happened here, I don't believe this house is safe for you."

The girl said evenly: "Neither do I."

"And for reasons of my own," Wayne declared, "I don't want to be here when the police make a thorough investigation. Can you frame some excuse for coming with me?"

"I could tell him—" She stared coldly, seemed to be informing him that the excuse need not entirely be a false one—"that I'm suspicious of you and want to keep check on you."

Wayne's grim smile was proof that he knew what she was thinking. He nodded, followed her back into the room and scooped his hat and coat from a chair. When he paced into the hall again, Geraldine King talked to Jason Frank alone.

Her words brought a crooked scowl to



Frank's thick lips, caused the detective's eyes to take on a dull glint. He answered her gutturally, dragging the words deep out of his throat. Joining Wayne in the hall, the girl said unemotionally: "Mr. Frank has no objections. I rather think he hopes you'll try to murder me, just so he can get something on you."

Wayne took her arm and led her silently to the door.

GERALDINE KING said little as she sat close beside him in the seat of the coupe, on the way to the big house on Parkman Street. She seemed concerned with problems of her own, mental problems that kept her face in the same fixed expression from the time she stepped into the car until Wayne opened the door to let her out again. As he led her up the concrete walk, she said suddenly:

"It seems strange that father has made no attempt to let me know where he is. I'm worried. If anything has happened to him—"

"I take it," Wayne scowled, "you don't believe the man in the black mask is the one who sent your stepfather that death-threat."

"I'm—I'm not sure."

"Queer how our thoughts run along the same lines." He used his own key to open the door. "Somewhere in this mess there's a man with a face like something that came out of a grave. Or maybe that's a mask, too. At any rate, he's still at large and still dangerous."

The big house was dark, silent as he closed the door and led the way down the hall. The girl kept behind him, seemed to be on guard against any surprise move that might be forthcoming. Not until he had switched on a light and pushed open the door to the living-room did she relax.

"We're alone here?" she said stiffly.

"Looks that way." Wayne tossed his hat and coat on a chair, rocked his head around and listened a moment. "I told Jonsen he might lock up and leave the place if he wanted to. Evidently he took the suggestion." He helped her out of her coat, draped the garment over his own

and walked across the room to the liquor cabinet. "You'll have a drink?"

"Make it short and harmless."

He nodded, reached out and turned on the radio. "I'm not at all sure why I brought you here. The real reason, I suppose, was to get you out of danger."

"Was that the real reason?"

"Frankly, no. I wanted to talk to you."

"About what?"

"I don't know," Wayne admitted.

The radio came in with a low hum, increasing in volume. It was turned to short-wave; the hum increased to an annoying drone full of static. Wayne put down a half-filled glass and leaned sideways to bring in music. His hand froze on the dial.

Through the fabric fancy-front of the lowboy a harsh voice blurted words into the room. Geraldine King put one hand to her throat and gripped the edge of the table with the other. Wayne stood rigid.

". . . Attention, car forty-two. Attention, car forty-two. Go to four-three Parkman Street, home of Justin Wayne. Four-three Parkman Street, home of Justin Wayne. Anonymous phone call says murder has been committed. Investigate. . . ."

The voice ate its way through static, went on droning, repeating the same damning indictment. When it stopped, Wayne backed away from the lowboy, turned and said grimly:

"That's the height of something or other. Tune in for dance music and find yourself accused of murder in the very house you're sitting in."

There was no humor in the words; he was not trying to be funny. Deliberately he took up two glasses, walked across the carpet and handed one of them to the girl. "The amount of time we have to find out what this is all about," he growled, "depends on how far away car forty-two is. You wait here."

He gulped his drink, slapped the empty glass on the table and strode from the room. It took him sixty seconds to hike down the hall, parade through the kitchen and push open the door of Ven Jonsen's



room in the servants' quarters.

Jonsen's room was empty.

Turning, Wayne strode back again, pushing his hand against light-switches whenever he passed them. On his way down the corridor he peered into the study, the dining-room, the small den which was supposed to be a library. None of the rooms contained anything to corroborate the radio's rasping accusation.

When he re-entered the living-room, Geraldine King was standing stiff in the doorway, waiting. She asked the obvious question; his answer was a curt shake of his head. Anxiously the girl said: "You'd better make certain. If anything has happened here, and the police find it out—"

Wayne glared around him, realized that a complete examination of the house was necessary, if car forty-two would give him time enough to make it. He went along the corridor again with huge strides, turned left toward the staircase that led to the landing above.

AT the base of the stairs he stopped, looked down at the floor. The girl came up behind him and said: "What is it? Have you found something?"

A broad white blotch marred the hardwood surface, angled out into the carpet. The carpet was eaten away, as if liquid fire had swept over it, foaming through nap and fabric. An odor of bitter almonds invaded Wayne's nostrils.

His gaze swept the floor and followed the acid-line to its source, where it curled under the closed door of a clothes closet. One stride took him to the door. His hand forked the knob, turned; the door swung outward.

Wayne stepped back just in time. His outflung arm caught the thing that fell forward on top of him; the weight of the thing slapped him sideways and he lost his grip. The thing jarred down, thumped dully on the acid-eaten floor and lay in a sprawled heap, its head lolling against Geraldine King's ankles.

The girl recoiled, voiced a sudden outcry of horror. When she pulled her foot

away, the thing's head made a soft spongy sound against the carpet.

Wayne said, "Good Lord!" in a whisper, and leaned forward from the waist, gaping. He knew the dead man's identity even before he reached out and pawed the body over. When he peered into the man's upturned face, he sucked a sharp breath and felt his own face go pale and tight.

The girl said thinly: "Who—is it?"

The shape on the floor had no features. Hair and flesh were a bloated mass of acid-eaten horror, as if the man had been hung head-first in a vat of liquid fire. White bones gleamed like pointing fingers in a gargoyle of cavernous flesh-pits and congealed puddles of black blood. Only the man's clothing and the contour of his sprawled body identified him.

Wayne stood erect, leaned against the wall and clenched both hands in an effort to drive the horror from his brain. He said dully: "It's Jonsen. Ven Jonsen. Only yesterday I was ready to accuse him of being the one who killed Naigler and tried to murder me. Now—"

He paced forward and peered into the closet, to make sure that the valet had been its only occupant. When he turned again, there was a glint of desperation in his narrowed eyes that caused Geraldine King to stand away from him and stare.

He pushed the closet door shut, bent down and raised Jonsen's body in his arms. Grimly he said: "Put out the lights. All of them. We're getting out of here!"

"You mean—"

"If the police come and find nothing, they'll cut their investigation short. They'll think the tip-off was a fake, from some crank trying to be funny. Get the coats out of the living-room. Turn the radio off and break those two glasses in the fireplace." He swayed forward, rocked under the weight of his burden. "Meet me outside, at the car. When the cops come, they'll find the place empty and dark and never know we've been here."

Without waiting for an answer, he



strode down the hall, with the valet's body dangling limp in his arms, its head thumping his thighs. He had trouble getting the door open. When he stepped over the sill and peered both ways along the street, he grunted with relief at finding the street empty.

Hurriedly he descended the steps, paced down the concrete walk toward the car. Then he realized his mistake.

On the running-board of the car, something moved. Abruptly, Wayne stood still, stood staring. A slump-shouldered shape groped erect and swayed on drunken legs, gazing at him. The fellow took two steps forward, rocked grotesquely and jabbed a hand to his mouth, drooling through spread fingers. He wore evening clothes.

He blinked at Wayne, made eyes at the limp form in Wayne's arms. He said thickly: "Wha's matter? 'D somebody pash out, huh? Huh?"

Wayne said curtly: "One side, you." Pushing forward, he shoved the drunk off-balance by ramming Ven Jonsen's limp legs into the man's swaying body. Growling in his throat, he clawed the car door open, propped the dead body in the seat. The drunk, regaining balance, glared at him sullenly and flung out: "All right, a' right. I was on'y askin', tha's all."

Wayne walked around the car and was sliding in behind the wheel when Geraldine King came down the stone steps. The girl ran forward, stopped abruptly when she saw the drunk, then walked quickly to the car and put a trembling hand on the door-handle. She shuddered when she saw the dead man propped at Wayne's side.

"Get in," Wayne said.

She got in, wedged her slender form in the narrow space between door and dead man, and closed the door by slamming it. Obviously she was trying hard not to let her nerves get the best of her. As the car droned from the curb she said anxiously: "Who was that man?"

"What man?" Wayne growled.

"On the sidewalk."

"A drunk. And thank the Lord he *was* drunk."

At the end of Parkman Street, Wayne swung the wheel hard left, turned the car into the Avenue. Headlights drilled through the dark toward him, along the Avenue's wide stem. The lights slowed as they reached the corner. Wayne said suddenly: "Lean toward me. Cover Jonsen's face."

THE approaching lights were part of a small coupe. Wayne caught the hoarse drone of a car radio as the machine swept past. Caught something else, too: the red police-insignia on the coupe's door.

"That," he said, "was car forty-two. Just two minutes too late."

He took the next turn right, pushed the accelerator to the floor-board. A glance at the watch on his wrist told him the hour was 2 A. M. In this part of Chestnut Hill, 2 A. M. meant an absolute emptiness, a complete cessation of living. On the left, as the car roared down a winding black road, the waters of the reservoir gleamed dully; houses on the right were dark in sleep.

He took the road around the reservoir, braked the car when he reached a spot sufficiently isolated for his purpose. Climbing out, he strode around the machine, opened the door on the girl's side and said grimly:

"Pile out, sister. I'm getting rid of the passenger."

She shuddered as he leaned over and dragged Ven Jonsen's body off the seat. Swaying with his burden, he walked across the gravel sidewalk, made tracks into a dark mass of trees and underbrush that sloped down to the water.

In a thick clump of snowball bushes, a hundred yards from the road, he lowered the corpse and left it. When daylight came, the gnarled bushes would effectively conceal the body from passers-by who might stroll along the walk above. He took a last long look at the dead man's mutilated face; and in the dark the hideous gargoyle glowed with an almost



supernatural radiance, as if endowed with life in death.

Geraldine King said, when he slid into the seat beside her: "What's next on this mad program?"

"I drop you off where you can get a cab to take you home."

"And then?" She stared at him queerly.

"I go into hiding, and play a lone hand from now on."

She said nothing more until the car was back on the Avenue, droning through Brookline Village on the way to town. Then, frowning, she declared: "That's hardly fair to me."

"What is?"

"Your intention of playing a lone hand. After all, I'm in this now whether I want to be or not."

"The most they can do," Wayne said, "is fire questions at you. Tell them whatever you feel like. Tell them I forced you to stay with me even though you had no desire to. Make me out to be a vicious abductor, if you want to."

"But I don't want to," the girl declared quietly.

"Why not?" He stopped the car a hundred feet from a red neon sign that said GARAGE—24 HOUR SERVICE. Turning in the seat, he looked at her levelly, put firm fingers on her hand. "You're okay, sister. But this is where we part company. If you're found with me, it means trouble; the kind of trouble a good girl should keep clear of."

"Where are you going?"

"To a dirty little tenement—" He hesitated, scowled and shook his head. Then he was aware suddenly that she was gripping his hand hard, and looking straight at him. "To a tenement in the North End," he finished dryly. "I made preparations long ago for just this sort of emergency."

"I want the address."

"Do you?"

"I'm not just a curious woman," she said. "I know who you are and what you are. And you're going to need me."

Wayne sat very still, returning her

gaze. If he needed help, this girl would give it without betraying him to the police; he knew that. "The name is Angelo Ferri," he said. "One-seventeen Quigley Street, off Causeway. Got it?"

"Angelo Ferri. One-seventeen Quigley Street, off Causeway." She opened the car door, slid off the seat and stood by the running-board. "Good luck," she said, and walked away.

## CHAPTER NINE

WAYNE drove down Huntington Avenue to Stuart, cruised down Stuart and turned into the Motor Mart Garage. The parking-clerk on the main level gave him a ticket, said "Fourth floor, sir," and Wayne put the car in first speed, drove it up the winding ramps and parked it.

He descended in the elevator, walked out of the building and got into a cab. He told the cab-driver: "North Station." At North Station he got out, paid the driver and made a pretense of walking into the station. Cab-drivers sometimes had hawk eyes, and could have uncanny memories when pumped for information by the police.

Wayne walked a semicircle inside the building, left by another door and strolled up Causeway to Quigley Street. In front of the fourth house from the corner he stopped, stared around him before climbing the high wooden steps.

The house was like every other house on the street: a three-story frame tenement exuding cheapness and squalor. And it was not Justin Wayne who keyed the door open, closed it behind him and slouched up the black staircase to the dismal flat under the roof; it was Angelo Ferri.

Three weeks ago, when the Scarlet Thief had first begun operations, Wayne had made careful preparations in case anything should back-fire. Angelo Ferri was one of the preparations. Renting the Quigley Street tenement under that name, Wayne had stifled the suspicions of an Italian landlady by handing her a



month's rent in advance and informing her, in confidential undertones, that she might see very little of him. Which had been all right with the lady, because North End landladies seldom asked questions, provided they were sure of their money.

Now, letting himself silently into his third-floor tenement, Wayne closed and locked the door behind him, made a light and paced into the low-ceilinged chamber that served as a bedroom. The window was open two inches at the bottom; the shade was up. Black train-soot, filtered in from the North Station yards nearby, lay in a winding-sheet over floor, bed and furniture.

Leisurely Wayne removed his clothes, walked in his stockinged feet to a cupboard and took down a cheap tan suit more in harmony with the role of Angelo Ferri. When he sprawled out on the bed ten minutes later, his own clothes were wrapped in newspaper and hidden far back on a high shelf in the cupboard. No vestige of Justin Wayne remained.

The man who lay on the bed, staring thoughtfully up at the dirty ceiling, had greasy hair, black-rimmed fingernails, a sallow face gray with ingrained dirt. He was Angelo Ferri. And Angelo Ferri, Wayne realized, was sadly in need of sleep. Angelo Ferri was exhausted.

It was broad daylight when he awoke. For a while he lay limp, pondering the events of the night. Then he pushed himself off the bed, jammed his feet into cheap working-shoes and took a long look at himself in the sooty mirror above the bureau.

Satisfied, he shambled to the door, went out, and locked the door after him. His wrist-watch, which he pulled from a pocket of his trousers and then stuffed back again, said eleven-twenty.

In the downstairs hall a fat Italian-looking woman was swaying back and forth in a rocking-hair. She had a paper bag full of vegetables in her apron, and was cutting carrots with a knife, letting the small pieces plop into a shallow aluminum pan. She blinked her small eyes

when Wayne descended the stairs. She said: "How you do, Mr. Ferri. I don't see you very often."

Wayne forced a thin-lipped grin and put thumb and forefinger on the woman's plump cheek. "I work hard out of town these days, Mrs. Vitulli. Now maybe I be around for a while."

He went out of the house and bought a take-out order of spaghetti and coffee in an Italian restaurant around the corner. On the way back he took three papers off a fruit-store newsrack and dropped pennies into the proprietor's grubby palm. He said to Mrs. Vitulli on his way up the stairs: "Maybe a young lady will come to visit me today. If she does, you let her in and tell her where she find me, please."

The Italian woman leered and pumped her head up and down.

ONCE again Wayne locked the door after letting himself into his third-floor tenement. In a drawer of the kitchen table he found spoons and a fork; from a shelf above the sink he took down a plate thick with dust, washed and wiped it and plopped it on the table.

While he was eating, he studied the morning papers.

They were worth studying. His own face stared up at him mockingly; above it, glaring headlines shrieked out:

#### EX DETECTIVE SOUGHT AS KILLER

JUSTIN WAYNE KNOWN TO BE  
SCARLET THIEF AND ACID MUR-  
DERER: Mysterious Phone Call Lures  
Police to Scene of Latest Atrocity, But  
Wayne Escapes with Woman Com-  
panion.

"Police stated today that they have positive proof of the identity of the notorious Acid Murderer and are even now closing in on him. Early this morning the fiend claimed yet another innocent victim and let another horribly mutilated corpse in his bloody wake.

"The latest person to meet death at the



hands of this mad killer, is the murderer's own valet, a former pickpocket and confidence man known as Ven Jonsen, whose name graces police records in several large cities throughout the country.

"Acting on a mysterious telephone call to LaRonge Street Headquarters, which gave information that murder had been committed in the suburban home of Justin Wayne, ex State Detective, police dispatched a cruise-car to the scene at approximately two o'clock this morning. They found the house deserted, but were informed by a man in evening clothes, whose name has not been divulged, but who was apparently walking down Parkman Street in a drunken condition, that Wayne and a woman left the house only a few moments before.

"It was revealed that Wayne and the girl carried with them the body of the Acid Murderer's latest victim, and drove away in Wayne's own car.

"The body, that of Ven Jonsen, Wayne's personal valet, was later discovered near the Newline Reservoir, only a short distance from Parkman Street. Police were led to the hiding-place by reports that a suspicious-looking car had stopped near the reservoir in the early hours of the morning, while its occupants were seen to indulge in queer actions.

"An investigation of Justin Wayne's home disclosed more than a dozen scarlet-and-white 'calling cards' identical with those which have been left by the so-called Scarlet Thief at the scenes of his crimes during the past several weeks.

"Police, believing that Wayne will not have fled the city, are now seeking the killer's new hideout. At an early hour this morning, State Detectives had already succeeded in locating the car in which Wayne and the woman fled after disposing of the mutilated corpse. The car was discovered in the Motor Mart Garage, on Stuart Street.

"State Detective Jason Frank declared emphatically this morning that he will have Wayne in custody within twenty-four hours, and will also have the woman. Authorities have so far stubbornly re-

fused to give out the woman's name, but it is strongly rumored that she is Miss Geraldine King, step-daughter of Vernon Dore, one of the city's most prominent bankers."

Wayne turned the page, glanced through the rest of the story and threw it aside when he discovered it to be merely repetition and elaboration. In the second paper he found a significant statement that caused the muscles of his face to bulge beneath drawn flesh.

"Orders have been issued by Commissioner John Joseph Holtz that no unnecessary risks are to be taken by any of the officers assigned to the task of bringing the killer to justice. 'This is no ordinary case,' the Commissioner declared bitterly this morning. 'Justin Wayne is no ordinary killer. He is an educated, intelligent, cold-blooded murderer who already has committed heinous crimes for the sheer delight of dealing in death. My orders to those assigned to the task of capturing him—and that includes every police officer in the State, as well as every State and City Detective—are to shoot on sight and shoot to kill!'"

WAYNE leaned back in his chair, gulped the rest of his coffee and pushed the plate of spaghetti away from him. He was no longer hungry. Scooping the newspapers into a pile, he carried them into the bedroom, dumped them on the bed and sprawled out beside them.

For the next hour he read and assimilated every word that had been written about the Scarlet Thief and Justin Wayne. His own future safety depended on an intimate knowledge of every slightest detail. When he finally thrust the papers aside and looked at his watch, the watch-hands stood at five minutes after two . . . and in the lower hall, a doorbell was droning.

Wayne swung both feet to the floor, walked into the other room and stood listening. He heard the guttural voice of Mrs. Vitulli, then a slow thump of ascending footsteps. The footsteps stopped on the third-floor landing, outside his



door. The door trembled to an impact of knuckles.

Wayne stood stiff, said quietly: "Who is it?"

"It's Jerry," a girl's voice answered.

He scowled, then realized that "Jerry" meant Geraldine. When he opened the door, Geraldine King was standing motionless in the hall.

She smiled and walked into the room without saying anything. She looked tired, and she was wearing the same clothes she had worn when he had last seen her. But she was still slender, still lovely, and had an air of calm competence that wiped the anxious frown from Wayne's dry lips.

He closed the door and stood facing her, waiting for her to speak. She sat in the chair he had used while eating dinner, then looked at him soberly, took a cigarette from a pack he had left lying on the table, and said:

"Have you seen the papers?"

Wayne nodded.

"All of them?"

"All I could get when I went out."

"Unless you've been out within half an hour," the girl said, "you ain't heard nothin'. Every paper in town has indulged in a special edition. Here."

She took a folded news-sheet from inside her coat and held it toward him. He opened it, stared at the headlines.

They were in red-ink streamers, half again as large as those on the papers he had just finished studying. Luridly they shrieked at him: POLICE COMMISSIONER HOLTZ NEXT ON ACID MURDERER'S LIST. DEATH THREAT PHONED BY KILLER TO POLICE HEADQUARTERS AND TO EVERY NEWSPAPER IN CITY. MIDNIGHT NAMED AS MURDER HOUR.

Below that, in somber black type, appeared the significant statement: "Holtz accepts challenge; refuses to leave town. Cordon of Police will surround Commissioner's home as death hour approaches."

Wayne read the details, lowered the paper and stared into the face of the girl

who was watching him. He took a cigarette and lit it, said quietly through an up-curling snake of smoke:

"That rather simplifies things."

Geraldine King said: "Are you sure it doesn't complicate them? Suppose this killer succeeds in carrying out his threat. What then?"

"Then the newspapers will raise a war-cry against police inefficiency, and declare me to be the cleverest and most blood-thirsty killer in history. Within twelve hours they'll have me so closely hemmed in, I won't be able to breathe except through the blue serge of surrounding uniforms."

Geraldine King studied him gravely, seemed to realize that his attempts at humor were an outpouring of bitterness. She leaned forward; before she could speak, Wayne's mood suddenly changed. He strode toward her, clamped a hard hand on her shoulder and stared down at her.

"Look here, Miss King—"

"When I came in, I announced myself as Jerry," she said calmly. "Not that it makes any difference."

"All right. Look here, Jerry. You've read the papers; you know what they think of me and what I'm accused of. Then why in the name of all that's holy did you come here?"

"Meaning why should I associate with a thief?"

"Thief and murderer both."

"You're not a murderer," she shrugged. "You *are* the Scarlet Thief, yes. I knew that last night. While you were robbing father's safe, I was standing in the doorway, watching you." Wayne's sudden intake of breath had no effect on her, except to put a slow smile on her lips. "But I also know what the Scarlet Thief is, and why he has taken it upon himself to relieve certain prominent men of their money. So, why shouldn't I be here?"

"If you're found here, you'll be charged with—" Wayne spoke the words deliberately—"with being an accessory after the fact of murder."

"But you don't happen to be a mur-



derer. And I'm just as anxious as you are to find out who is the murderer. Furthermore, my step-father is still missing, and I can't find him without your help. I need you as much as you need me."

WAYNE paced the floor, clamped his lips hard on the cigarette protruding between them. He stared at the girl, knew that she was wrong, all wrong. She was a woman; she didn't realize, yet, the immensity of the thing she was doing. She didn't understand that when an ordinary newspaper—a paper that normally held up its hands in holy horror at the thought of using headlines in color—suddenly broke out with a red-ink streamer special, the affair was little short of revolution. And if the police found Jerry King in the custody of the man who was responsible for those streamer headlines, she was doomed.

"You've got to get out of here," Wayne said savagely. "God knows I need you and want you, but you've got to get out."

"And where am I supposed to go?" the girl demanded pleasantly.

"Go? Go home! Tell the police you—"

"It's too late for me to tell the police anything. I burned my bridges by not going home last night."

Wayne swung on her, stood wide-legged. "Where *did* you go last night?"

"To a crummy downtown hotel where good-looking girls get leering glances from every bald-headed man in the lobby. I registered as Miss Alice Dooley and made sure my door was locked on the inside."

"Good Lord!"

"So you see, I'd have a lot of explaining to do if I backed out of this now. I'd have to—"

Jerry King stopped talking, stared at Wayne with wide eyes as he jerked up a warning hand to silence her. Abruptly he stepped past her to the door, his eyes were narrowed in a lean, tight face; he made fists of his hands and said curtly in a voice barely audible:

"Get in the bedroom in a hurry. Close the door and keep quiet."

"Someone is coming?" Jerry breathed.

"It may be the police. If it is, don't waste any time finding out what happens to me. Go through the bedroom into the kitchen and down the back stairs. The downstairs door opens on an alley." He thrust a hand in a pocket of his Angelo Ferri coat, brought out the small automatic which had already served him in more than one grave emergency. Ascending footsteps reached the third-floor landing and stopped.

The steps began again, scuffed to the threshold. Behind Wayne, Jerry King tiptoed across the room, closed the bedroom door behind her. Wayne stood stiff, waiting.

Hard knuckles rapped the panels. Wayne put a hand on the knob, stood warily to one side and said evenly: "Who's there?"

A low voice answered him: "Gros-tumpf. Fedor Grostumpf."

"Who?"

"I work for Mr. Dore. I come with message from Mister Dore to Justin Wayne."

Wayne scowled, pulled the door open slowly. The man who called himself Fedor Grostumpf stood like an ape in the hallway, his hatless head outthrust, his large feet planted hard on the floor. He was of normal height but fat, with shoulders that looked powerful. He had a dark, Teutonic face and a shock of coarse dark hair. He said again, thickly: "I bring a message from Mister Dore, who I work for."

Wayne remembered that one of Vernon Dore's servants had been missing from the Dore home last night, and that Geraldine had suggested the man might possibly have accompanied her step-father to whatever hideout Dore had selected. This bull-necked Teuton was probably the missing servant—the gardener, if Wayne remembered right. With a shrug, Wayne dropped the automatic back into his pocket and said:

"Okay. Come in."



He stood aside and closed the door after the Teuton had lumbered over the sill. When he turned again, to demand what the man wanted, his mouth gulped open and his eyes gaped at a revolver in Grostumpf's handlike fist. The German's face was no longer dumb and expressionless; it was full of a hard, vicious snarl.

## CHAPTER TEN

FEDOR GROSTUMPF had evidently come to talk. His small eyes glared into Wayne's stiff face. He made a rumbling sound in his thick throat and motioned Wayne into the chair recently occupied by Jerry King.

"Sit down."

Wayne sat down, stared.

"You know why I come here?" Grostumpf demanded.

"I wouldn't know," Wayne said. "Evidently you didn't come from Vernon Dore after all. This is just a pleasant social call."

"I come here because I see Geraldine—" Grostumpf pronounced it "Jardine"—"come to this house and I know why she come for. Where is she?"

"What would you say if I told you she didn't come here?"

"I say you a liar!"

"Then I won't try it," Wayne shrugged. "She did come here, but she skipped out the back way fifteen minutes ago. So what?"

"This is what," the German growled. He leaned forward and made a stabbing movement with the big revolver, so viciously that Wayne gazed with unblinking eyes at the fat trigger-finger and wondered if the finger would accidentally exert pressure. "Me, I am not blind!" the German snarled. "I see how much Geraldine like you and how she go to your house, and how she pay attention to you."

Wayne said quietly: "Really?"

"So I come here to tell you she is my girl! Mine! You hear that?"

"I could hear it in China, the way you're yelling."

"Well, I tell you something else." Grostumpf swayed his big shoulders forward, thrust his head out and breathed sour fumes into Wayne's nostrils. "I have love for Geraldine for long time, for years, and I don't let any man like you take her from me so easy. She hang around you, she will get deeper in trouble."

Wayne said nothing, merely stared at the man and yearned for an opportunity to get past the menacing gun-muzzle.

"Already you have got her in plenty of trouble," the German said ominously. "Now you get her out of it, the way I tell you how."

"What way?"

"You go with me to the police and give yourself up. See? When they ask you about her, you tell them she was leave you last night right after you go away from Mister Dore's house. You swear to them you have not see her since then. You tell them it was a different woman who help you get rid of that dead man from your house later. Understan'?"

"Simple," Wayne said stiffly, "as falling downstairs. Suppose I refuse?"

"You will not refuse."

"And why won't I?"

"Because I give you this much choice. Either you go with me now to the police and swear by God you do like I say, or I kill you with this gun and go away from here alone, to find Geraldine." Grostumpf jabbed the revolver forward with a quick thrust of his thick arm, and swayed menacingly above Wayne's rigid body. "Now will you refuse?"

Wayne peered up at him, maintained grim silence for an interval of seconds. The German meant business; no doubt of it. The man's dark face was convulsed, almost black with a passion that would burst the stopper on the least provocation. Without doubt the man had made a fetish of Jerry King, worshipping her loveliness from a distance until a certain distorted sense of ownership had begun to fester in his moronic mind. He would tolerate no foolishness.



"Okay," Wayne said, and pushed himself slowly erect. "Let's go."

The German was close behind him as he walked sluggishly to the door. Wayne felt the man's hot breath on the nape of his neck, knew that the leveled gun hung not more than a foot from his back. He slouched forward, put his fingers on the doorknob.

Behind him—and behind Fedor Grostumpf—the door of the bedroom creaked open and Jerry King's voice said sharply: "Fedor! Are you *mad?*"

Wayne stiffened, heard the man behind him catch a sudden sharp breath of amazement. Without hesitation, he took the chance the girl had offered him, swung completely around on bent legs and made a windmill of his arms. One arm crashed against the German's gun-wrist, slapping the wrist aside. The other arched up, made savage contact with Grostumpf's startled face.

Grostumpf pitched backward, scuffed his feet on the floor in an effort to retain balance. Voicing a guttural oath, he jerked the gun level again, jammed the trigger as Wayne's lunging body hurtled into him. The revolver belched thunder, drove a screaming bullet into the wall, missing its mark by tenths of an inch.

The German cursed, let his face go livid. In the bedroom doorway, Jerry King stood rigid, her breast rising and falling as if worked by a bellows. Wayne's pile-driver fist slammed the German across the floor toward her.

Grostumpf crashed into the table, heaved himself away from it; the table skidded, rocked off its legs and spilled dishes and silverware. Crouching, the Teuton thrust both arms out and swayed like a wrestler, licked his thick lips and snarled. An explosive grunt jarred from his throat as Wayne crashed into him. Hurling off balance, Grostumpf bent double, brought up against the wall with a resounding thud.

Strong arms closed like cables over Wayne's middle. Wayne stiffened inside them, braced both feet on the floor and drove hard knuckles into the Teu-

ton's thick throat, struck three times in rapid succession and dumped the man in a sprawled heap amid broken dishes. Grostumpf's face blurred back; his head made crunching contact with an out-thrust leg of the table. He made a low moaning sound and lay still.

Wayne, swaying above him, caught a deep breath and stared down into the man's bleeding face.

IT was Jerry King who spoke first. Advancing with short quick steps, the girl put a hand on Wayne's arm and said anxiously: "Did he hurt you?"

Wayne said, "Some," and leaned against the upturned table. Peering at her, he forced a crooked grin. "The fellow evidently goes for you in a big way."

"If he does, I never knew it until just now."

"I don't doubt it. Anyway, his motives are okay, even if his methods are wacky. I get his idea, all right. I could get his motives, too, without half trying." Wayne rocked around, paced into the bedroom and came back dragging a crumpled sheet from the bed. "We'll truss him up just the same and then clear out of here, both of us."

"Clear out?" Jerry frowned. "Why?"

"The place is getting too popular. If an amateur like this chap could trail you here, the chances are someone else did, too. Then again—" He tore the sheet into strips and went to his knees beside the Teuton's slumped body—"Jason Frank is no fool, even if he does love me like poison. By now, he will have unearthed the cab-driver who took me from the Motor Mart to North Station last night, and he'll know that I'm either on a train or in hiding around here."

Jerry nodded soberly, walked to a window and stared out. Obviously she was realizing for the first time that trained detectives had ways of finding out things. Before Wayne had finished binding the German's arms and legs, the girl turned slowly and said in a low, tight voice:

"You said there was a back stairway to this place?"



Wayne stopped what he was doing, stared at her and said: "Why?"

"We're having visitors."

She said it calmly, with a mirthless smile curving her lips. The tone of her voice put cold fingers on Wayne's spine, made him lurch up and stride across the floor to stand beside her. His eyes narrowed when he peered through the unclean window and focused his gaze on the street below.

A police car had pulled up to the opposite curb and was disgorging four men, two in uniform. One of those not in uniform gazed up at the window where Wayne stood, then turned and gave orders to the others. The man's sloppy clothes, his squat, thick-shouldered frame, branded him as being Jason Frank.

"Just a nice little surprise party," Wayne murmured. "But we won't be here to receive callers."

He took the girl's arm, hustled her across the room into the bedroom. Her arm was trembling in his grip; her face had lost a little of its color and her lips were tight-pressed and white; but she made no complaint, did no whimpering. When he opened a door leading to a dark, dirty staircase, and pushed her ahead of him, she went without protest.

The stairs angled down in shadow, took Wayne and the girl past the second-floor landing to a closed door on street level. With one hand gripping the knob, Wayne stood listening, scowled when he heard the dull drone of the front doorbell vibrating through the building.

He took the girl's arm again, hurried her over the sill and down three wooden steps into an alley that ran behind the row of tenements. Farther down the alley a man in overalls was cleaning a dilapidated delivery wagon. The red and black sign on the wagon said *A. Papapoulos, Meats and Groceries*.

Wayne hiked forward, released Jerry King's arm and said: "Wait a minute." The girl stared at him, bewildered. He stepped up to the man in overalls, nodded to the man and said indifferently: "You want to make some easy money, buddy?"

The Greek turned, gaped with bleary

eyes and mumbled, "Huh?" He was bare-headed, fat-bellied and somewhat greasy; he looked about thirty years old. Wayne said again: "You want to make some easy money?" and realized that the man would have to be argued with.

That would take time. Too much time.

"Listen," Wayne growled. "It's like this." He stepped closer, closed his right hand hard and drove the hand against the Greek's jaw. The fellow burped, gaped with glassy eyes full of sudden astonishment, swayed his face into a second blow and slumped unconscious against the truck's running-board.

Wayne pulled him aside and yanked open the door. The key was in the switch. Jerry King climbed in beside him and said: "I'd hate to be married to you."

The truck was in motion, roaring down the alley, before Wayne answered. Without turning his head he said quietly: "Would you?"

"You're too competent. That poor Italian—"

"He was a Greek," Wayne said. "You can't argue with a Greek. I'd do the same to fifty of them if it meant getting you out of here." There was no particular malice in his voice, merely hard determination.

Jerry King put a hand on his arm and said softly: "It's all right. I know how you feel."

She was silent then. The delivery wagon groaned up a rutted incline at the alley's end, swung left and straightened with a lurch. Before it stopped swaying, Wayne swung the wheel hard right, turned the truck into another alley. A long while ago, the Scarlet Thief had taken time out to familiarize himself with every turn of the neighborhood.

THE truck went into a maze of side-streets and alleys and came out on a narrow cobblestoned by-way off Atlantic. Wayne braked it to a stop and said to the girl beside him: "Here's where you get out. Walk around the corner to North Station and take the first outbound train to anywhere. Buy your ticket on the train, not at the window, and don't hang



around the depot before you get aboard. If you have to wait, stay in the ladies' room."

His fingers closed hard over Jerry's hand. "Go as far as the train takes you, then hang low for a couple of days and when you think it's safe, mail some kind of an ad to the *Globe*, to let me know where you are." He peered down into her face. "And don't worry about me. I'm going to be almighty busy the next few hours, but not busy enough to forget you."

She nodded, slid out of the seat. Before turning away, she leaned forward, said quietly: "Kiss me."

"What?"

"I said—kiss me."

He scowled, mumbled awkwardly: "I was going to save that till later, but if you insist—" He held her in a hard embrace that brought a sob to her lips when he released them. She said quickly: "Thanks, pal. See you later!" and walked swiftly along the sidewalk. Before turning the corner she swung about, saluted him with an upthrust hand.

Wayne smiled grimly, hunched himself over the wheel and put the truck in motion again.

Half an hour later he abandoned the stolen wagon in a parking-lot near Boylston, paid a quarter for the privilege and slouched along Huntington to a cheap movie-house. A slow drizzle had brought early darkness; the Edison clock over the bridge said five after five. Out of town traffic was thick and slow.

Wayne bought a fifteen cent balcony ticket, walked up a flight of dirty wooden steps and slumped into a seat near an exit. A Mickey Mouse cartoon entertained him for ten minutes; then he went to sleep.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE home of Commissioner John Joseph Holtz was on Eadie Street, Chestnut Hill. At eleven-twenty p. m., on Venley Street three blocks toward the Avenue, Patrolman John Burke stopped in front of the tobacco

store of one Jacob Fink and went through the routine of testing the store door to be sure Fink had properly locked it after closing up.

John Burke then strolled on down Venley Street toward the corner of Murray, and had to pass by the doorway of a building which had once been a local of the B. P. O. E.

Burke took three steps past the shadowed doorway before a slouching form stepped out behind him. The man wore crumpled tan clothes, had the greasy hair and sallow face of Angelo Ferri. With a silent, abrupt stride he closed the gap between himself and Burke, and jabbed a black automatic into the patrolman's back.

"One move, Burke," Justin Wayne said grimly, "and I'll give it to you. Turn around and walk back to the doorway I just came out of."

John Burke's Irish face lost its ruddiness. He turned slowly, kept his hands above his belt. When he peered into the scowling face of the man with the gun, his eyes widened and showed white. He said thickly: "Justin Wayne! By the saints—"

Then, still gaping, he paced mechanically into the doorway of the Elks building.

"Open the door and walk in," Wayne ordered.

"The door's locked," Burke protested. "Only fifteen minutes ago I tried it—"

"Open it and walk in."

Burke obeyed. When he turned again, after crossing the threshold, a flashlight glare enveloped him. The door was closed, and Wayne, leaning against it, held the light in one hand, the leveled gun in the other. A flight of black stairs angled up into darkness; a wide corridor ran away into deep gloom. No sound was audible in the deserted building.

"There's a men's room straight ahead down the hall," Wayne said. "Get going."

John Burke walked to the men's room, marched over the sill and stood stiff again. Entering behind him, Wayne closed that door too, then thumbed a



light-switch in the painted wall, made an up-and-down movement with the automatic, and said softly:

"Now strip."

Burke stripped, all the while staring with enormous eyes. He dropped his discarded clothes on the floor; Wayne scooped them up, emptied the pockets, grunted with satisfaction when he found a pair of steel handcuffs. Smiling a little, he said: "Turn around, Burke. This is going to trouble your dignity."

Five minutes later, when Wayne, quietly closed the outer door of the Elks building behind him and strolled down Venley Street, he left Patrolman John Burke on the floor of the men's room. Bracelets encircled Burke's wrists; a gag filled his mouth; strips of torn under-clothing held his ankles. The door of the men's room was locked on the outside.

Without the slightest shadow of doubt, John Burke would remain there until the beginning of the next business day, when, by hammering his bound feet against the wall, he might attract the attention of the Jewish gentleman who ran the furniture store next door.

And Justin Wayne was no longer Angelo Ferri, no longer a slouching tan-suited Italian with greasy hair and shambling gait. John Burke's neatly pressed blue uniform fitted Wayne nicely; the visor of Burke's hat successfully shaded Wayne's features.

With easy unhurried strides Wayne turned into the Avenue, abandoned the beat assigned to the man whose identity he had usurped, and made his way toward the home of Commissioner John Joseph Holtz, three blocks distant.

The Commissioner's home, on Eadie Street, was Colonial in style and as pretentious as any surrounding it. Tonight, Eadie Street was patrolled by uniformed policemen. The house itself was an armed fort, surrounded by a cordon of picked men. Any intruder who entered that home tonight without being observed, would have to be a resurrected Houdini.

Wayne avoided Eadie Street. Turning

into a road that ran parallel with it, he paced methodically along the concrete sidewalk, observing that that street, too, was patrolled, though not so extensively. Beneath the low brim of his hat, his narrowed eyes missed nothing.

One thing was in his favor: the street he was on was not brightly lighted. The few lamps which did loom above the walk bore cup-shaped shades to direct their glare into the road, away from sidewalk and houses.

Wayne slouched forward, saw the shadowed shapes of two policemen conversing together just ahead. Silently he turned left, invaded a private yard and made his way to the rear of a darkened brownstone house. Moving noiselessly in shadows, he covered half a street-length by prowling from building to building, across rear lawns.

A grim, cold smile played about his lips when he remembered that every man on duty tonight had been ordered to shoot first and talk afterwards if Justin Wayne put in an appearance. Therein lay irony, for Justin Wayne, if tonight's mission were to be successful, must rely on cunning alone.

THE ordeal lay ahead. A shadowed no-man's land of back yards led to the rear of the homes on Eadie Street. A garage afforded protection part of the way; fifty feet beyond, a shoulder-high wall of stone provided an obstacle. Bent low, almost hugging the ground, Wayne sought shelter in every haven of deeper darkness. The stone wall tore his uniform-coat; he crawled forward in deep grass and lay limp.

A lighted window in the Holtz home glared at him mockingly. A man in uniform, on sentry-duty, paced slowly from one end of the building to the other, looming huge and black each time he passed the window.

Wayne studied the man, stared at him. As an ex-detective, Justin Wayne could call most of the men on the force by name.

Slowly he slid forward, watched the



sentry's every move. Judging time and distance he swayed erect, paced forward with no further attempt at secrecy. Stumbling purposely, he voiced a guttural oath, pulled himself erect again and kept going. The sentry heard the oath, stood rigid and stared.

A flashlight beam shot out, focused on Wayne's advancing bulk, on the official blue of his stolen uniform. Wayne growled out, with his face in shadow: "Lay off, Regan. Lay off."

The sentry came toward him, clicked off the light. Scowling, the fellow said curtly: "What's wrong? Listen, for God's sake you had orders not to roam around. You want to get shot? You want to—" He peered into Wayne's face, stepped backward with a sucking intake of breath and reached for the holster strapped outside his coat.

He was too late by a fraction of a second. The heel of Wayne's automatic caught him as he rocked backward.

The gun made a hard crunching sound against the man's jaw, felled him as if his legs had been slapped from under him. All Wayne's strength went behind the blow. Regan rumped the ground, rocked sideways and lay in a silent heap, legs and arms stuck out like tentacles. Next instant Wayne was lunging forward, across the area of darkness separating him from the rear wall of the Holtz home.

He had laid plans long ago, laid them carefully with meticulous attention to details. Now, without hesitation, he cat-footed along the rear of the house, crouched low before a cellar window. How long Regan would remain unconscious was a question, an important one. Perhaps ten minutes, probably not longer.

But already it was nearly midnight. The ghoulish killer had promised to murder Holtz at midnight. Never yet, except perhaps in the case of Jerry King's missing stepfather, had the killer failed to keep a promise.

The cellar window was locked. Wayne made a fist of his hand, drew back the fist to strike. Instead, he stiffened, rocked erect at a sound of approaching footsteps.

A uniformed figure came slowly around the corner of the house and paced toward him.

He stood rigid, curled his fingers around the automatic in his pocket. The uniformed figure approached with slow strides, spoke while still a dozen feet away. Wayne caught words. "If there's a lousy job around, we get it every time. Can you imagine that damn' stiffneck tellin' us we can't even take a drag on a butt? If you ask me, this whole business is—"

Wayne made a movement with one hand toward the lighted window above, said gutturally in an undertone, with a brogue in his voice that could easily have belonged to Regan: "Shut up and keep movin'. The big boss is makin' a check-up."

"Huh?"

"The Commissioner, sap. Lay off the conversation."

The cop made a face, glanced at the window and growled uncomplimentary words. He swung about, paced back the way he had come. Almost before he had vanished in darkness around the corner, Wayne was crouching again at the cellar window.

Leaning forward, he dragged a handkerchief from his pocket, wrapped his fist in it and drove hard knuckles against the pane. Glass broke, tinkled on the cellar floor inside. Stiff as wood, Wayne hung motionless, realized that if Holtz had planted guards inside the cellar, the game was up.

But there was no alarm. Pushing hand and wrist through the jagged opening, Wayne released the catch, shoved the window up in its grooves. Next moment he was over the narrow sill, dangling at arm's length while he pulled the window shut above him. His shoes thumped the stone floor when he dropped.

Darkness, filled with gaunt looming shapes of coal-bins and furnace, enveloped him as he crept forward. More than once he had been a guest in this particular house, but never before below street-level. Knowing the floor-plan of



the building above, he made a way cautiously through ink-thick gloom to a wooden staircase leading upward into gloom.

THE stairs creaked under his weight as he ascended. At the top he stood by a closed door, listened intently before clamping a hand on the knob. The door was framed with cracks of light; when he inched it open and stepped across the sill, he was in a brilliantly lighted kitchen. Evidently the Commissioner and Jason Frank were counting on the fact that bright lights would be dangerous to intruders who wished to remain under cover.

Wayne blinked his eyes in the glare, toed forward across smooth linoleum. When he stopped again he heard voices emanating from a nearby room. One of the voices was harsh, nasal, belonging to Jason Frank. It was croaking:

"I'm telling you, Holtz, if the man said he'd be here at midnight, he'll be here, police or no police. Justin Wayne keeps his word. And by God, if you're mad enough to go on prowling around like this, instead of locking yourself in a room with armed men to protect you, you'll take the consequences! The man's uncanny!"

Wayne heard a snarling reply from Holtz, then heavy footsteps as the Commissioner grimly paced a floor. Eyes narrowed, Wayne moved across the kitchen, drew open a door that revealed a stairway to the floor above.

Up there, he could keep check on things. If he could reach a room somewhere above the chamber where Holtz and the others were assembled, he would be in a position to overhear conversation; could await the zero hour in comparative safety.

He climbed the stairs silently, made sure that his slow-moving feet made no noise on the carpeted boards. At the top he hesitated, put a hand on the wall and stared both ways along the second-floor corridor. Lights glowed in shoulder-high brackets along the wall. Twenty paces

from the head of the stairs, a short stumpy figure leaned motionless against a door-frame.

Wayne studied the man's dark face, glossy black hair. The name was Kinsella; the fellow was one of the Department's best gumshoes. Apparently he had been assigned to cover the upper part of the house, keeping eyes and ears alert for anything suspicious.

Rigid against the staircase railing, Wayne waited for the man to move, realized that moments were precious, that it was essential for him to reach a place of concealment, a place where he could keep check on the occupants of the house, before the zero hour arrived. But if Kinsella refused to stir—

Wayne's fingers clamped hard and white on the railing; he stood with both feet rooted in the stair-carpet, his lean body stiff as stone. In the house below him a door had jarred open, closed again with a splintering thud. Someone was lunging across the linoleum floor of the kitchen, bellowing words in a hoarse choked voice.

The words ate their way up the staircase, snarled savagely along the upper corridor. Their maker was the man who had been assigned, with Regan, to watch the rear of the house. Now he was lurching toward the room where Jason Frank and the others were waiting; and he was croaking hysterically:

"The killer's in here! Here in the house, I tell you! Regan's outside with a busted jaw and the cellar window's broke, and—"

The alarm was a tocsin. Before the man's high-pitched words ceased rasping, Wayne heard pounding footsteps, guttural commands flung forth by Jason Frank and the Commissioner. How many men were stationed in the building he had no idea; but judging by the sudden bedlam that rose in answer to the cop's warning, the place was alive with them.

Wayne swayed on stiff legs, knew that he was like a rat in a trap. For an instant his nerves let go; he sucked a hoarse breath, started down the stairs. A roar



of heavy footsteps jarred the floor of the kitchen below and stopped him in his tracks. He gaped at the closed door, lunged backward.

A thick-shouldered shape, big enough to be the Commissioner, drove over the threshold at the base of the staircase. The man stopped, flung out a yell of savage triumph at sight of Wayne's swaying form above. The stairs trembled to a rush of ascending feet. Wayne whirled with fantastic quickness and leaped to the upper corridor, in time to see Kinsella plunging toward him.

The Italian had a gun, whipped it up and pulled the trigger as Wayne hurtled sideways to avoid him. A belching roar filled the passage; Wayne's shoulders jarred the wall. Bounding back, he shot down the corridor, zig-zagging from side to side. Kinsella's gun belched twice more, sent steel-jacketed wasps thumping into floor and wall, missing Wayne's corkscrew form by inches.

Next instant, Wayne's outflung hand slapped on a doorknob, heaved the door wide and sent it clattering against the wall. In a headlong lunge he dove over the sill, dragged the barrier shut behind him. A key was in the lock on the inside. He turned it savagely, reeled backward from the door and stood wide-legged in a chamber of darkness, breathing great gulps of air into his tortured lungs.

**O**UTSIDE, the corridor echoed a din of rushing feet. A harsh voice, Jason Frank's voice, thundered: "Look out, you crazy fools! He'll plug you through the door!"

Wayne took a slow step backward, stared around him. The room he was in was a bedroom; that was all he was sure of. How big it was, what it contained, he did not know. Drawn shades masked the lesser darkness of two windows; black furniture-shapes loomed on all sides of him, seemed through the frenzy of his laboring mind to be closing in on him.

He glared at the locked door, swayed unsteadily and flung out a grim-voiced challenge.

"The first man who breaks in here gets a bullet through his head. Understand that, Frank?"

The answer was a roar of gunfire, and a vicious messenger of death chewed the door panel, made a sucking sound as it sang past Wayne's face. Breath stuck in his throat. He crouched, toed his way to one of the shaded windows, but knew even before he inched the shade aside that any such avenue of escape would be blocked. Before he could even hope to heave himself over the sill, uniformed men below would make a target of him, riddle him with bullets.

He shook his head, moved silently away from the aperture. The complete hopelessness of the situation brought a twisted smile of resignation to his thin mouth. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, shook one of the white cylinders out and stuck it between his lips. Mechanically he struck a match, held the flame in his cupped hands and dragged smoke into his lungs.

Then, without lowering the match, without moving a muscle of his body, he stared straight ahead of him.

The pale glow revealed a shadowed bureau-shape against the wall. Above the bureau loomed an oblong mirror, and in the dark glass the yellow match-flame winked and flickered like a thing alive.

Something else in the glass was moving. Something black, massive, with out-thrust hands and a leering, unholy face of death and decay. Slowly, silently, the menacing shape swayed out of a shadowed corner and inched itself toward Wayne's rigid back.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

**A**T that moment Justin Wayne was on the threshold of annihilation and knew it. The ghoul-face in the mirror was hideously familiar: it belonged to the unnamed dealer in death whom the newspapers had luridly called the Acid Murderer. The hunched black shape, creeping silently toward Wayne's back, was the same vile



shape which had murdered Alvin Naigler and countless others, including Wayne's own servant, Ven Jonsen.

That creeping, leering monster was the murder-mad fiend who had threatened to annihilate Commissioner John Holtz at midnight, tonight. And even now, in a room somewhere nearby, a clock was slowly chiming the zero hour!

The match burned itself out in Wayne's fingers and dropped to the floor. Deliberately, and with an effort to make the movement seem casual, Wayne took a slow step toward the bureau, sliding a hand into his coat pocket where lay the automatic which had already aided him in countless emergencies.

Then, swift as a ballet-dancer, he swung on the balls of his feet, hurled himself bodily at the creeping monster who had thought to take him by surprise.

Not more than three yards of floor separated his hurtling body from the ape-like form of the murderer, as Wayne charged. That simian shape went suddenly taut, lashed erect and backward to avoid the gun in his outflung fist.

The gun belched thunder, filling the room with a thousand mad echoes. In answer, a serpent of seething white liquid stabbed from the fiend's upthrust hand, leaped like a thing alive toward Wayne's face. With a gasping intake of breath, Wayne writhed aside to escape it.

He did escape it, but the Herculean effort jarred the gun from his hand and threw him off balance, sent him stumbling into the wall. The seething acid-snake curled to follow him, died before it reached him. Next instant, snarling with rage uncontrollable, the ghoulish monster leaped.

Off balance, Wayne had no defense. The hideous death-mask shot toward him through darkness; murder-claws stabbed at his throat. In the corridor, someone was hammering with a wooden bludgeon, probably a chair, on the locked door; but Wayne had no time to think about it. Facing death, he fought frantically for life.

The bureau stopped him, ground into

him as he staggered backward with the killer's writhing arms seeking to encircle him in a spiderlike embrace. Again and again he drove hard fists into that leprous white face of horror, sobbing from his own exertions. Reeling sideways, he brought up against the wall and braced himself. A groan ate through his lips when the fiend's bony knee knifed up and stabbed his stomach.

In the corridor, Jason Frank was shouting harshly, giving lurid orders. The hammering on the door had increased to a violent clamor, threatening to heave the barrier off its hinges.

Wide-eyed, Wayne stared into the corpse-face of his assailant, stumbled blindly along the wall and strove to protect his throat with a hooked arm. His lurching body rammed a chair, slapped the chair over and sent it skidding across the carpet. He backed into a table, voiced a grunt of pain as the hard wood stabbed into him and sent fire-streaks through his hunched shoulders.

He was breathing hard, laboring for every breath. More often than not, his flailing fists missed their target; when they did strike home they made sucking sounds in the killer's obscene face and sank deep in soft flesh. But the blows seemed to have no effect, did nothing to stop the fiend's advance.

Still retreating, Wayne backed against one of the three windows, slapped a hand on the sill and steadied himself. Something hard and long, gleaming dully and shaped like a steel cane, leaped upward in the killer's fist, whined high and descended with terrific force toward Wayne's head. He lunged on crooked legs. The blow caught him on the shoulder, broke flesh and bone under the heavy fabric of his uniform.

Sobbing, he slammed one foot against the wall, heaved himself with pile-driver force straight toward the gargoyle face that hung before him. Across the room, the locked door was groaning on its hinges, buckling inward under the furious onslaught of the men in the corridor.

Wayne's mad charge carried him under



the killer's flailing weapon, brought him in crashing contact with the man's lunging body. The monster stumbled back, fell with a sickening thud against the iron end of a bed and voiced a snarling scream as the bed stopped him.

Wayne leaped with mad abandon, slammed the fiend's contorted body to the carpet. Locked in each other's embrace, he and the killer rolled clear of the bed-legs, turned the room into a shambles.

**T**IME and again, Wayne's knuckles buried themselves in the monster's leprous face, driving the man's head back as if the neck beneath it were made of rubber. The carpet crumpled under the killer's answering attack; sharp-nailed fingers found Wayne's throat, ripped into soft flesh. Slowly, surely, the fiend dragged Wayne nearer the wall, toward the spot in front of the bureau where the attack had first begun.

Groping fingers found a claw-grip in Wayne's neck, locked there. Sobbing, Wayne realized the grim significance of the man's methods, saw what the killer hoped to do. Within inches of his face, the carpet was a bubbling foaming expanse of death, where seething acid had boiled into it.

Relentlessly, the monster's strangling fingers forced Wayne's head toward that acid inferno.

Wayne opened his eyes wide, gaped into the gloating face above him. The face was a mask of triumph, its ghoulish flesh bloated and torn, its maw of mouth drooling bloody saliva. Savage fingers were the killer's only weapon; he had flung aside the steel cane and was intent only on dragging Wayne's tortured head into the bubbling death that lay inches distant.

Wayne fought for breath, caught none. Weakly he struck at the face above him, tried to heave it back and break the killer's grip. With strength born of terror, he hurled his whole body off the floor, toppled the fiend's crushing bulk away from him. With a vicious lunge he crushed the man to the carpet.

Sucking breath, Wayne stabbed stiff fingers at the ghoulish face beneath him. His hands made clawing contact, clamped in writhing flesh and exerted pressure, twisting the monster's head face-down on the carpet. A lurid shriek welled from the man's mouth, died to a gasping gurgle as leprous flesh felt the hungry attack of hydrocyanic. Like living fire the acid boiled into the man's eyes and lips, began hideously to devour what it touched.

Wayne shut his eyes to the sight, maintained his grip relentlessly. His arms were rigid from the shoulders, his hands hooked in a viselike grip on the killer's neck and hair. Grimly he continued to exert pressure, crushing the monster's gargoyle face into the lake of foaming death that covered the carpet.

Not until the locked door behind him shivered in its frame with a sudden crackling sound, did he release his hold. Then, lunging around, he stared wide-eyed at the barrier, saw that it was ready to crash from its protesting hinges.

Realizing his new peril, he leaped clear of the writhing form beneath him, swayed erect and took two staggering steps toward a window, knowing that he lacked sufficient strength to make it. His lungs were on fire, his throat burning. The almond-scented fumes had eaten into him, seared their way into his vitals and devoured his strength.

His knees sagged. He rocked forward, put both hands out in a feeble effort to right himself and fight off the blackness that roared over him. Clutching drunkenly at the edge of the bed, he turned a crooked half-circle and slumped floorward in a limp heap, racked with the agonies of the ordeal he had passed through.

For an instant he clung to a last shred of consciousness, tried weakly to grope erect again by clawing the bed-leg. When the door crashed inward, vomiting uniformed men into the room and flooding the chamber with light from the corridor, he made a final desperate effort to regain his feet and defend himself.

Then, sobbing thickly through dry lips,



he crashed face-down and lay still.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**H**E was not unconscious long. When the blackness left his twitching body and his eyes blurred open, he stared up through half-closed lids into the scowling face of Jason Frank. The rest of the Commissioner's men were grouped around the contorted shape on the carpet. Frank stood wide-legged above Wayne's sprawled body, glared down and said gutturally:

"Well, what is this?"

Wayne was silent. Commissioner Holtz straightened above the ghoul-faced killer, strode forward and answered Frank's question. There was a strange glint in Holtz's eyes as he peered into Wayne's tired face. Wayne saw a rubber-banded pack of small cards, scarlet-and-white cards, gripped in the Commissioner's hand. Holtz said grimly:

"It's the end. The end of the whole dirty business, thanks to Wayne here." He stooped, put a hand on Wayne's shoulder. "You hurt? You able to get up?"

Wayne stood up, leaned against the bed and stared at the scarlet-and-white cards. Answering the question in his stare, Holtz said quietly: "These were in the killer's pocket. We had the wrong idea about you, Wayne. I apologize." He looked around, nodded slowly. "The fiend's done for. Dead. You know who he is?"

"I'm not sure."

"Go take a look then."

Wayne said wearily: "I've had an idea right along that the man might be—" He hesitated, swayed forward—"might be Vernon Dore. If I'm right—"

He crossed the floor with slow steps, one hand pressed hard against his chest to stifle the burning pain that stabbed his lungs. The Commissioner's men stood aside and stared at him as he approached the thing on the floor. The room was utterly still; when one of the

men coughed, the sound was like the popping of a champagne cork in a hospital operating-chamber.

Wayne stooped over the hunched body of the inhuman fiend who had tried to annihilate him. The body had been rolled over; it lay face up, convulsed from its death-agonies. Swaying on bent legs, Wayne gaped down into the thing's upturned face, opened his eyes wide and held his breath in a suddenly contracted throat.

Acid had done things to those ghoul-ish features. The face was a muddy gargoyle, more than half devoured. The man's head—that gleaming, hairless skull which had loomed with leprous paleness in the dark—was a thing of horror, its smooth pate eaten away to reveal a black mop of half-dissolved hair.

Wayne's eyes were rimmed with white. He bent forward, reached out to touch the face of the corpse and drew the hand back abruptly when Holtz, behind him, growled out: "Careful. That stuff is still working."

The acid was still working. As Wayne stared, another portion of the killer's obscene countenance suddenly became a bubbling horror. The man's whole face, Wayne realized, had been a mask, a flesh-tight covering of some rubbery substance like latex, completely concealing the true face beneath. Now those true features were revealed. The acid had eaten through to them, eaten into them, leaving barely enough to be recognizable.

But they were recognizable. The agony-convulsed, acid-marred face that stared up in unholy death, was the face of a man who had supposedly died more than twenty-four hours ago.

It was a face from the grave—the face of Ven Jonsen.

**T**HE significance of that revelation sapped every trace of color from Wayne's stiff features. He swayed erect and stepped slowly backward, said gutturally: "Good God! Then—then the body Jerry King and I carried out of my house last night—"



He caught himself, stifled the words abruptly when he realized what he was saying. But Holtz had heard. Holtz nodded, put a hand on Wayne's arm and said quietly:

"The body you and Jerry King got rid of was the girl's stepfather. We knew that as long ago as this afternoon, when we had the corpse looked at by someone who knew Dore intimately. Evidently Vernon Dore went to your house last night for help, and this devil—" He glared down at Ven Jonsen—"murdered him."

Wayne nodded slowly. Holtz made a snarling sound, continued to glare at the dead man. "Then Jonsen must have changed clothes with the corpse, swabbed Dore's face with that infernal acid to kill any chance of identification, and phoned the police, in order to have you burned for the murder. Under the circumstances, Wayne—" Holtz had the same peculiar glint in his eyes that Wayne had already noted—"no one blames you for getting rid of the body and making a getaway."

"That helps," Wayne said.

"And these cards—" Holtz jerked the scarlet-and-white cards up in his fist—"prove that Jonsen was both the killer and the Scarlet Thief. That rather lets you out of the whole mess, Wayne."

"That also helps," Wayne said.

"And I personally owe my life to you."

"What?"

"Look here." Holtz put a hand on Wayne's arm, steered him across the room to where Jason Frank was standing wide-legged near a turned up section of carpet. Apparently Holtz's men had made a careful investigation during the moments when Wayne had laid unconscious.

"Ven Jonsen didn't break into this house tonight," the Commissioner said grimly. "No one did, except you. The man must have hidden himself here immediately after phoning his death-threats to the newspapers, long before we put a cordon around the place. And if you hadn't broken in and raised particular hell when you did, the man would have

got me with that infernal acid-tube of his. You see?"

Wayne saw, and stood stiff, gaping at the floor. A neat round hole had been drilled through the wood, through the plaster of the ceiling beneath.

"He took a chance," Holtz said, "that some time around the zero hour I'd be standing in the room under this one—which wasn't much of a chance, because that room's the living-room, and I was in it nearly all evening. If any of us had looked up, we'd have seen that hole in the ceiling; but we didn't look up, and he knew we wouldn't be apt to."

Wayne nodded, turned pale at the ingenuity of the killer's scheme. He drew a mental picture of Holtz and the others standing in the living-room below; of a long metal tube snaking slowly through the aperture in the ceiling above them; of a sudden seething serpent of death driving its way with murderous force into the face of the doomed Commissioner. Shuddering, Wayne stepped back, gazed at a long metal tube in Jason Frank's out-thrust hand.

"What—is that thing?"

"A telescopic steel pipe," Frank grunted, "lined with beeswax." He pulled the thing out to its full length and handed it over. Wayne took it in stiff fingers, studied it.

Closed, the tube was small enough to fit into a man's pocket, and resembled a small hand fire-extinguisher or a large hypodermic needle. Fully extended, it was at least four feet long, its narrow end tapered almost to a pencil-point. The upper end of it was a barrel-shaped compartment sufficiently large to hold about a pint of the death-dealing hydrocyanic. A steel plunger provided the means of expelling that seething murder-stream into the face of the intended victim.

Wayne passed the thing back, turned slowly and stared again at the convulsed corpse of Ven Jonsen. He turned away, licked his lips. Holtz said quietly: "If you're not all in, Wayne, I'd like a few things cleared up downstairs, in private." Holtz swung on the men surrounding



him. "The rest of you can be excused."

Wayne walked to the door, put a cigarette in his lips and waited for the Commissioner to follow him. Holtz said quietly: "And I've got a little surprise for you. Something you won't object to in the least."

Half an hour later, in the living-room of the Holtz home, Wayne sat in a fog of cigarette smoke under the sinister ceiling-hole which had come so close to claiming the Commissioner's life.

**H**OLTZ himself leaned against the brick facing of a dead fireplace, his hands wedged in his pockets, his feet toed in on the floor. Holtz's "surprise" sat in an overstuffed chair facing Wayne, her face softly lovely through the diffusion of undulating smoke.

The rest of the house was empty. Jason Frank and the others had gone, taking Ven Jonsen's mutilated body with them. Holtz, Justin Wayne and Jerry King were alone.

"So far as the law is concerned," Holtz said evenly, "you're clear, Wayne. There'll be questions to answer and red tape to go through, but you're clear, free. Frank and the others are quite convinced that they were wrong about you."

Wayne forced a slow smile, looked across at Jerry King. He knew now, through what Holtz had told him, that the girl had been in the house right along. Instead of obeying orders and taking a train out of town, she had gone straight to the Commissioner's office, contrived to get Holtz alone, and told him things which were brewing in her mind. Something about a ring, a ring on the finger of the corpse which she and Wayne had removed from Wayne's home last night. She had remembered it after the emotional excitement had died down. Remembered it as one which Vernon Dore had occasionally worn. And would the Commissioner object to her having another look at that corpse?

She had identified the corpse as belonging to Vernon Dore. She had meant well, and had tried to convince Holtz—and

later Jason Frank and other detectives in Holtz's employ—that such a revelation completely exonerated Justin Wayne of the charges laid against him.

Holtz had believed her. Jason Frank and the others had maintained, logically enough, that her revelation proved nothing, except that Ven Jonsen was still alive and was probably in league with Justin Wayne—who was still, and always would be, the Acid Murderer.

So the girl had been brought to the Commissioner's home and handcuffed in the chair she now sat in, while Jason Frank and the others awaited further developments. The handcuffs no longer encircled her wrists. She was leaning back, one leg crossed over the other, gazing intently at Wayne. Rolling her head around, she peered at Holtz, said quietly:

"If you're soft-pedaling on my account, don't bother. I've known right along that Justin is the Scarlet Thief. I also know why."

"Personally," Holtz frowned, "I wouldn't mind knowing why, myself."

"It's really very simple." Jerry King let a slow smile curve her lips. "The Scarlet Thief's victims were all big-money men, all in on the same big pool. Their latest scheme was crooked. Legal, of course, but crooked. Some few hundred people, innocents who couldn't afford to lose their life-savings, were induced to invest their everything in a hot-air stock bubble. They were mulcted of every penny. How Justin discovered this, I don't know. I got it from my stepfather, who was immensely proud of the whole affair."

Wayne said: "Naigler, Dore and the rest of them are members of my club. They did enough talking, bragging, to make a man sick of being human. When I looked up some of the victims, I felt even worse. So, being a soft-hearted fool, I decided to create the Scarlet Thief and see that the money found its way back to where it came from."

Holtz leaned forward, narrowed his eyes. "Ven Jonsen was one of the suckers, eh? He had money invested?"



"Everything he owned. But I didn't have brains enough to realize—"

"Strange thing, human nature," Holtz muttered. "But Jonsen has a police record, a long one. He's dealt in violence all his life. Chances are, he got his ideas for revenge when you first took him into confidence about being the Scarlet Thief. Only his ideas of revenge differed from yours."

"So it seems."

"There's more to it than that," Holtz said.

"What?"

"If you check up, you'll find that Naigler and Dore, and maybe some of the others, had a hand in sending Jonsen up for his last term in the Big House. Five years, that session was. In five years a man can do a whole lot of thinking about vengeance. When you hand him an additional motive on top of that—"

"That makes it easier to understand," Wayne said.

Jerry King said: "Then why did Jonsen attack you in my house last night and kill Larena?"

"He didn't. Jonsen wasn't near your house last night. The man in the black mask was your friend Grostumpf."

Jerry King stared, bewildered. Wayne said quietly: "That's all right; he fooled me too until he came to visit me in the tenement this morning. I thought the black mask was part of the killer's make-up. The first time I encountered the man—that was the night he came prowling around my house—he carried a cane or something very much like Jonsen's acid-tube. He laid me out with it. That cane steered me in the wrong direction."

"Grostumpf," Holtz said softly, "has confessed."

"Lost his nerve?"

"He lost it when you tied him up in the tenement, for Jason Frank to stumble on. The man will burn for killing Larena, but he really shouldn't." Holtz rocked his head from side to side, stared at Jerry King. "He just had a lot of crazy notions, including the idea that

Miss King had no right to be running around with you. Chances are, that's why he was prowling around your house that night, Wayne, and why he laid for you at Dore's home. He killed Larena because Larena blocked his escape. He had brains enough to wear the black mask, and to put the mask on Larena, but that's about all the brains he did have. Where you going?"

WAYNE stood up, walked to Jerry King's chair and sat on the arm of it. He said softly: "I wouldn't blame Grostumpf too much. He had a good motive, even if he was wrong about it. He lacked Ven Jonsen's ingenuity, that's all."

"Meaning?"

"Jonsen was clever." Wayne put an arm around the girl's shoulders, blew smoke in Holtz's direction. "Jonsen never once slipped up on the mental end of it, not even tonight. Twice he faked injuries to make me think he'd been attacked by the killer. Then he stole the scarlet cards from my safe, to use against me. When things got hot, he tried to murder me and thought he'd succeeded—even left me for dead in the kitchen, then handcuffed himself to his own bed and chloroformed himself, with the intention of remaining right there until the police or someone else invaded the house and found him. It happened to be me who found him, but he didn't anticipate that."

"From beginning to end he made a mighty clever series of plays to throw suspicion away from himself. And some of them *were* clever, such as that threatening phone call which I suspected Jason Frank of making. The call was made when Jonsen was supposedly asleep in his own room. I'm not going to be a bit surprised to find that my own phone is tapped, with an extension concealed somewhere in Jonsen's room. Matter of fact, I think he suspected me of having found something of the sort—which led him to fake his own murder."

Holtz nodded, slouched forward and leaned against the table. "No one knows,



except Miss King and me, that you're the Scarlet Thief, Wayne. What about it?"

"That's your problem."

"Meaning, the Scarlet Thief is all through?"

"The last name on the list," Wayne said evenly, "was Vernon Dore."

Holtz puckered his lips, scowled. "When an investigation is made and the police fail to find the stolen money among Jonsen's belongings, there'll be a smell."

"I couldn't return the money if I wanted to, Holtz. It's been distributed to the poor devils who invested it. If it comes to a question of returning the money, you'll have to arrest me. I can't pay it, and wouldn't if I could."

"And I can't arrest you," Holtz said. "If it hadn't been for you, Jonsen would have got me with—" He shuddered—"with his acid. By all rights I ought to be a dead man even now, unable to arrest anyone; and if the fiend had failed tonight, he'd have succeeded some other time. He intended to wipe me out for my part in sending him to prison. We'll forget the Scarlet Thief, Wayne. What we know, we know, and—" He stared at Jerry King—"with all due respects to

Miss King, I'm of the unofficial opinion that Naigler and the others had it coming. Damn it, man, the Scarlet Thief can shake my hand any time, and I'll be proud of the honor. But—"

"But?" Wayne murmured.

"It seems to me," Holtz frowned, "you've got a personal problem on your hands. You've cleaned Vernon Dore of his blood-money. What about Miss King here? You can't steal every cent a girl has, and expect her to pull through."

Wayne said softly: "You're forgetting that I'm not exactly a pauper, Holtz."

"And you," Jerry said pointedly, turning her head to stare at him, "are forgetting that I'm not a charity case, sir."

"I didn't say you were. I didn't even ask you to be." Wayne glared at Holtz, jerked a significant thumb toward the door. "If the good Commissioner will get to hell out of here, I'll do my best, my humble best—" He tightened his arm around the girl's shoulders, drew her closer to him—"to put the proposition in what I hope will be more acceptable language."

THE END

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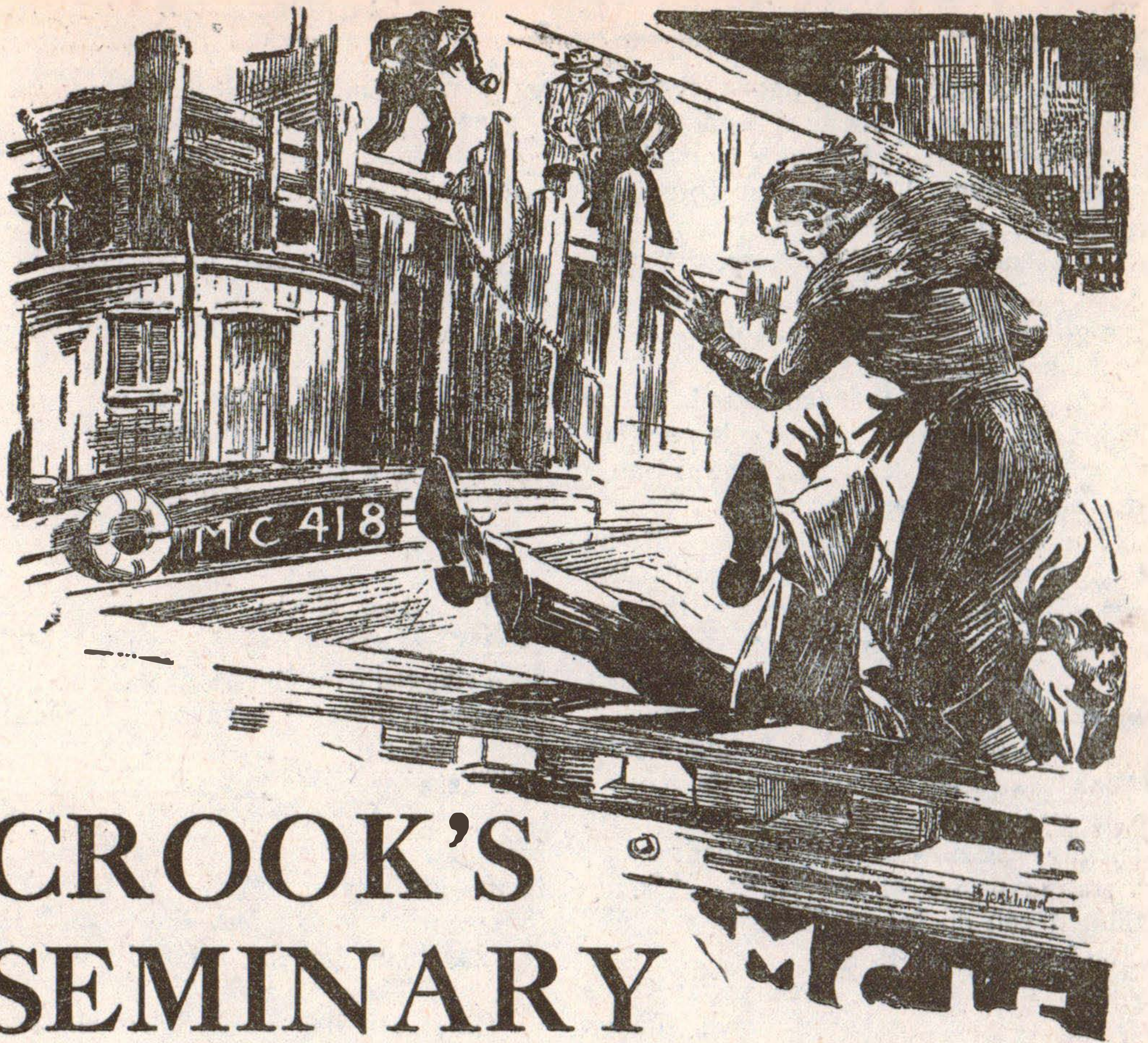
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FIFTEEN CENTS





# CROOK'S SEMINARY

By RICHARD WORMSER

HANIGAN was wrestling with his bookkeeping when the private phone rang. He went on figuring a moment, frowning at the figures; then pulled the phone towards him, and said: "Go ahead."

A male voice, deep and a little cracked, said: "I got one of them, chief. The mugg had his hand in a gent's pocket when I caught him."

"Swell," Hanigan said. "That's just fine, Mallarkey. Take him around to the station house, and take him the long way; d'ye get me?"

"Yeah. Yeah, boss, sure. Anything else?"

Hanigan thought a minute. "If he can still talk when you get him to the house, you and the coppers see if he'll tell you the names of any of his friends. There's been too much of this stuff going on in

the Steel Building for any one guy, even old Fingers Jefferson come back from the grave."

Mallarkey's deep laugh made the diaphragm of the phone crackle. "This ain't Fingers, Jefferson, boss. No, sir. This is a young punk—can't be more than twenty."

Hanigan growled and hung up. That dumb Mallarkey! For twenty years Hanigan had wondered why he kept him on, and still he didn't know the answer. The dumb ape! Taking everything Hanigan said seriously.

"Seventy-two bucks from a hundred and twelve," Hanigan muttered. "Leaves forty, and minus nine, plus sixty-three gives you—" Some day he'd hire a bookkeeper.

It was late, and the regular business of the day—assigning men to jobs, talk-



ing to employers who thought they might be getting gypped, phoning bonding companies—was over. Hanigan worked on, sweating over his figures, forgetting about the time. When the door to his office opened he didn't look up.

"It's O. K., Mildred," he said, "you can go on home." He thought it was his switchboard girl.

But the voice that answered wasn't feminine. "I guess your girl's gone already, Han. At least there wasn't anyone outside, so I walked right in."

The man in the doorway was tall and heavy. He was about Hanigan's age, forty-five; he needed a shave at the moment. Hanigan knew him well, had known him for years; he was a police sergeant, plain clothes, named Pollack.

"Come on in, Pollack," Hanigan said. "Yah! You got a good head for figures. These things are driving me nuts." He put his head down again and made a few tentative passes at the paper. "Something I can do for you besides a drink? You know where it is."

Pollack made no move towards the cabinet. Nor did he sit down, though there were three empty chairs in the office. Instead he stood there, fumbling his battered felt hat. "I—this is business, Han," he said. "Umph—the boss told me to come over."

Hanigan looked up then, pushing the paper away. "Yeah?" he asked. His voice was cool, guarded. "What have I done now? The inspector want to take my license away for something?"

Pollack looked very embarrassed. He fumbled the hat some more, shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"Nothin' like that, Han," he said. "Naw, nothin' like—" He swallowed. "It's Mallarkey," he blurted.

Hanigan began to grin, but the smile was not reflected in the policeman's face. "Mallarkey, huh?" Hanigan said. "Aw, now, he didn't do anything. He called me up when he made that pinch, see, and he told me the guy looked like he'd been in a fight. He wanted to know should he get a doctor to look at the mugg, so's

you cops wouldn't think it was the third degree he gave him, and I said—"

"Cut it, Hanigan," Pollack growled. "Shut up, can't you? Mallarkey's dead!"

Now that it had ejected its news, the big cop's body seemed to collapse; Pollack seemed to be much smaller. His head came down until his untidy white collar was pressed into a thin ribbon of crushed linen. Keeping his eyes carefully averted from Hanigan's face, Pollack found a chair and sat down. He fixed his eyes on the wall and waited.

Finally, Hanigan said: "Where?"

"NOT two blocks from the station. Over towards the river. He'd been slugged over the head, see, and then dragged in there; they gave him the knife when they got him in the alley."

"They?"

"Yeah. A harness bull over on the beat saw these bums—four or five of them—in the alley. When he turned in to see what was what, they ran. He chased them, but he tripped over—he tripped. They got away."

"Didn't see their faces, huh?" Hanigan asked. His face was pulled into straight lines, but with such an effort that the muscles made big welts along his jaw.

Pollack shook his head. "It's—it's tough to lose a man, Han," he muttered. "Sure. The boys wanted me to tell you." He paused. "Yeah—and listen. You know I wouldn't bother you myself, but I got a job to do. The inspector said to ask— Well, what was Mallarkey working on?"

Hanigan didn't answer for a moment. Instead he got up, went to the little cabinet, and got out a bottle and two glasses. He poured the liquor carefully, his hand not shaking at all; and he carried one drink to Pollack without spilling a drop, though the liquor was near the top of the glass.

They drank, silently. With the whiskey still stinging his throat, Hanigan said: "I don't have to tell you, you know."

Pollack nodded, squirmed in his chair.



Hanigan smiled. "O. K., fella," he said. "You might as well know. I'll get there first. It was the Steel Building. Pickpockets in the big lobby there. The building hired me to send a man over, see if he could catch them—"

Pollack nodded. "That ought to do. Mallarkey—he got one and was bringing him around to the station, huh?"

Hanigan nodded.

The two men shook hands ceremoniously, and Pollack went to the door. He turned and looked at Hanigan, once, then went out.

Hanigan sat down at his desk, and absentmindedly shoved the papers off onto the floor. The afternoon's work was scrambled, ruined.

Hanigan looked like a roughneck and he knew it. He knew that his jaw was too big, his eyes too small, his nose too often squashed. Five years on the cops—which he had quit because he didn't see any sense in the seniority system—and eighteen years of being a private dick—had done that to his face.

To counteract his rough appearance, he always dressed carefully, shaved as close as he could.

So when Mildred, his telephone girl, came to work at nine the next morning, she hardly recognized the unshaven, dirty-lined man who lurched out of the inner office. She stepped back in surprise.

Hanigan said: "Go get the morning papers."

She'd been working for him for ten years, and he'd never spoken like that before. She nodded, gulping, and fled.

When she returned, Hanigan had moved the screen in his office, and was shaving at the little washstand. A trail of blood ran through the lather; his hand was shaking.

Mildred threw a quick glance around the office. The whiskey bottle was standing out, but there were only two drinks gone from it; one of her duties was to see that the liquor didn't run out.

"Mr.—Mr. Hanigan," she said. Her voice was trembling. "You're — all right?"

"Yeah. Oh, yeah. Those the papers?" Hanigan turned. Then he saw how white her face was, how scared she looked. He laid the razor down, and essayed a grin. "It's all right, girl. Yeah. I been working all night—seeing stool pigeons, mostly. There's nothing wrong, except I'm tired."

She had three children and a grandchild, the girl did, and she had always wanted to mother Hanigan too. She said: "Let me order you some breakfast."

He shook his head and went back to shaving.

MILDRED carried one of the papers to her desk and left the other for Hanigan's perusal.

She read the front page, started working her way through. On Page Eight she cried out.

## PRIVATE DETECTIVE FOUND DEAD

### *Police Believe Notorious Fingers Jefferson May Be in City*

She skipped through the story. "George A. Mallarkey, 51, . . . Hanigan Detective Bureau . . . former policeman . . . phoned his office . . . before he could reach the station house.

"Inspector Manders said . . . pickpockets seldom kill . . . Fingers Jefferson . . . cleverest worker in his . . . believed dead . . . only pickpocket who carried weapons . . ." And then: "Five years ago, Jefferson was arrested by a detective of the pickpocket squad. On the way down to headquarters, Jefferson must have turned on his captor. The detective's body was found in a washroom in the subway, stabbed to death. Since that day, police have searched for Jefferson in vain."

Mildred laid the paper down and stared. The poor boss! Mallarkey had been the one Hanigan operative who could be stupid and get away with it.

She half rose, meaning to go into the private office and offer some consolation, but Hanigan slammed out. "Goin' out,"



he said. "Going to tour the hockshops. You saw the papers? Yeah, tough. Poor—I got a list of stuff that's been lifted in the Steel Building lobby. Gonna round the hockshops, see if I can get a lead. Look, girl. I saw a lotta guys last night. Some of 'em may call. Get the message carefully, but don't push any of 'em. I mean, don't ask 'em more than they want to tell. They're all stool pigeons."

Then he was gone. She stared after him, frightened by his confusion. He was usually so competent.

After a while the phone rang. She answered it, giving the name of the agency. "Hanigan dere?" the phone asked. The voice that came through it was dry, tough.

"No. He'll be back later. Any message?"

"Yeah. Yeah, O. K. Tell him to call this number at five." She wrote it down. "Tell him—get this straight, sister—tell him it's about—Fingers Jefferson."

Then the phone was empty. She stared at it a moment. Then she called the phone company. Hanigan had an arrangement with them—she found out where the number was located—a stationery store in the lower East Side, just north of Chatham Square. A tough, tough neighborhood.

Afterwards, she had nothing to do but wait for Hanigan to show up.

That was at four-twenty. He took the slip and stared at her without seeing her.

Then he said: "Call him at five, then," and left.

Hanigan climbed down the steep elevated steps quietly; he looked a little too well-dressed for this Bowery-end neighborhood, but not too much so. The despair in the eyes of the homeless Bowery bums was matched in his own eyes; the day had been fruitless, and Mallarkey was dead.

Halfway to the stationery store he saw a cop that he knew. The cop was coming towards him; Hanigan turned and stared into a lunchroom's window until the steady beat of the officer's heavy shoes had gone by.

When he turned, the savings bank clock up towards Chinatown said four-fifty-three. He went on to the stationery store.

Outside he bought a paper, stood staring at it. The cops reported no progress on the Mallarkey case. He handed the paper—he had read only the first page—back to the one-legged man who ran the newsstand. "Sell it again, buddy." The man dipped a head that wore an overseas cap, and muttered a thank you.

Hanigan went on into the stationery store. He found only one phone booth; he found no idlers in the store. He found the proprietor, in skull cap and gold rimmed glasses, nodding over a book.

He waited.

THE clock on the savings bank tried to sound its gong five times. It didn't succeed in making any impression over the noise of the elevated trains outside.

Promptly the phone started ringing. Mildred was a good girl.

Hanigan got back into the shadows near the drowsing proprietor. The phone rang twice; the door swung open against the darkening street outside, and a silhouette blocked it.

Instantly Hanigan knew that silhouette. It had only one leg; it was the newsdealer outside.

The man swung along on a crutch towards the phone booth. He slipped into it, and closed the door; Hanigan stepped around behind, and pressed his head against the thin partition.

"Yeah," the newsdealer said. "Yeah, I'm the guy called Mr. Hanigan . . ."

Leo came around in front again, and pulled open the door. He reached across the man, took the receiver, and held it to his ear while he said: "Hello, Mildred, Hanigan speaking. Any messages?"

He hung up on her negation. The one legged man had pressed back against the wall of the booth.

"Yuh don't have to hang onto that gun, Mr. Hanigan. I ain't nothin' to be skeered of." He motioned towards the crutch.



Hanigan said: "A man with no legs can squeeze a trigger. You wanted to see me?"

"Sure," the newsman said. "I tink I got de Mallarkey job for ya."

Hanigan forced a beam, though he knew this was probably a blind alley. "Can you leave your stand? I'll buy a coffee."

"Make it chowder," the war-veteran said. "Coffee ain't good for my noives. Hey, Pop!" This last was to the dozing scholar. "Watch my stand, huh? I'll be back."

They walked down to the Bowery together. Hanigan walked slowly at first; he was trying to figure this thing out. The one-legged man did not look like a stool pigeon, or like a man who wanted to be a stool pigeon; he did not have the air of furtive importance that distinguishes the rat who wishes to sell his acquaintances' liberty or lives for gold.

Neither did he fit into the other category of male informer; the lover whose girl has been stolen by a crook, and who wishes revenge.

Then Hanigan had to hurry; the war veteran showed amazing speed with his crutch.

"My name's Hinkle," the cripple said.

Hanigan said: "O. K."

"It's my own name, too," Hinkle said.

"I could show ya my license."

"O. K.," Hanigan said again. He hadn't asked the name before because he had thought he would have to get it from the peddler's license bureau; stool pigeons don't use their real names.

They turned into a Bowery clam joint. Hinkle leaned his crutch against the wall, and swung himself by a chair back to a table; he slumped down. Hanigan got two bowls of clam chowder from the counter. He carried these to the table, and sat down.

Both men plied their spoons for a moment. "I got plenty time to read the papers," Hinkle said. "Ya'd like to toin up these guys that killed your pal, huh?"

Hanigan forced his strained nerves to be still. "Sure," he said, "but I got five

other cases I'm working on." This was not true, but it wouldn't do to seem too anxious.

The man named Hinkle grinned. "D'ja know?" he asked, "that Fingers Jefferson—old Fingers, the King of the Pickpockets—usta live down this way?"

"I think I remember that. But Jefferson's dead. Hasn't been heard from in five years."

"Yeah?" Hinkle leered. "There's been plenty talk about Fingers in dis case—I read it all, I tell ya. Sure. Well, I can turn up Fingers Jefferson for ya—and the muggs who killed Mallarkey. Easy as that—" The cripple snapped his fingers.

"How much?" Hanigan asked. He kept his eyes, his voice lowered.

"I AIN'T a stool pigeon. I mind my own business, and I expec' other guys to mind theirs. Yah? Take me for a rat? But guys gotta keep their hands off me. So. I got a daughter, and she's not gonna be no Bowery Broad, either. She went through school, and she's studying about how to work in an office. See? An' then this cheap punk shows up wit' his vaseline hair, and his wrist watch, and his pinch back coat. So I says none of that for her, see, and I knocks the guinzo down the stairs."

"And he was Fingers Jefferson?" Hanigan prodded, gently.

"Naw," Hinkle blared, "naw. This was a young punk, a brat. Only when dey comes back—him and his gang—I knew de rest of 'em—two or t'ree of 'em. There was Seppi Perrucci, whose folks lived acrost the hall from Fingers Jefferson, onct upon a time. Seppi's been hop-headin' it sincet he was knee high to a fire-plug. An' Joey Riley was dere, too, him that did a stretch in the Kid House, and what useta run errands for Fingers. I'm telling ya!"

"Are you?"

"Yeah. Look, if you don't believe me. Look!" The newsdealer pulled something out of his pocket, and planked it on the table. It glittered there. "This



guinzo Vamset gave this to me kid. Ain't that the thing they was talkin' about in the papers?"

It was. It was the precise necklace that Hanigan had studied in the insurance company's drawings—one of a dozen pieces of loot taken from the Steel lobby in the last week or so.

Hanigan leaned forward. "O. K. They came back and beat you up, you say? Then this—Vamset?—Vamset is still calling on your daughter. When?"

"Tonight. She goes to school tonight. He'll bring her in about eleven."

"Where do you live?"

Hinkle gave him the address of a tenement. Hanigan stood up. "Don't look for me. I'll be around, but don't look for me." He tried to press money on the war veteran, but couldn't. He left.

It is not true to say that the poor require less sleep than other people. Neither would it be true to say that because they do not care for themselves properly, certain people never rise above the poorest rank of society. It is a vicious circle. Living fire in a room is not conducive to an early retirement; loss of sleep dulls ambition.

Something of this crossed Hanigan's mind as he stood, shortly before eleven o'clock, in the doorway of a greasy tenement near Chatham Square. It still lacked a few minutes of eleven; but uptown, in the respectable tenements of the German mechanics, the Jewish merchants, the Italian provisioners, peace would have long ago fallen. Down here children still rioted and whooped through the streets; adults of a dozen races chatted and bickered between littered stoops and half filled ash cans.

The cops patrolled in pairs.

Two Chinese, bound for their little town a block or so away, skipped out of the way of a news-truck skidding to a halt at the stand near the L steps. Chattering, the Orientals moved on, past Hanigan; the truck driver's helper slammed down a bundle of papers, and the truck screeched away again.

The be-sweatered newsdealer ripped

open the package of early morning papers and spread them across his stand.

Always keeping an eye on a certain lighted window across the street, Hanigan strolled to the corner and bought a paper. He carried it back to his post of concealment.

A flickering gas-light in the hallway behind him provided enough light to read by. It was the Globe, and his name ran in the headline below the banner.

### HANIGAN DISAPPEARS HAS NOT BEEN IN OFFICE SINCE MALLARKEY'S DEATH

The light across the way was split in half. Silhouetted against it for a moment, were a pair of broad shoulders, a head and back. Hinkle had agreed to go and sit on the window sill when and if the gangster, Vamset, brought the girl home.

SO the bird was in the trap. It did not surprise Hanigan that Vamset and the Hinkle girl had gotten in without his seeing them. A dozen people passed through that door across the street every five minutes. The door in which Hanigan stood was, in fact, the only quiet one on the street; this was because the city had condemned all but the bottom floor of it.

Hanigan's nerves tensed. The next few moments were going to be important, if not dangerous. For it was necessary now for Hinkle to indicate the young man in some unmistakable way. The one-legged veteran was too inarticulate to give more of a description than he had that afternoon, and that would fit anyone of a dozen young city men.

So wait. Hanigan's shoulders rested against the dirty lintel of the doorway. A man, fat and dirty, came through the door with a can in his hand, and went away. Hanigan dropped his newspaper, and straightened.

From the movements of the people on the opposite stoop, they had heard someone coming down the stairs inside, and were moving to let him through.

Hinkle and a foppishly dressed kid ap-



peared. Hinkle swung down the stoop easily on his crutch and good leg; the boy came down with him. Even from across the street it was apparent that they were not very good friends, though they threaded their way down the crowded block together.

By never hurrying, Hanigan was right behind them when they got to the corner. Hinkle was saying: "See ya tomorra, den?"

The kid answered: "Yeah, and won't you be glad, pop? I don't t'ink."

Hinkle turned into a drugstore, the boy Vamset turned north along the Bowery. Hanigan followed.

A block up the broad Bowery, a bell clanged, and an ambulance came slowly out of a side street. It picked up speed as it came, leaving a chain of yowling kids behind it. But Vamset hesitated to cross in front of it; he halted on the curb, and this brought Hanigan even with him. The boy turned his head and stared unseeingly at the dick.

Hanigan saw pinpoint eyes; a hophead. He saw that they were blue while the hair and complexion were olive.

Some sort of second generation mixture of Nordic and Latin.

The ambulance turned north towards the Beekman Street hospital. Vamset continued walking. Hanigan trailed him.

The gangster walked two blocks north. Then he stopped abruptly, and passed through a little alley between two stores. Hanigan paused, the muscles along his jaws tightening until they ached.

Could this be Jefferson's hideout?

The detective counted ten, and then stepped into the alley.

Light bloomed at the end of it.

His hand was close enough to his shoulder gun as he walked, lifting each foot high on the debris, towards the light.

Then the alley was over and then—a parking lot. There were fifty or more cars there; this was not the hideout. Vamset had simply followed a little shortcut instead of going around the block.

The lot was floodlighted and drop-lighted. Hanigan could not risk that

much exposure; he had to wait until he saw where Vamset was going.

There was a coupe parked, and another young punk behind the wheel. The driver was slumped forward, grinning; he looked drunk.

Vamset joined him, and the two exchanged words. Then the car started up. The detective had a choice of running after it—it would stay in low gear till it made the street—or of trying to outguess it.

He remembered that the street to which the entrance led was one way, coming back to the Bowery.

So he turned and sprinted through the alley, his feet slipping on the greasy garbage that floored it. On the Bowery proper, he continued north.

There was a cab parked on the corner. He stepped into it, shoved a hand through the partition window, and shook the drowsing driver. "Wake up, guy. You got a fare." He turned his head, and through the back window saw the coupe coming out of the lot and towards him.

"GET behind that heap, and stay with it." The coupe was almost even now.

The driver had thrust his gears home. Now he stopped. "For who?" he asked. "Why should I go 'round followin' cars, and maybe gettin' my fenders shot into my belly? Huh?"

The coupe had gone past. But it was too late. It had been Hanigan's tough luck to pick the man who was probably the loudest voiced cab driver on the Bowery that night.

Hanigan bawled: "Nuts!" and leaped through the door for the curb.

The coupe had stopped. Vamset and his driver were swaggering back along the Bowery curb, their shoulders shoving at their sleek, too-tight coats. Hanigan could have ducked. The crowd was thick enough for an agile man to duck through and get away through a store. But what was the use? They had seen him. They were warned. He was not trying to stay away, he was trying to shadow them and



find out where they hung out.

They reached him.

"You was followin' us?" Vamset asked.

"Sure I was," Hanigan grinned insolently.

The other two men were taken aback by his nerve. The driver said: "Why?" Hanigan saw that he was drunk.

Vamset put his hand on his friend's arm. His eyes glittered like a snake's, and he said: "The guy's nuts, Morris. You, Irish—scram, or we'll call a cop."

"O. K.," Hanigan said. The quiet power of his voice came from an inner exultance, a horrible, bloodthirsty satisfaction. Mallarkey was dead, and these were the killers! "O. K. Call a cop. Call a cop, who'd like to hear about a dick named Mallarkey, who was workin' in the Steel Building Lobby—"

Morris's hand flashed towards his coat. Hanigan swayed in close to the drunk, but Vamset stepped in between. "Nuts, Morris," he said sharply. "This guy's crazy." The trembling of his dope-ridden voice showed he didn't mean it. "Let's get outa here, now—"

Hanigan growled: "This is a pinch." He brought his hand down, then to strike at Vamset's wrist when the hophead reached for a knife.

Something caught his elbow, someone said: "Is it, wise guy? Is it, you flat-footed numbskull?"

The accents had changed—they were no longer the rough, untutored ones of a simple Bowery tough—but the voice was the same. Hanigan, menaced on the front by Vamset's knife, on the rear by whatever weapons his captor had, blurted: "Hinkle!"

The one-legged man said: "Yah. Oh, yes, Hanigan. If you turn, I'll stick my crutch between your legs and sock you as you go down. If you go forward, Mr. Vamset knows how to use that pig-sticker. So—you'll give your gun over quietly, huh?"

"It's in my shoulder holster," Hanigan said dully. This was not the end necessarily, but it was a lot closer than he cared to be.

Hinkle's hand came between his arm and his side, and then his gun was gone. Afterwards Hinkle moved alongside. Around them flowed the Bowery traffic, but no one had noticed anything.

"I guess we'll ride," Hinkle said. He motioned with the hand that did not hold the crutch, and the two younger men got on either side of Hanigan. They walked back to the car, Hinkle shoved Hanigan in, and again Morris drove. Vamset crawled into the back seat.

They turned East. Against his will, Hanigan shivered. Morris, somnolent over the wheel, driving from instinct, chuckled.

Hinkle, as though ashamed of being allied with the kids against Hanigan, said: "It's cold." They went on towards the river.

Hanigan's mind turned the mess over and over. No sense to this, and yet there must be some. Must be. He had not been bothering Hinkle, had had no idea of going near the one-legged man, had never heard of him. And yet Hinkle had gone out of his way to invite Hanigan down and trap him.

**T**HEREFORE Hinkle must have suspected that Hanigan was going to menace him. That or—Hanigan knew his crime. It was obvious that Hinkle, who was somewhere north of thirty-five, was the head of this gang of kids, aged about twenty. Maybe he couldn't control them. Kids in gangs got that way. Maybe he wanted to turn them up. Maybe they had killed Mallarkey against orders, and he was scared.

But Hinkle didn't scare easy.

Hanigan said: "How did you know I was after you, fella?"

Hinkle chuckled. "Were you? Then I guessed right. When Vamset here said that Mallarkey phoned you before he was croaked, I was scared maybe he'd seen me. He was one of the few dicks that might recognize me."

Hanigan had an inspiration. "Sure," he lied, "Mallarkey told me you were Fingers Jefferson. He gave Vamset the



works, and Vamset squealed he was working for you."

In the rumble seat there was a noise. Vamset. The kid barked. "Boss, let me get at that rat. I never done that, what he said. I never squealed on you in my—"

"Shut up," the one-legged man said. "Shut up. Stop the car here, Morris. We walk."

So this was the end. Fingers Jefferson! The modus operandi had all pointed to Fingers, the best, the toughest pickpocket that ever worked. Put this together, Hanigan, and keep your mind busy. It'll come easier that way when it does come, somewhere along this street of warehouses and dark corners and East River fog.

Fingers Jefferson killed a dick in a subway station and disappeared. Then he turned up five years later with one leg—

"What happened to your leg, Fingers?" They were walking him towards the river. *A corpse was found floating in the East River that was later identified as that of Leo Hanigan—*

"That night," Fingers said huskily, "I had to make my getaway. I didn't know how many dicks there were in the station. I tried to cop a sneak in front of a subway train—it got my leg—I thought I was dead."

"Anyone else would have been," Hanigan said.

"Yeah," Fingers boasted. "Yeah. I rolled into one of the little bays the track walkers use to keep stuff in. I tied my belt around my leg—jees, I don't want to talk about it."

"So," Hanigan finished the story, "you were ruined for the only trade you knew. And you started a gang, taught them the business?"

"They're the best dips in the streets," Fingers Jefferson said. "I taught them—we turn south here."

They were at the river. Hanigan felt his eyes squeezing shut. Now, now, now, he thought; surely they'll kill me now. Not a voice, not the sound of a shoe against pavement broke those dreary expanses of warehouses; no taxis cruised

or motors roared. North, there were blurred flashes of light against the fog, and south, higher flashes; the bridges and the approaches to the bridges, where men still went about their business, not knowing, not caring that Leo Hanigan, who had done as well as he knew how, was about to die.

Fingers Jefferson's crutch made tapping noises against the cobblestones.

Hanigan had to talk; had to reestablish his contact with humanity. "It's a cold night for a swim," he said. He laughed, and hoped the laugh was natural.

"You'll swim—but you won't feel it," Morris said.

Fingers Jefferson barked: "Shut up! You cheap punks pull a couple of jobs and talk like movie gangsters!"

It occurred to Hanigan that there might be more here than met the eye.

They walked on. I could make a break for it, Hanigan thought, and make them kill me now; it would end this awful feeling of not belonging to life any more, and still not being claimed by death.

That was the same thing as quitting, though.

NOT a breeze was blowing; the fog hung thick over the swift current, clinging to the river surface so closely that tendrils of the smoky mist were carried along.

Finally Jefferson stopped. He took Hanigan by the arm and led him to the wharf edge. "O. K.," he said.

Hanigan got his voice under control. "You'll fry for this," he said. "Guys know where I was going."

Fingers laughed, unpleasantly. "You aren't dead yet, fella," he pushed.

Hanigan felt himself go hurtling through the air. Dumb! Why, he could swim; they should have shot him, or at least knocked him out, before pushing him into the river.

He hit something solid with a force that knocked his wind out. He rolled over once, hit something else, and brought it down on top of himself. There was a



scream—a woman's scream.

Then, while Hanigan was massaging his anguished solar plexus, there were three thuds, the bandits landing on the deck of the barge to which they had pushed Hanigan.

The dick stood up, and pulled the woman he had rolled into up with him. "Got a gun?" he whispered fiercely. "This is Hanigan, I'm a dick."

She screamed.

The crutch tapped towards them. Jefferson's husky voice said: "Who is that?"

Vamset loomed up briefly through the fog. "It's my dame. I told her to meet me here."

All their voices were lowered. Jefferson cursed Vamset.

Hanigan moved two feet through the fog. Then his outstretched hand hit a wall; and then Morris—or someone—had seized him, hurried him up an incline, and pushed him through a door.

Around him for the moment was the noise of people breathing. Then the door closed, and a light was scratched, an oil lamp flared up.

The rewards of crime! This was Fingers Jefferson's hangout. A cabin on a barge, a two room cabin designed as a home for a fifteen a month barge captain and his family. Bare shiplap walls, whitewashed, doubledecker beds to accommodate six people if they were friendly, a pine table and some kitchen chairs.

Losses in the Steel Building lobby alone had totalled thirty thousand in a week. And this was where they lived.

But in one corner—and this was inexplicable—hung what looked like four bodies.

Hanigan stepped back, startled.

Morris said: "That's what we do to nosey dicks."

But they weren't bodies. They were dummies. Here, in a barge on the river, Fingers Jefferson taught his trade. He could no longer pick pockets himself; a one-legged man was too conspicuous, too clumsy. So he taught the business to

young kids, and sent them out to work for him. The dummies were to be practiced on.

Fingers Jefferson said: "Get your doll outa here, Vamset."

"Oh, Johnny," she blurted. She was pretty, she had dark hair, she was about twenty years old. She did not look too bright for her years.

Vamset said: "Scram. I'll see ya later."

She just stood there.

Fingers Jefferson swung towards her. He balanced on one leg like a stork, and raised the crutch as though to brain her.

Vamset kicked his one leg out from under him.

Hanigan saw Jefferson fall. He saw the cripple turn and catch Vamset's ankle with the hand that was on the same side as the missing leg; that hand was tremendously strong. Vamset came piling down and Jefferson, still using only one hand, jerked the boy around and sunk his fingers into his throat, his hand changing grips like lightning.

So much Hanigan saw. Then he dashed for the door. Morris was drunk, and he moved slow. He didn't hit Hanigan till the dick was at the door. Hanigan turned, and let Morris have it on the chin.

MORRIS went staggering back, and his head cracked against the bulkhead with horrible force. Hanigan would have gone on, but he saw the drunk was not out; Morris's hand was feeling for a gun. Hanigan sprang at him, rapped his chin again, and Morris's eyes went blank.

That was all that Hanigan knew. The world was a place of whirling lights, ammoniac smells, and himself falling, falling. Then nothing.

The melancholy waters of the East River slapped against the side of the boat. A match scratched and someone exhaled sharply. Hanigan opened his eyes. His head felt terrible.

Fingers Jefferson said: "There's water over in that bucket. Go soak your head and you'll feel better."



Hanigan rose and staggered towards the bucket. Some wave from a passing boat pushed the barge up into the air a little, and the dummies flapped their feet at him. He soaked his head.

Morris was still out against the bulkhead. Vamset was in a lower bunk. His neck was horribly discolored, his shirt was torn away, but he breathed, loudly.

Fingers Jefferson sat backwards on a chair, the stump of his leg thrust straight out in front of him.

Hanigan said: "So I'm still alive?" He tried to grin, but his eyes were narrow, measuring the distance between himself and the cripple. A quick jump—

"Don't try it," Jefferson said. "Two more o' my kids are due in here any moment."

"How many ya got altogether?" Hanigan asked.

"Six. Six boys, all of 'em good. I been living in clover—Hanigan, how much'll you give me for the six of them?"

Hanigan's eyes roamed the cabin, focussed finally on a slipper. "Where's the girl?"

"The doll," Jefferson said, "went home."

"She left her shoe," Hanigan said.

Jefferson shrugged. The turgid waters of the East River slapped at the boat again. "I got enough cash," Jefferson said. "You give me four days' time, and you never do say Fingers Jefferson was in on this, and you can have the kids."

Hanigan croaked: "I don't do business that way."

"It seems to me," the cripple said, "that you haven't much choice. You're here, and I'm here, and I got a gun. . . . I didn't kill Mallarkey. The kids did that. That's one reason I want to get rid of them. And then—I can't handle them. Too wild. They want to take all the money in sight. I told them not to go back to the Steel Building. I got up there just in time to see Mallarkey pinch Vamset."

Hanigan smiled, nastily. "Send them after the girl," he suggested.

Jefferson looked regretful. "No. Too

many of 'em. I thought of that. I could take the girl because the rest of them would be down on her for knowing their hideout. By the way, it was she who conked you. With a pitcher."

Hanigan took two steps towards him.

Jefferson's eyes widened. He yelled something incoherent.

The door slammed open, and two boys came in. They were young, sleek. "Riley, Seppi," Jefferson said. "This guy's a cop. The one we said we'd bring here."

Riley grinned. "It was awful cold out there," he said. "Jees, boss, you kep' us waitin' long enough."

"Okay," Hanigan said. "I'll take Vamset and Morris along now, Fingers." He still had his handcuffs in his pocket. He got them out, and moved towards the two unconscious kids.

Seppi yelled: "Hey!"

Hanigan said: "Your boss is selling you out, kids."

The two boys in the door both looked at Fingers Johnson. He tried to grin.

Hanigan moved. He plunged into Seppi and Riley, swinging the handcuffs like a blackjack. He caught Seppi, sent him down; Riley ducked and the handcuffs dented the pine wall. Riley backed away, fumbling for his gun.

HANIGAN jumped. Riley went over backwards, still reaching for his gat. Jefferson fired but his target was on the floor, the gun went high.

Seppi bit Hanigan's ankle.

Hanigan felt the man under him connect with his gun, and his movements after that had the fierceness of desperation. He rolled over, brought Riley's body up, got his feet under it, and kicked the boy away.

Riley's gun went off, as he hit Jefferson. He and the cripple went down together.

Hanigan threw himself on Morris, still unconscious. His hands played over the crook's body feeling for a gat.

Jefferson straightened himself up and fired. Lead knocked Hanigan's body for-



ward, but it was only lead in his shoulder. His right hand found the gun, he turned, his left arm limp and seeming to drag him down.

Riley was coming at him. Hanigan squeezed the trigger. Riley went backwards, knocking the gun out of Jefferson's hand. The one-legged man sprawled again, and rolled over to come up under the dummies. He crouched there, his head sticking out grotesquely between the dangling legs.

Hanigan shot his other leg out from under Jefferson.

Somewhere a siren screamed.

The cops got there after a while. They found Seppi and Morris chained to each other, Riley and Vamset still out, and Fingers Jefferson crouched in a corner, flat, trying to crawl like a seal—

"Keep quiet," Hanigan told the police. "There are two more to this gang; they're out working now; they'll be back. I'm—I'm Hanigan"—and he keeled over.

## SUCCESSFUL PROSECUTION OF "GERM MURDERERS" IN INDIA

One of the strangest cases in the annals of modern crime came to an end with the passing of the death sentence on two of the four defendants in India's "germ murder" case. To add to the horror of the murder for which these men were condemned to death, one of the defendants was a stepfather of the deceased, who had been Amarendra Nath Pandey, a wealthy landowner near Alipore, India. The other condemned prisoner, Dr. Taranath Bhattachra, was one of three doctors charged with conspiring to murder him by an injection of plague germs; of the two who were acquitted, Dr. Sivapada Bhattachra faced, in addition to the charge of conspiracy to murder, charges that he suppressed evidence in failing to inform police of the crime.

The prosecution also charged that he issued a false certificate of death, making possible cremation of the body and thus destroying the most important evidence in the case.

The trial judge said of this murder, which occurred last year, that it was one of the most cold-blooded murders which he had ever come across. Amarendra Nath Pandey was walking along one of the streets on his way home when he suddenly felt a sharp pain. As his assailant fled he cried out that he had been poisoned. Pandey's stepbrother, Benayendra Nath Pandey, took him under his care but septic pneumonia developed with fatal results.

The four defendants were arrested last May and brought to trial in the course of which eighty-five witnesses, who came great distances, testified and more than 300 exhibits were introduced. Evidence at the trial showed that the slain man owned some property to which the step-brother was heir and some of which he was the administrator. When the victim decided that he was being cheated he hired an attorney to look out after his interests. At this the murderer decided to kill his step-brother.

With the aid of physician friends he secured first tetanus bacilli and then plague bacilli from a hospital in Bombay. When the injection of tetanus proved unsuccessful the plague bacilli were injected and this resulted in his death.

After listening to the prosecutor characterize this crime as "unparalleled in the annals of crime of India in its enormity and well-planned scientific design," the jury brought back its verdict in four hours.





# BRAINS For SALE

By DONALD BARR CHIDSEY

IT happened in the dinner lull, after the commuters had hurried home and before the shoppers had emerged. A customer entered Kaplan's Cigar Shoppe and asked for three of the usual. Old Kaplan was behind the cash register at the far end, and one man faced him. This man, whom the newcomer didn't particularly notice, was small and rather dark; he leaned against the end of the counter, and his right hand was out of sight behind the cash register.

"Make it fast, will you, Pop? I'm late now."

The register drawer was open, and old Kaplan was fumbling in the various compartments. Without shifting his position he opened the counter case, took out a box of cigars, handed it to the customer, who grabbed three of the cigars, tossed a quarter on the counter, and started out. Kaplan didn't replace the box.

It wasn't until he was halfway out

that the customer realized something was wrong. Kaplan, he remembered, hadn't said a word—and Kaplan's face had been white, his hands had trembled. The customer turned.

"Is anything—"

Kaplan cried: "For God's sake, Mr. Johnson, call a police—"

The explosions were terrific, and shook every bit of tobacco, every fixture, every dust particle on the floor. Kaplan thudded back against the wall; his yell dribbled to a mere blubber; he slid to the floor. The little man snatched a handful of money, wheeled, and with smoking automatic raced past the startled Mr. Johnson.

"Out of my way, guy! Unless you want it too!"

Then he was gone.

Of course there was nothing unusual about this—nothing except the fact that it happened in West Carter, and that this



was the third time within a month that such a thing *had* happened in that quiet, ultra-respectable suburb.

George Markey first heard about it from his wife, who answered the telephone just as George was sitting down to dinner.

"It's headquarters, dear, and he says to get to Broad and Anderson right away. There's been a hold-up—and a murder!"

George dived for his coat and gun. "Go ahead and eat, honey. I'll catch something downtown, when I get the chance." He bounded out to his own Ford, cursing wearily.

George Markey was captain and acting chief. The real chief, Simon Walsh, on an indefinite leave of absence, was 62 years old and feeble; he was something of a character, picturesque, and with plenty of pull. George really had been running the department for the better part of a year; but now that he was in formal charge, and things were popping right and left, people grumbled about the need for a good old-fashioned chief like Si Walsh.

George didn't have enough men, and he didn't have the breaks. You couldn't kick about breaks, or it would sound like crawling. George already had complained, and vehemently, about the cutting of the police department budget; but West Carter, essentially a substantial community, was in the throes of an economy wave, and the taxpayers gave no heed to George's wail. "Old Si Walsh ran things all right," the taxpayers growled. "*He* never started bellyaching when the appropriation was cut." It did no good for George to point out that the appropriation never had been cut while Walsh was in active command. The fact remained that Si Walsh was big and old and good-natured, and he chewed tobacco thoughtfully, and cracked slow jokes; whereas George Markey was young, nervous, and looked dumb. George wasn't dumb, but he looked that way.

The first message George received, when he got back to headquarters, was a command to telephone the Mayor.

"I know, I know. . . . Yes, of course we're doing everything we can, sir, but—No, Kaplan won't die. He's only hit in the left shoulder. But he was so scared he can't give us a decent description. Neither can Mr. Johnson. Mr. Johnson barely saw the man. Don't even know whether he got in an automobile or not. As far as we can—What's that? . . . Well, of course we're doing everything we—"

HE was interrupted again; and for a long time he was silent, making little geometric designs on a pad, and frowning furiously. After a time he sighed, and hung up. The Mayor already had hung up.

Kirk asked: "Hell?"

"Naturally," said George, and grunted. "What'd you expect?" He rose. "Let's go see that louse Harman."

"Think Harman's back of it, huh?"

"Naturally. Cinch it wasn't any local kid. There's plenty of easier spots in town, where a man could get more too. Whoever did this job did it on the spur of the moment. Needed the dough fast, I suppose. Some tough kid from the city, and I suppose Harman had been bearing down on him about something."

"Why don't you just kick that guy Harman out of town?"

"Gawd, Kirky! how I wish it was as easy as all that!"

Max Harman, to the average citizen of West Carter, was merely a real estate man who didn't do much business. To the police he was an underworld power, a finger artist, a brains guy. He possessed the soul of a rat, the mentality of a big bank president, an amazing memory, and no conscience and no courage at all. If he'd ever been actively engaged in the commission of any crime, nobody knew about it. He was careful to keep his record technically clean. He might have been a great business man if he hadn't happened to be incurably dishonest, underhanded, fascinated by crime and criminals.

Max ran a sort of employment agency,



an idea bureau, for crooks. He was a consulting expert. He introduced men. He proposed jobs, or warned against them. He wasn't a lawyer; probably he wasn't a fence; yet he was more than a mere fixer. He charged well for his advice. And he took no chances with his own skin.

He didn't have to advertise. It isn't necessary in the underworld. There you simply get a reputation when one guy tells another guy, who tells another guy, who tells another. . . . Those New York crooks who were just smart enough to know that they weren't smart, who had guts and guns and a desire to make cash quickly, trekked out to West Carter and visited Max. To them he was a master mind. They overestimated his ability, perhaps; but nobody doubted that the man was brilliant, or that he was an encyclopedia of the underworld and could at any moment tell who was doing what, and where, and why, and with whom.

George found Babs in the ante-room. Babs, the Baboon for long, was the firm's stenographer. He could operate a typewriter, though not the kind they have in offices—it made him sweat even to sign his own name—but he was 6 feet 3, and proportionately heavy; his hands were like Westphalian hams; and he thought Max Harman the greatest man on earth.

"Yeah? What would you want?"

"I'm cops, Baboon. You know that."

Babs rose. It was like a slow motion picture of an erupting volcano.

"I'll see whether the Boss—"

"Never mind about seeing! I'll see myself!"

George pushed past him to the door of the inner office. It was locked. George shook the knob, kicked the door.

"Say, listen—"

"Shut up, ape! You know damn well the boss will see me."

From the inner office Harman called: "Who is it, Babs?"

George kicked the door again.

"It's me. Cops. Give an open, before I get good and sore."

The door was opened, and Max Har-

man, small and greasy, with loose-hanging gray eyes, and a chalk-like skin, bowed in his visitor.

"Sorry. Didn't know. Alone, huh? Not raiding me again then?"

George slammed the door in the bodyguard's face.

"No, I'm not raiding you again. You wouldn't keep it around here even if you ever did have the nerve to handle anything hot."

Harman said, "Dear, dear!" and dropped into a chair. "What's it all about this time?" he asked.

"I came to find out why the hell you must plant yourself here in my town. Why don't you take some place like Jersey City or Hoboken, if you're afraid to go right into New York itself?"

"I like this place. I'm interested in real estate here. Fact! I sold a lot yesterday. Paid thirteen hundred for it two weeks ago, and sold it today for thirteen-fifty. Pretty good, huh?"

"Wonderful! Must be big deals like that that let you drive around in a Lincoln, I guess?"

"Well, of course I got other interests. . . ."

"Your biggest interest right now better be to get out of here! I've fooled around with you long enough, Harman. It means my job now, and sooner than lose my job I'd take you over the hurdles for fair! Yes, even if it did cost me an assault rap, after your smart lawyers got through with me! It'd be worth it!"

"Dear, dear."

GEORGE MARKEY was making a fool of himself, and he knew it. The presence of Harman always had this effect on him. He shook his head.

"Listen. You know what one of your boy friends did a little while ago? Well, he went into Kaplan's cigar store and stuck Pop up, and when Pop started to yell the punk turned it on. Didn't kill Pop, but it might have. The punk got away. We've done everything we can, but you know as well as I do that if we do pick him up it'll be sheer luck. Mean-



while, I got my job to think about. I got a wife, and a kid."

"That's nice," said Harman. "But why tell me about it?"

"This is why. Because that punk, whoever he was, had come here to see you. You attract 'em like garbage attracts flies. I suppose this one owed you dough, and you were putting the screws on, and he lost his bean and tried to stick up the first place he came to. Except for you and your dirty business, that kid never would have come to West Carter—probably never would have even heard of the place!"

"You can't prove—"

"Naturally I can't prove it! But you know and I know that what I'm saying is the straight. Even if we do pick the guy up, even if we get a conviction, *you* won't be singed! But if we don't happen to get him," George said slowly, "it means I'll be up on charges, and maybe get canned, or anyway get put back in harness so's God knows how I'll ever be able to meet the payments on my house. And if that happens, worm, I'm going after you. *Personally*, see? Badge or no badge, job or no job, and I don't care if you've got all the lawyers in the world behind you— It'll be doctors you'll need anyway, not lawyers."

"Dear, dear. I can see where it must have got you worked up."

George growled something, unlocked the door, stamped out. Babs, the body-guard, blocked his passage. Babs was angry; his dignity had been hurt.

"Say, listen. I'm in charge of this office out here, and I don't let anybody that wants to go—"

"Get out of my way."

"—up to that door unless I tell them they can, see? Now—"

"Are you going to get out of my way?"

"—to me it don't make no difference whether you're—"

George hit him. It was a short blow, but hard, choppy. It didn't topple Babs—dynamite, or three or four such blows, would have been required for that—but it did make him stagger. He worked his

jaw slowly, dazed. His right hand began to wander.

"I wouldn't." George was in the doorway. "Because in the first place, I can get mine out faster. And in the second place, even if I should get a stroke of paralysis or something, Joe Kirk's right outside, and I leave it to you how far you'd get and what the boys down at headquarters would do to a guy like you who'd turned cop-killer. The boys," George added, "have been wanting to take you apart for a long, long time now."

He went out. Babs hadn't stirred.

"Take a poke at him?" Kirk asked.

"No, I wish I had. But he's such a little shrimp . . . and he wouldn't stand up. You can't smack a guy when he's sitting down."

"I could," said Kirk. "That guy, anyway."

It was for George a highly unpleasant evening. His own boys, and a few of the more sensible citizens, understood; but most of the men he met either gave him a funny look or else asked outright what was the matter with the police these days. He knew that soon there would be resolutions. The Women's Club, the Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary Club. . . . And editorials in the local paper. And he dreaded the thought of the next council board meeting.

THEY were busy at headquarters, as always, but they tried to look even busier. George told reporters he hoped to have something soon—though he knew there was not one chance in a hundred that the gunman would be arrested.

"Christ! I've got to be my own detective staff, practically!"

"I know," said Kirk sympathetically.

"If they'd only let me get rough, I could make this a town every crook would go miles out of his way to miss! But no. . . . If I did pick up Harman the whole bunch of 'em would band together and ship lawyers here! They'd all be scared that he'd fall apart."

"He would, too. He's plenty yellow."

"Sure. But what good does that do?"



There's only two ways to get rid of that guy. One of them is to paste hell out of him, and I can't do that. The other way—is to outsmart him."

Joe Kirk shook a sad head.

"Not that guy. Nobody's ever going to outsmart him."

"I wonder," said George Markey.

He was, ordinarily, a mild-mannered, rather tired-looking young man. He had thin hair, so very blond that he looked almost like a Swede, and light blue eyes. He talked slowly, and when he was thoughtful he frowned. He was husky enough, was a crack pistol shot, had an excellent record, knew the work, and his men liked him. But it needs brains to run a police department nowadays, the citizens of West Carter would tell you. It needs a man like old Si Walsh, for example.

George sat there thinking, and frowning, until after 9 o'clock. Then he went outside. He waved Kirk away, got into his own Ford.

Manny, when Art Wallace returned with the cigarettes, was staring at a building across the street. There was nothing unusual about this building. On the street level it houses a drugstore and a delicatessen. On the third floor two windows were labeled: "Harman Realty Company." The other offices appeared to be unoccupied.

"What's the matter?"

Manny said slowly: "A funny thing just happened."

"What?"

Before Manny could answer somebody leaned against the door of the touring car, and asked: "Going right through, or stopping?"

Art Wallace glared. Manny was hurt.

"What business is that of yours, Buddy?"

George flipped back his left lapel.

"Oh, a wise guy, huh?"

"Well, you're pretty famous, Mittel, and I look at pictures whenever I get a chance. Naturally you got a perfect right here. I just wondered whether you're stopping."

"Well, we're not! We don't stop in hick dumps like this!"

"Okay," George said pleasantly. "I just wanted to know, that's all."

He was wishing he had enough men so that he could assign one of them to trail the big touring car and make sure it quit West Carter. A bad customer, Manny Mittel. A hijacker, fond of strong-arm stuff. George looked back and saw that the car had drawn away from the curb and was slipping through traffic toward the main highway. Probably, he reasoned, Mittel had just been passing through and had stopped for cigarettes. In fact, this was correct. But George couldn't be expected to know that, even while he stared after the machine, Manny was saying: "Of course, this might be a bad hunch, but we got nothing else to do and maybe it'd be worth our while to stick our noses in. We'll go get a few of the boys, in case of any trouble."

"You don't suppose that hick cop—"

"Oh, *him!* I wasn't thinking of him when I said trouble! The last thing I'd worry about would be these cops."

During this time an immaculately dressed young man, shiny, clean, with dark brown eyes and a perfectly waxed brown mustache, was climbing the dim steps to the offices of the Harman Realty Company. He looked sleek, well fed, even a shade foppish. At a glance you would have said that quite possibly he had a perfumed handkerchief thrust up his left cuff; and in this you would have been right. But you wouldn't have thought that he had a loaded automatic under his left arm.

BABS stared in astonishment at this visitor. The Harman Realty Company clients frequently wore expensive clothes; but this fellow's outfit was more than that. Babs wasn't sophisticated, and he had never even heard of Bond Street, but he knew real class when he saw it.

"I'd like to see Mr. Harman, please. It's business."

Babs knew better than to ask names. He pointed to a chair.



"Sit down. I'll see if he's busy."

The visitor didn't sit down, but neither did he search the far wall for a peek-hole. Presently Babs returned.

"Go ahead in."

The visitor went in, closed the door, nodded to Max Harman.

"Mr. Harman?"

"That's right."

"I thought so. My name," the visitor said carefully, "is Rutherford Stuyvesant." He sat down, now. "I've been living here almost a year. I play a little bridge and a little golf—that sort of thing. I have half a floor at the Carter Arms. I move about among the very best people."

Harman said, "That must be nice." He was staring hard at Stuyvesant.

"They all think I'm wealthy. And I was, rather, until a little while ago. But now I'm absolutely broke."

"Well, you got lots of company."

"But it happens that I don't like it. So I've concocted a scheme to remedy this condition. It—uh—involves breaking the law."

"Dear, dear."

"However, I can't operate this thing alone. I need assistance. I've heard about you, Mr. Harman. If you want me to, I'll mention the men who—"

"I sell brains. You don't look to me as though you needed any."

"Thank you. Perhaps I don't. But I do need somebody to help me in this little matter, just the same. If I didn't, I wouldn't be here."

"Let's listen to it, anyway," suggested Harman.

Rutherford Stuyvesant lighted a cigarette, dropped the match into a cracked, grimy saucer on Harman's desk, exhaled, settled back.

"I'll be brief. The matter concerns four Boccios owned by our esteemed fellow townsman, Walter Marshner."

"Four what?"

"Boccios. Boccio was a famous painter, many long years ago, and the paintings he painted are called Boccios. Catch on?"

"Go ahead."

"These are called priceless, but of course they're not—not really. Marshner paid upwards of four hundred thousand for them, and even today they must be worth almost half that. Marshner loaned them to the Metropolitan Museum of Art a couple of weeks ago for an early Renaissance exhibition. The museum returned them today. They're not in their frames just now because it would have been too difficult to transport them that way. At least, I suppose that was the reason. Anyway, they're flat now, in little temporary aluminum frames, very light. Small, too. Not more than half the size of the top of your desk here. Marshner has them in his daughter's studio, in the third floor tower of his home up in Carter Hills. That room is kept locked, of course. But I know Marshner well, and I happen to have a key."

Harman grunted. He seemed puzzled.

"I purpose, if I can get a confederate, to go up to that room tonight, when Marshner is entertaining, and to lower those paintings by means of a silk ladder from one of the windows. It's in back, out of sight of the garages, but not far from a little service driveway."

The visitor was making sketches on a sheet of paper snatched from Harman's desk. Harman didn't even glance at the sketches. He never took his gaze from Stuyvesant's face.

"The paintings could be taken. The ladder could be left hooked to the windowsill, which would make it look as though one of the servants had been involved. Like an inside job, as I believe it's called. Meanwhile, I could quietly return to the party."

"Yeah, and somebody would have four hunks of canvas he wouldn't dare to show to anybody, ever!"

"It's not burglary I'm proposing, Mr. Harman. It's kidnaping."

"Huh?"

"If you were to kidnap Walter Marshner's daughter, you might get a hundred thousand ransom. But it would be a dangerous job. She's a spirited



young lady in the first place, and she'd be hard to hide, and to keep hidden. There'd be all sorts of publicity. The Federal police would be called in, or would come in anyway. But if you were to kidnap four Boccios you'd have something easy to conceal, the Federals couldn't be called, and all you'd need to do would be get word to Marshner that if he didn't pay a hundred thousand without telling the police or anybody else, you'd burn the paintings. I know Walter Marshner, and he'd pay!"

FOR the first time since the beginning of the interview, Max Harman took his gaze from the visitor. He lifted a bottle of Scotch and two glasses from a low desk drawer, poured himself a drink, pushed the bottle and the other glass toward Stuyvesant.

"All very pretty, Mr. Ed Wolfe. Now suppose you tell me what you really came here for?"

Stuyvesant seemed not in the least annoyed, but rather pleased. He helped himself to a drink, smiled, nodded.

"So you knew me right away?"

"I got a rogues' gallery here," Harman said, tapping his head, "damn near as good as the one in Center Street. If I didn't know the slickest iceman in the country, I'd be ashamed of myself."

"You flatter me. . . . Well, here's how." Edward Wolfe downed his drink, patted his lips with the handkerchief from his cuff. "All right then. Here it is. I figured on telling you anyway."

"Everything I've told you so far is straight. With the exception of the name, of course. But I'm Rutherford Stuyvesant here, and nobody knows different. I'm sure of that. I'm on no particular job—just taking things easy and keeping my eyes open. There's a lot of dough around here, and I'm a member of the Maheekaw Country Club, and I meet lots of millionaires, so you never know. . . . But I didn't think of this stunt myself. Somebody else did. You'd never guess who."

Harman said: "I give up. Who?"

"The chief of police of this dump. Fellow named Markey. Know him? I see you do. Well, I'd met him several times, and the other day—it was up at Walter Marshner's house, incidentally—we were talking about the crime wave and I said I thought people were too hard on the cops. Said I thought they were handicapped sometimes because they didn't get the right co-operation from citizens. Said I only wished I could do something, sometime, to help clear out these criminals."

Max Harman grunted, poured himself a second drink.

"It was just the usual line, for me, but evidently this Markey fellow remembered it. He doesn't know who I am, of course. To him I'm Rutherford Stuyvesant, the polo player. But he knows who you are, and he's almighty anxious to get you out of this town."

Harman said: "You're not telling me any news."

"I don't suppose I am. But I'm about to. Today this man Markey came to me and asked was I in earnest about that stuff about co-operating with the police? I said of course I was. So he said he'd spoken to Mr. Marshner, who it seems is a good friend of his in the matter of a bigger appropriation for the cops here, and Marshner was willing to go through with this thing, and was I? Then he told me the scheme. I was to come to you and talk to you the way I just did. Be a young aristocrat down on his luck and desperate. He gave me the names of two cons who were to have recommended you, and said he'd fix it so that they'd give the right answers if you checked up. He figured you might check up, of course. He's not as dumb as all that."

"He also figured that the thing would look so big, and so easy, that you wouldn't be able to resist going for it yourself. That in other words, you'd break your usual rule and instead of just supplying me with a partner and then taking your commission, you'd play the partner yourself, see?" The visitor chuckled. "He even said that you weren't dangerous personally, but that you had a bodyguard



who was pretty hard-boiled, and in case I was a little scared he gave me a gun to carry—and a permit! Nice of him, wasn't it?"

"I wouldn't have thought George Markey would be quite so stupid as to want to leave me with two hundred grand worth of pictures, even for a little while. I should think Marshner would be scared to do that."

"No, no! You weren't to get the real ones! Marshner's daughter, you see, is an art student herself, and she made some copies of these Boccios before they were sent to the museum. An expert could tell the difference right away. I probably could myself. But you couldn't. Not right off, anyway. So it was the copies you were to get. They're valued at fifteen dollars apiece, which would bring the total to over fifty and just make the rap grand larceny instead of petty larceny. Maybe they couldn't make it stick, but they could throw an awful scare into you, and force you to get out of West Carter, see?"

"I see. Thanks for the tip. I'll keep away from pictures."

EDWARD WOLFE, alias Rutherford Stuyvesant, was leaning forward now. He was pointing at Harman, and his dark brown eyes glittered. His voice sank to a whisper.

"But why do that? Why not go through with the thing?"

"Huh?"

"It's a perfect set-up! Made to order for a couple of guys like us! Look: The real paintings are going to be in that tower room too, along with the phonies, in case you decided to do some snooping among the servants. Markey figures you for a mighty cagey customer, and he's taking no chances. I'm supposed to go up there alone, just as though I really was going through with it, and lower the silk ladder and everything. Now, what's to prevent me from getting the real paintings instead of the copies?"

"You're nuts!"

"I'm not nuts! A man could make a

mistake, couldn't he? Besides, even if they did suspect me afterwards, what would that get them? They couldn't book me without incriminating themselves. It'd be compounding a felony for them. And anyway, they'd know that if anything happened to me, the paintings might be destroyed.

"Look. Those paintings are insured for a hundred grand. The insurance company would want to investigate, wouldn't it? Wouldn't that look pretty bad for Marshner and his friend the chief? Oh, Marshner'd shell out. You take my word for it!"

Harman reminded: "All this is assuming that I get away with the paintings. Suppose they grab me as soon as I've got them?"

"They won't. That isn't part of the plan. Markey explained it all to me. He knows you're a pretty timid guy, and not used to doing jobs yourself, and he figures you'd have a good look first. So he doesn't dare have any motorcycles or police cars around. He's going to have one man posted down on the road that leads to the center of town, and another man watching your office here, and still another watching your home. He's got to allow time for the robbery to be discovered, hasn't he? He can't go chasing you right off. That'd be too raw."

"Yeah, but if he—"

"All you do is turn left instead of right. It'll take you down another little private drive there, and out into the road. Then you turn left again, and go like hell. It'll be just exactly the opposite to what they're expecting, see? You buzz over to Amhurst and phone Marshner's house, and get Marshner personally, and you tell him to call off his dogs or the real paintings will go up in smoke. It won't take him long to find out that you're straight about that. And don't think for a second that he won't jerk the police away as soon as he learns that the real paintings are in danger! Those Boccios mean more to that man than anything else in the world!"

"Um-m-m. . . . Still—"



"It's one hundred grand, remember. Fifty grand apiece. And neither of us taking a real chance anywhere."

Max Harman stared for a long time at the label of the whiskey bottle. Finally he rose, without looking directly at his visitor.

"I'll have to give this a couple of thinks."

"Take your time. Here's my card, with my telephone number. If I know by six o'clock it'll still be time."

Little Max Harman, frightened, sat for an hour or so. He stared at the bottle, but he didn't drink. After a while he got up, put on his hat—

"You stick around," he told Babs. "I'll be back late this afternoon."

Usually he sent Babs on these checking-up errands. But this job was too tricky for Babs. Harman, always pale, now was almost white. But his eyes shone. Fifty thousand, cash, for less than an hour's work. . . .

By the middle of the afternoon he was satisfied. He called upon Rutherford Stuyvesant, and they arranged the details.

"I'm trusting you with a lot, of course," the jewel thief said. "Still, I know you're a straight guy. Otherwise you wouldn't last in this business."

"Of course I'm straight!"

Wolfe phoned police headquarters, reported gloatingly that Harman had fallen for the scheme and that everything was fine.

"Great," said George Markey. "Mr. Stuyvesant, you're a real hero! I only wish we had more public-spirited men like you!"

"Well, I like to try to help. . . ."

HE grinned when he hung up, and repeated Markey's praise to Harman, who grinned also. They shook hands, and Harman went back to his office.

There was nobody in the ante-room. That meant that Babs was inside, probably tapping the Scotch. Harman frowned, crossed the ante-room. "You in there, Babs?" He pushed open the door and went in.

Babs was there all right. He was seated in Harman's own chair, his arms bound, his ankles taped. His great head sagged forward, and his chin was on his breast. Blood dripped from his mouth and oozed from a dozen slashes on his face. His cheekbones were puffed, red.

There were five other men in the room; and at the sight of them, all cool and smiling, Max Harman went white.

"Come in, Maxey boy. We got something we want to ask you about."

Harman was accustomed to deal with killers, gangsters. Most of his clients, to be sure, were the lesser fry of the criminal classes, but some were not the less violent because of that; and Harman knew some big shots too. He could keep his head, or seem to, even when he was most frightened.

"Hello, Manny," he said quietly. "Hello, boys."

"Don't stand there. Come on in. And close the door."

Harman entered, closed the door, nodded carelessly. He seemed not to see Babs. But he did notice the bottle. He waved to it.

"Drink, you boys?"

"Thanks, we had one already. In fact, we killed the bottle."

"You want I should step out and buy another, maybe?"

"No, that's all right, Maxey boy. That can wait." Manny Mittel put his fists on his hips, strolled across the room. For a time he stood over Harman, nodding thoughtfully, grinning a little. "You know, Maxey boy, it just happened Art and me were breezing through this town a little while ago, and it just happened I saw Ed Wolfe come in here."

Harman nodded, wetted his lips.

"Yeah. Yeah, he was here. Sure."

"Yeah, I know he was. Well, Ed's a guy usually works alone, and he never works at all except it's something big. Is that right?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Well then, Maxey, suppose you tell us all what Ed's interested in this time, huh? You and Ed both, I mean."



Harman hesitated not at all. He was not by policy a squealer, for he knew it was better business to have a reputation as a close-mouth. He stooped to blackmail only when it was imperative, when he couldn't collect his commissions in any other way. And he boasted that any secret was good with him. Any secret was, too—as long as somebody like Manny Mittel didn't ask him for it.

"It's a larceny. I—I'm helping a little. Pictures, not ice. But— Well, as far as you boys are concerned, I'll tell you honestly I don't see where there's any room for you in it."

Manny Mittel raised his eyebrows very high, and nodded very slowly, cocking his head.

"Oh, you don't? Couldn't you look a little harder, maybe?"

"Well, of course, if you boys would like to have a little cut—"

"Who was asking for a little cut? You got us wrong, Maxey boy. What we're asking for is the whole gravy boat."

"Jesus, Manny! It—it's tonight, and I promised Wolfe—"

"Maxey boy, I don't give a good God-damn what you promised Ed Wolfe. Chatter! Chatter so's Manny can listen, huh? Your pal here didn't seem to know much, though we asked him pretty hard—"

"He don't! He don't know a t hing!"

"Too bad we smacked him then." Manny seemed genuinely sorry. "But you must know, Maxey boy, because you know everything."

"I—I— Listen, if this—"

Manny knocked him down. It was a right-hander just under the ribs, and it sent Harman to the floor like a folding chair. Harman moaned a little. His face was greenish now, his eyes were closed. Manny squatted beside him, elbows on knees, grinning still.

"Come, come, Maxey boy. Tell Manny all about it."

George Markey, motionless in the shrubbery, had an uneasy feeling that something was going to go wrong. He

didn't like this kind of work. All his instinct prompted him to go straight to men he deemed dangerous to the peace and quiet of West Carter, and to tell them to get the hell out of town. But a cop can't do that. At least, not a cop in George's position. So George was trying tricky stuff, which didn't come easily to him.

"Ought to have at least a dozen men on a job like this."

Kirk said: "It's exactly ten o'clock, now."

"The bushes here ought to be lousy with cops. And they ought to be up and down the road, both ways."

"Here he comes," said Kirk. "On the dot."

A SMALL sedan poked in from the road, rolled soundlessly along the little service drive. It was dark, but they could distinguish two men in the front seat, two blurred shadows, one very large, one small. The car stopped near the house, and the big man got out.

The tower of the Marshers house was tall and grim, and seemed to have little connection with the main structure. Elsewhere, the mansion was bright with lights and gay with dance music. Walter Marshers was a sociable sort of millionaire. He liked to give parties like this.

"Business above, too," Kirk whispered. "That's being on time!"

A window in the top floor of the tower had been opened. Somebody in evening clothes was there. Presently something white and oblong was lowered. The big man moved toward this.

"It's the Baboon," George muttered. "Naturally Harman would get him to do the dirty work."

The man above disappeared. Babs fumbled with the white oblong for a little while, then scurried back to the car. The oblong was under his arm. It was about 24 by 18 inches, not thick, and obviously not heavy. The Baboon put it into the back seat, climbed in after it.

George touched Kirk's shoulder.

"You keep watching for the other boy. I got a hunch he's going to try a double-



cross. Don't take any chances with him if he should get nasty. I'll be back as soon as I can make it."

He got his first shock when the dark sedan turned right, toward the business center of West Carter. He had figured that Max Harman would go the other way, toward Amhurst, either because he wished to double-cross his partner or because that partner had—as George had expected him to do—warned Harman that the cops would be waiting.

George had not brought out any motorcycles or police cars, but he had parked his own Ford, lights out, engine running, in a driveway nearby, across the road. It was ready to go in either direction.

Had Wolfe decided to leave Harman in the dark, permit him to get arrested, and himself disappear with what he believed to be the real Boccios? It was the only explanation George could conceive. Otherwise, on the face of it, Harman seemed to be asking for arrest.

George had no time to go to the man he had stationed down the road toward Amhurst. He didn't wish to have Harman get too far ahead of him. He snaked through the shrubbery, jumped a hedge, ran across the road, leaped into his car.

He drove very fast. There were about two miles of large private residences between the Marshier mansion and the center of West Carter. The road was lighted, but not brilliantly. It was only by accident—or rather, because of a near-accident—that George happened to see the body. A car came out of a driveway, paused half-way upon the pavement: then the driver evidently decided he could get out safely before George's car reached him, and he stepped on the gas. George, cursing, was obliged to brake the Ford for an instant, and to swing over upon the shoulder of the road. That was how he happened to see the feet.

It was a little ditch, a polite little ditch of well-clipped grass backed by a hedge. George wasn't certain . . . and he was in a hurry. Nevertheless, he stopped, jumped out, ran back.

And he gave a long, soundless whistle when he found what was left of that Polack, Mike-something, who was generally called the Baboon, or Babs. A bullet through the side of the head, just over the right ear. It had come out the other side.

The right side of the face was black with powder.

The face, George noticed hastily, was not otherwise in good condition, either. Babs had absorbed a considerable beating. It was extraordinary! George himself had seen Babs—there could be no mistake about that enormous, stooped figure—only a few minutes earlier. It was understandable that he might have been shot, *must* have been shot, in the meanwhile. But how had he been beaten in that time?

Max Harman do a thing like that? Incredible! Indeed, impossible! There must have been somebody else in that car. Somebody on the floor of the back seat.

A telephone was what George needed. But he was afraid that Harman would try some funny work, and he didn't wish to be far away from that little sedan. He quit the corpse, jumped back into his Ford, and raced on toward the business center.

THE sedan was parked directly in front of the building that housed the Harman Realty Company. The office of that company was lighted. Across the street, in a doorway, George found Patrolman Halloran.

"Harman go in?"

"Just a few minutes ago. He was with two other guys. Don't know who they were. Couldn't see 'em good. One of 'em carried a white package. They walked a little back of Harman. Harman had been driving. I didn't call out to 'em or anything—just like you said."

For an instant, biting chunks of skin from the inside of his mouth, George verged on panic. Then he shook his head, stiffened.

"Stay right here," he told Halloran.



"Don't take your eyes off that door, and don't let anybody leave the place till I come back!"

He returned to the Marshers mansion as fast as the Ford would carry him. He didn't even slow up when he passed the ditch where Babs' body was getting cold. A little out of breath, and very nervous, he rejoined Joe Kirk.

Kirk motioned for silence.

"The rat's just come down that ladder himself, with another bundle. There he is now, going toward those cars. Do we tail him?"

"I meant to, but I guess the way things are we'd better not."

"Something wrong?"

"Something's wrong as hell. Come on."

Edward Wolfe was stowing the paintings in the rumble seat of his own roadster, when the policemen approached him from behind.

"Not polite to leave a nice party without saying good-bye."

Wolfe wheeled. He was very handsome in his dinner clothes, but obviously very startled. But he laughed when he saw George.

"Oh, it's you! Well, everything went swell. You catch Harman?"

"Got no time for fooling," George snapped. "You're Ed Wolfe. I've known it for more'n a week, since a friend of mine that works for the New York cops was visiting me here and happened to see you. Come on." To Kirk he said: "Take those paintings out, Kirky." He took Wolfe's arm. "We'll go in my car. It's across the road."

Wolfe sprang back, broke away. His right hand flashed across the linen of his shirtfront, and reappeared with an automatic.

"Up, you cops! Your own gun, too, Markey."

Kirk dropped the paintings, raised both arms. But George Markey walked directly toward the jewel thief.

Wolfe backed another step. His grip on the pistol tightened.

"If you think I don't mean this—"

George walked toward him. Wolfe squeezed the gun, got a click. He gasped. With his left hand he threw back the jacket, ejecting an unexploded cartridge. He squeezed the gun again. Another click.

George was upon him now. He drew his own gun, a revolver, and slapped Wolfe across the side of the head.

"Behave yourself. Did you think I was dumb enough to give you a gat that worked? Those cartridges haven't got any powder in them."

"Why, you dirty, two-timing rat!"

"Huh! You should call me names, when you were trying to pull a cross on Max Harman yourself! Incidentally, with pictures that aren't worth much more'n the ones he's got.

"Do you mean to tell me that—"

"Naturally! These are copies too, only they're touched up a little nicer and I had Miss Marshers sign 'em with that Dago's name. You didn't think I'd let Marshers keep the real ones loose, with a couple of crooks like you around? Hell no! They're locked up in the wine cellar, and I got one of my best men guarding them."

They walked across a shadow-splotched lawn, Wolfe purple with fury, Joe Kirk, still looking a little scared, clinging to the pictures. Behind them they could hear the shuffle of feet, the babble of laughter and light conversation. The orchestra was playing "With My Eyes Wide Open." Walter Marshers' guests were having a good time.

When they reached George's car, George put away his gun.

"You get in back, Kirky. Wolfe, I think—I'll let you drive."

Something was jammed against his back.

"That's as good an idea as any."

THREE men. They had appeared, it seemed, from nowhere. They all had guns, and they all looked positively eager to use them. Two were strangers to George Markey. He snarled at the third.



"What are you doing back here?"

"I like the town," Manny Mittel explained. "Now you get in the front seat with Wolfe. You other copper—you go with these boys."

It was very quietly done. Two automobiles passed, but nobody in either of them noticed the little group in the drive. Edward Wolfe, clearly as dumb-founded as George or Kirk, drove. George, relieved of two guns, sat beside him. Manny Mittel sat in the back, smiling. Another car, which apparently had been parked down the road a short distance, trailed them with Kirk and the pictures.

George understood, now, why Max Harman had been eager to be arrested.

"This is funny," Manny Mittel said. "I suppose we got half the force of this hick town, huh? How many coppers you got out here, anyway?"

George growled: "Not enough."

"This is funny," Manny said again.

"Maybe you think so," said George.

It was one of his most humiliating experiences, that walk from the car into the office building. Twenty-five feet away, in full sight, Halloran loafed in a doorway. Two blocks distant, its green lights glowing like dragon eyes, was headquarters. Yet George could do nothing but obey orders: walk quietly, and not too fast. Otherwise his spine would be broken. He knew it. There were no pistols in sight, and certainly Halloran, though he might have wondered at the crowd, suspected nothing.

Ten minutes later Manny Mittel faced a row of well fastened men. There were only three chairs, and Harman was in one of these, Wolfe in another, George in the third. Kirk was on the floor.

"This is a scream," Manny said. "Imagine, all these cops! What happened to Maxey-boy's gorilla, by the way?"

One of the men said: "I had to give it to him, coming here. Couldn't help it. He tried to reach over and grab my gun, just as I was getting up from the floor of the back seat there."

"Umph! I don't like that so much."

"I had to, Manny! Honest! I dumped him out of the car there. It was dark and all. I dumped him in a ditch."

"Well, anyway. . . . Well, we got what everybody was looking for, anyway. Christ! we got pictures all over the place!" He picked up a couple of canvases, frowned at them. "Which is which, anyway? They all look the same to me."

Wolfe was thumping, pushing back and forth to make the legs of his chair bang on the floor. Manny looked at him.

"You got something to say? Is that it?"

Wolfe nodded eagerly. Manny went to him, ripped the tape from his mouth. He wasn't gentle about this.

"Christ, you damn near killed me."

"Well, never mind that. Which of these pictures is the right one? That's all we want out of you!"

Wolfe glaring at Max Harman, said: "Neither of them."

"*What!*"

"That's what I said. They're both copies. This bright cop over here thought he was going to pull a fast one on me and Harman both. Thought he was going to make us bump our heads together. And as far as I'm concerned I hope he does get something on that dirty little squealing—"

"Never mind all that! If these ain't the real pictures, then where are they?"

"They're in the winecellar at Marshers, with a cop on guard."

"You sure of that, guy?"

"Absolutely. Would I fool a man like you, under the circumstances?"

"No-o. . . . I guess you wouldn't," Manny said. He was angry now. Perplexed, too. His men watched him expecting a decision. He frowned from one set of paintings to the other. Finally he turned back to Wolfe.

"Well, God-damn it; if they're really worth all that to Marshers we're going to get 'em, that's all. And this time we get the right ones! I'm sick of all this running around, and everybody trying to trip up everybody else. Listen, Wolfe!



Do you know your way around in that house?"

"Of course I do. I've been there dozens of times."

GEORGE MARKEY felt a little sick. He had guessed what was coming. Manny Mittel was no man to quit a job half-finished. Manny was sore. There was nothing subtle about him. He was for direct action all the time.

"Well, listen then. You're going to take us into that place, and you're going to guide us down there. We'll be a couple wearing the badges we'll take from these two cops here, but if anybody starts anything in spite of that—well, you know what happens."

Wolfe shrugged. He still was glaring at Harman. He seemed to think that Harman was responsible for all this trouble.

"I suppose you know your business," he muttered.

"You're damn well right we know our business! You're going to lead the way in for us, and we're going to walk right in after you, flashing the badges and saying we're specials sent by this hick chief here to relieve the guard downstairs. But if Marshner or anybody else puts up a kick—well, from then on it's a straight hold-up, see?" He turned to one of his men. "Let that guy loose."

The instant Wolfe was free he did an astounding thing. He sprang upon Max Harman and punched him in the mouth, hard.

"Hey! Grab that guy! He's gone nuts!"

Harman, chair and all, had crashed over backward, striking a wall so hard that the whole building seemed to shake. Harman's eyes were closed. He had fainted, or been knocked out.

"What the hell do you think you're doing around here, anyway!"

"All right," Wolfe said, and shrugged again. "I just wanted to get that one smack in."

"Well, don't try any more of that stuff again, or else one of us'll turn something on, see?"

"All right," Wolfe repeated. "That was all I wanted, just that one smack. Come on. I'll take you there."

"You're damn well right you'll take us there!"

George Markey's face was wet with sweat, but cold. His heart hammered wildly against his breast. His eyes, hot and strained, seemed to be trying to force their way out of his head.

One murder already, and now there would be another. At least one more. And in Walter Marshner's own house! For George knew Harry Blake, the man guarding the winecellar. Blake wasn't going to permit strangers to take priceless paintings away under his nose. The badges would mean nothing to him, except as a warning. The guns probably would mean nothing to him either. He was a fighting fool, Blake. He'd go crazy at the sight of a gun, and he'd reach for his own, and then— George shut his eyes, drew a long, shuddering breath. He exhaled very slowly. It hurt him to exhale.

The instant the hall door closed he started to thump and joggle his way to the nearest window. It was extraordinarily dirty. But through it he could see the dark doorway across the street, where Halloran loitered. He couldn't expect much from Halloran, a steady cop but stupid. Halloran's orders had been to permit no one to leave the building until George returned. But George had returned, and had entered the building, apparently of his own free will. Halloran wouldn't stop these men going out now. Wouldn't see any reason for stopping them.

George found that he could stand, a little. He was hunched far over, carrying the chair with him. He was tied to the chair by arms and legs both. With his head he banged against the window. It made only a slight noise. Halloran did not emerge from the doorway across the street, and it was not likely that he would look up at this window while he had something more interesting to watch.

For Ed Wolfe and the Manny Mittel



gang were debouching upon the sidewalk now, were climbing into the big, bright touring car. No doubt Halloran was watching them.

George got the top of his head against the top of the lower pane, and pushed up. It moved a little. He was obliged to take it very slowly, for fear he'd lose his balance. If he toppled over, with this chair fastened to him, it might take five minutes to get back on his feet.

The window moved up, hard. He got it open far enough to thrust his head underneath. Then the raising was easier.

It made him furious that he couldn't yell. His mouth was well taped. His only real hope was that Halloran would happen to look up.

But Halloran didn't.

The touring car started away from the curb.

George had his head and shoulders out of the window, and was looking down. Directly below, over the front of the delicatessen store, was a half-lowered awning. It was a new awning, bright in the glimmer of street lamps. It wouldn't be new very long, George thought wildly, if old Schmidt was going to leave it half-down like this every night. But for this particular night, thank God old Schmidt had done just that!

George wriggled over the windowsill. He used his knees, the heels of his hands, his shoulders, his chin. Most of all his chin.

HE had a spasm of sickening doubt when he balanced, when he teetered on the edge, knowing that now he was able to do it. If he missed the awning, if he himself or any part of the chair hit the side of the building on the way down. . . .

It was a good sixteen or eighteen feet to the awning, another ten feet to the sidewalk. A concrete sidewalk.

The most horrible realization was that he wouldn't be able to throw his arms in front of his face. If he missed, he'd simply have to hit any way he landed. His skull? A leg?

That instant of teetering was worse than the fall itself. George simply closed his eyes, tried to forget about everything, and tipped himself off.

He had no sensation of going through the air. It seemed as though the awning struck him instantly. It struck him in the face. It split a little, and his head, lacerated, stuck through. One leg of the chair went through too. Then he was swinging back and forth in short, startled jerks.

And Halloran was underneath him, jabbering inane things.

Halloran got him down, and had at least the sense to take the tape from his mouth first.

"Undo my arms! I'll get the rest! Never mind questions! No time!"

Halloran was all hands, and he made odd little noises deep in his throat. George's arms came free.

"Take off your gun and leave it here! Beat it down to headquarters and tell everybody to pile out to the Marshers house! *Everybody!* Even Hennessy! Tell him to leave the desk!"

"But Chief, what is all—"

"Go on, you lummo! *Run!*"

The legs didn't take long. They had been tied to the chair hastily. George wasn't stiff. He wouldn't have had time to feel stiff anyway. He grabbed the gun and belt Halloran had left, jumped into his Ford, bellowed away in the direction of the Marshers house.

He caught a glimpse of the touring car at a rise of the road near the Fernbray house. He knew it from the two purplish-pink tail-lights. Then it was gone.

The touring car must have been moving slowly. Perhaps Manny Mittel wished to distribute a few last-minute commands.

But George took a short cut. He swung into the driveway of the Wall estate, tore over gravel for a short distance, swerved off the drive, journeyed across a flower-bed, and then was on smooth, hard lawn. He knew this property well. He didn't slow up for an instant. He missed hedges and trees and bushes. He drove



right through one low hedge, and entered the Marshier estate. Now he could hear the music, even above the thunder of his engine.

Lawn again. Level and hard. Almost as good as a road.

Then gravel, when he struck the drive behind the Marshier mansion—the service drive. He skidded around the out-thrust tower, jammed on the brakes.

He was out, and he was shooting, even before the Ford came to a full stop.

Mittel's touring car was in the middle of the big drive in front. It was about forty feet from George. Mittel and Wolfe and two of the gangsters had stepped out and already had started to walk toward the house. They stopped when they heard the shriek of brakes, the rattle of outraged gravel. Mittel reached for a gun.

George fired twice, then sprang back to the protection of his Ford. He went on one knee. He fired again, and again.

One of the gangsters started running across a lawn. He fell to his hands and knees. He got up, ran a little further, fell again.

The other gangster jumped for the car.

Ed Wolfe, too, jumped for the car.

Manny Mittel, the fool, stood with legs wide-spread, shooting and shooting. He was a man blind with rage, insane. He didn't even aim his pistol—simply emptied it in the general direction of the Ford. Most of the slugs did no more than tear paint from that vehicle, or smash the windshield.

**M**ANNY emptied the whole clip, but he must have been struck before he'd finished. He dropped the gun—just opened his right hand and let the thing fall out. He turned completely and carefully around, and fell flat on his face.

They learned later that one of George's bullets had gone through his neck, missing the spine by a hair but clipping the jugular vein.

The touring car was turning. It stuttered orange flame in sharp, annoyed spurts. Its rear wheels got into soft

grass, spun hopelessly for a moment; then they caught, and the car completed the turn.

The music had stopped. The house was a box of screams. Over it all George Markey could hear Blake's roar:

"What is this, anyway? Hey, who are you guys trying to—"

George yelled:

"Give it all to 'em, Blake! It's me! Markey!"

He was filling the magazine of his gun. He couldn't see Blake, from where he stood.

The touring car got off down the drive, toward the gates. George was lost now to all sense or plan. He was fight-crazy. He scrambled back into the Ford, threw off the emergency brake. . . . He missed Manny Mittel's body by inches. Somebody behind was shooting at him. Blake, probably. He cursed Blake. He threw the car into high.

Near the gates a dark figure separated from the touring car, tumbled into a laurel bush. George flashed past. It had been Ed Wolfe. Probably hadn't quite got inside, and the gunmen had shoved him off the running board.

The touring car turned toward the business center. It was a big car, a Packard, and in a long chase George couldn't possibly have caught it. But George knew this road, and the driver of the touring car didn't. For instance, the driver of the touring car didn't slow up for that curve in front of the Wall estate. That curve always *looked* harmless enough. They'd had a lot of accidents there.

The touring car left the road, its rear trying to climb an embankment. The right rear wheel struck a tree, bounded back like a thing made of rubber. The front swung to the right then. And the whole car turned over three times, stopping on its four wheels, upright. It had made a lot of noise doing all this. But now it was utterly silent. This—as was learned a minute later when Halloran and Hennessy and a few others came screeching from headquarters—was because all three of the men in it were dead.



Physically Ed Wolfe alias Rutherford Stuyvesant made out as well as any of them. He'd been considerably scratched, and was very dirty, but in spite of the fact that Harry Blake had sat on his chest for twenty minutes he was not really hurt. They didn't even take him to a hospital. One of the ambulance surgeons dabbed him here and there with tincture of iodine, and they took him straight to headquarters.

He didn't look well. There was nothing dapper about him. His dinner clothes were torn, his face was deep red and covered with sweat, his eyes were angry.

George Markey, who could scarcely see him or anybody else from behind the mass of bandages they'd put upon his shredded face, gazed somberly upon this fellow. George had refused to go to the hospital, and he was clearing things up. There was a lot of work, of course. There shouldn't have been, if he'd got the appropriation they ought to have given him, if he'd had enough men to go around. . . .

"I would have just asked you to get out of town, when I found out who you were. Only I knew you'd make a big stink about persecution. You had a lot of influential friends around here who'd believe in you, no matter what a poor dumb cop said. And after all, you had no official record. You were like Max Harman: you were technically clean.

"So what I tried to do, I tried to kill

two birds with one stone. And boy! I certainly flushed a whole covey! Naturally I wasn't to know that Manny Mittel would butt in with his old-fashioned hijacking tactics at the last minute."

WOLFE started: "If you think you've got any larceny rap against me, no matter what you say about those pictures—"

"Larceny! Is that what you're worried about? Hell, I wasn't going to bring any charge against you at first—you or Harman either. I was just going to tell you to blow and leave us alone here. But now it's different."

"What do you mean?"

George Markey shook his head.

"A big-time crook like you, Wolfe, he can't afford to have a temper like you got. Larceny, you think, huh? Hell no! It's murder you're going to be booked on! I've just come from Harman's office, and we had a doctor there, and Max Harman's dead. Did you know that? His skull was busted when he was beautifully slammed back against the floorboard there. And Kirk and I both saw you do it, Wolfe."

George turned away with a sigh.

"Yeah, I guess the brains department is closed for good now. West Carter'll have to get along as best it can with a lot of dumb clucks like me. But anyway, I kept my job all right. Naturally that was the principal thing."

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# KINGS and KILLERS

By **CONRAD GERSON**

## CHAPTER I

**D**RUNKEN Jay Patrick started yelling again. "Let's go find old McCoy," he bellowed. "Go find ol' McCoy an' tell him what we . . ."

His voice trailed away again. The taxi driver turned his close cropped head, and leered at Bill Vanney. "Cop or no cop," the hackie said, "I never saw no guy with no edge on like him."

"Keep riding him around," Vanney said, wearily. "If his skipper—what's that?"

Out of side streets had come a swirling mob of men, dirty men, tattered men. They looked like a mob scene in one of

the old time movies because they repeated themselves, looking like a small bunch of men photographed over and over again, instead of being all individuals. Each was small, swarthy, heavily built—and dirty.

Somewhere a cop siren howled dismally. "Labor trouble at the mills," Vanney guessed. "Get out of here—fast. We'll be in cops up to our neck, and if this guy is caught drunk again, he'll be off the force, and I'll have to give him a job."

A high wind was tearing in off the lake. "It ain't labor troubles," the driver said. "They settled the strike a week ago. It's patriotism is giving those guys the itch. They're bohunks, and the bohunk king



was bumped off this noon. A waiter where I got my lunch was telling me."

The wind made the banners the foreigners were carrying bellow out, and one of them, made of brown paper brightly lettered, tore, and went flying away down the street. The stench of coke at the steel mills was every place.

"Get out of here," Vanney bellowed. "To hell with it. Back to my apartment on the lake, and if they catch this sot, no one can say we haven't tried."

Over his shoulder, the driver said: "We've tried all right. The meter says seven-fifty, Mr. Vanney." While he said this he was using brake, clutch and gear-shift to make the little taxi do a complete about face without stalling. One hand on the wheel, his eyes only negligently following the street, the hackman made the cab turn on a dime and run away from the steel mill crowd, the bohunks.

"Let's all go play polo," Jay Patrick said brightly, sitting up. "McCoy can be the horse's neck."

Bill Vanney groaned. He and Patrick had been partners on the force, friends for the four years since then, years when Vanney had risen to being the best-known private dick in the town. Now that Bill was beginning to make money he was, unconsciously, overscrupulous about sticking by his old friends; five years before he'd have dumped Jay Patrick at a Turkish bath and left the homicide squad dick to evade his new and unpopular command if he could.

The identical looking men who made up the mob split now, Bill saw through the back window, and a half dozen mounted patrolmen rode through on their tall chestnut horses. The manes and the tails blew in the wind and they were fine to look at.

Then the taxi put on a burst of speed and ran quickly away from the mill section of the town towards the lake. As they passed a police car carrying a uniformed lieutenant up to the riot, Bill covered Jay Patrick's face with his hat.

The wind was sending water almost up to the seawall opposite the entrance of

Bill's apartment. Vanney paid off the driver, half-listened to a parting witticism from that worthy, and helped Jay Patrick out of the cab.

The homicide squad man surprisingly came to then, and ran ahead of Bill Vanney into the house. Walking after him, holding his hat on with his hand, Vanney saw Jay collapse just inside the door. The night elevator man caught him, and guided him towards the elevator.

Vanney joined them there. The boy was still holding Patrick up; therefore Vanney had to say something nice to the kid. "How's college, boy?" The elevator man went to school in the day time, studied between trips at night.

"ALL right, Mr. Vanney," the kid beamed. He took hold of the control handle while Bill received the white man's burden into his arms. "Funny thing, but I brought a book on the agriculture of the Balkans home with me tonight; and here they are, having a Balkan riot right in town. Those Bestrians, you know."

Bill said that he knew and guided Jay Patrick out of the elevator and to his apartment door. While he supported Jay with one hand and fumbled for the key with the other, he could hear his phone ringing inside.

Jay Patrick came to and started repeating his grievances against McCoy.

"Worst commander the homicide squad ever had," Jay mumbled. "Takes all the fun out of a murder for ya."

Vanney got the door open, hurled Patrick at a chair, and got to the phone. He still had his hat and coat on, and, out of the window, the sight of the whitecaps on the lake made him shiver. He said "hello," to the phone.

A girl's voice said his name. Before she had finished, he had placed her; the local night operator for the Western Union. "Yes, sweetheart."

"Sorry, Mr. Vanney. There's a very important radiogram here for you. It came in at noon without a street address. And the name was spelled with D instead



of a V. So it wasn't till I came on that we knew who to give it to."

"Go on," Vanney said. "And if it's anything that takes me out again tonight, I'll be annoyed." Darkness was settling quickly outside.

"It's from Belgarthia in Bestria," the girl said. Vanney's mind closed on the second name. He'd heard that some place before—of course, the rioters.

He almost missed the next statement wondering about this. The girl had said there was also an order for a thousand dollars with the radio. He gulped, was quiet while she finished reading:

PLEASE ACT AS BODYGUARD  
JOSEF PATCHONT TWO TWENTY  
WASHINGTON LETTER FOLLOWS

"And it's signed: TITIANU," the girl finished.

Vanney slammed down the receiver, stood there staring. And that radiogram had been there six hours. He shook his head, trying to clear it, stared at Jay Patrick without seeing him. The homicide squad man snored.

Vanney snorted, pressed his hat down harder on his head, and slammed towards the door. He took one last look at Jay Patrick—the homicide dick was out for the night. Bill Vanney switched off the lights and rang for the elevator.

He'd never heard of Josef Patchont and he'd hardly ever heard of Bestria. Like most men of his class he grouped Magyars, Croats, Slovenians, Ruthenians and a dozen other races together as Bohunks and let it go at that. He wouldn't have known a Montenegrin from a Latvian.

But anyone who was worth a thousand bucks to bodyguard was a client. Vanney was very quiet going down in the elevator, and the college boy operator didn't speak to him.

No taxis prowled the bitter lakeside streets. Vanney stood in front of the house for a moment, swinging his arms around to keep warm, tapping his shoes against the pavement to keep the circulation going in his long legs; but when no cab cruised through, he started walking.

By the time he sighted a cab he was so close to Washington Street that a ride wasn't worth while.

HE spotted 220—a white vertical belt in the dark zone of the center of the block. The two ends of the street were belts of amber light from street lamps; but, surprisingly, a patrolman stood in the dark, opposite 220.

Vanney had that queer cold-stomached feeling that precludes disaster. If this job was connected with the riots—and it must be—it was good for publicity. And if anything had happened to the man he was supposed to be safeguarding—even though the fault was with the wire company and not with him—he'd be panned on all the front pages for a flop.

And the work of four years would then be to do over. Vanney sighed, and hard-heeled towards the cop. There was enough light when he got up close, to spot the man, an old timer named Mullen.

"Hi, Mullen. How's the boy?"

Mullen turned, sighed with the air of a man who has something on his mind he wants to unburden. "And it's you, Vanney. What brings you into the wind on this night?"

"Business," Vanney said. "Know anything about 220?"

The patrolman's gloved thumb swept through the air. "And it's funny you would be asking that, Vanney. You're a friend of Mr. Patchont's now? Then you would be knowing the ring he always wears, the one with the lion and the leopard and the stars and all? Well, I was coming down my post here . . ."

He broke off as a small car, a Universal sedan, swept into Washington Street. With the utmost amazement in his tones, Mullen cried: "I do believe it's the same fella!" and took two steps towards one of the lighted areas nearer the end of the block.

The Universal was coming fast. It seemed to drive straight at them, and everything happened faster than it had any right to do. First Mullen stepped out into the street, as though to peer at



the driver of the car. Then the car slowed abruptly, and then the wind whirled down hard on Vanney's hat brim, driving it stingingly into his eyes. And then a gun started talking. It was a .32 from the noise and to its clatter was instantly added the noise of breaking glass.

All of this while Vanney was still blinded by the brim. He swept the hat off with an impatient, growling motion, swept his overcoat open and went for his own gun.

The street was a mess.

The lighted windows, the yellow shades of 220 were gone. A gun had accounted for them. And down the street went the Universal, with Mullen's fat bulk tearing after it.

The wind was making Vanney's eyes water. He dropped to one knee, tried to get a tire of the car without getting Mullen. He missed, and saw Mullen take a shortcut across the sidewalk to get in front of the car.

He never saw that last flash of the killer's gun because his own .38 was talking then, fighting its recoil to get the car. Again Vanney missed because he flung up his wrist at the last moment. He was sure that Mullen was going to run into a bullet.

Mullen did, but not a bullet from Bill Vanney's gat. The car went around the corner and was gone.

But it left Mullen standing stock still, back pedaling a little, clutching at his bright silver shield as though to hide the fact that he was a cop. Vanney stretched his long legs, and went down the block at a gallop, his open coat billowing behind him.

His lips moved, repeating as much of the license number as he could. He just had the first four numbers, 73-j-5. Another number had gone too quickly for him to catch it.

By the time he got to Mullen, the cop had stopped back pedaling, and was walking around in tiny circles on the corner. The circles were getting smaller and smaller, Mullen was bending farther and farther over as he walked.

VANNEY caught the cop, and Mullen let go, fell back against the private dick's hard arm. Bill Vanney lowered the man to the pavement.

"And I pushed his bus for him when it stalled," Mullen said clearly. He seemed grieved, as though he didn't mind getting shot but not by a man for whom he'd done a favor. He was breathing very hard, and always has hand clutched at his shield.

"Is that the guy who had a ring like Patchont's?" Vanney asked huskily.

Mullen said: "Why, yes." His voice was unnecessarily loud.

His hand came off the shield now, and his blood spurted bright red between his fingers. The wind caught this and broke it up into tiny drops that splashed capriciously on the fallen uniform, on Vanney.

"Yes," Mullen said more softly. "I asked him was he a friend of . . ."

The voice broke. Vanney muttered something about getting an ambulance, started to rise. But it wasn't necessary, wasn't important. Mullen shouted some one word, incomprehensible, and jerked on the pavement.

Vanney bent forward quickly. But there was no reason why Mullen had lived as long as he had. Where the heart of the cop had been there was a silver shield now, driven in by the force of the murderer's bullet.

Bill Vanney stood up. He ran his fingers through his uncovered hair, stared down at Mullen. After a moment he said: "Well—there's nothing I can do—for you—" as though he expected Mullen to hear him. Then the detective turned, and went fast for 220.

## CHAPTER II

WHEN a man is in the midst of excitement, nervousness, fear, his eyes and ears and nose take in sensations that do not register until much later. Vanney remembered as he galloped back up the block that a shadow had hitched across



the yellow window shade of 220 while he had been listening to Mullen. That shadow—but this might be merely a trick of his memory—had been slim, youthful.

But the yellow light of the white house tumbled out into the street now nakedly, without the softening of shades or curtains. Some tattered remnants of cloth indicated where the shades had been; and a jagged rim of glass still remained in the frame.

A gun could never have done that. Vanney stood on the low limestone stoop next to the brass framed card of Mr. Josef Patchont, and worried. Then he laughed, harshly. "What difference does that make?" he asked the night. "It was the glass cut out the cloth."

No answer came to his ring. He vaulted the railing, landed in a tiny area-way. First he carefully wrapped his hands in the tails of his coat; then he jumped up and caught the edge of the glass-littered sill to pull himself through what had been a window.

As his head crossed the sill, someone used a gun from inside the house. It was a small gun, a .22, but it was used with enough accuracy to make Vanney drop back into the areaway again. A vacuum had snapped two inches from his ear.

He put up his hand, and found the hair in front of that ear crisp, so that it crumpled into dust under his fingers.

He shook his head, and knelt there, thinking. It was really only about five minutes since the whole thing had started; it felt like hours.

This time he jumped and caught on with one hand, held his .38 in the other. He pushed the gun across the sill first, flung himself after it, and rolled quickly behind a chair, ready.

But no more shots broke the silence. There was nothing but the wind whistling through the broken frames, making the tattered shades dance.

From behind his chair he looked at the high ceilinged chandelier, brilliant with crystals. Still no bullets came, and Bill Vanney moved out from behind the chair. He was beginning to worry about phon-

ing headquarters now. He didn't want McCoy to start thinking things.

He moved softly across the room until he turned around another chair, and was face to face with a man who was old and fat, but who would never be any older. His throat was half ripped out with a slug and the firing of the .22 which he held in his hand had shocked him enough to rip the wound open and make his death instantaneous.

Vanney's puzzled face sized the man up. A servant and a foreigner. His body and face reproduced the features, on a cleaner scale, of the men in the riot near the mills.

VANNEY turned to the right, his big hand stroking the nape of his prickly neck. He saw an overturned chair, and knelt to examine the marks its hind legs had bitten into the apple-green rug. There were just two of these marks.

When he saw patent leather shoes projecting from behind that chair, Vanney nodded, and went to the phone.

"Police headquarters," he droned. Then: "Homicide squad. . . . McCoy there? . . . Vanney speaking, Bill Vanney. Double killing at 2-2-0 Washington. The murderer seems to have gotten Mullen of the third precinct, too. . . . I don't know where Patrick is, I tell you . . . nuts."

He grinned at the pronged receiver, went back to the second dead man. This fellow was a Bohunk, too, a Bestrian. But it was not just youth that made his features clearer, more distinct than those of the servant. This was a gentleman.

The bullets had taken him through the chest, had turned his dinner jacket duller and made his white shirt front red.

His thin fingers were ringless. But there was a mark on one finger that might have been made by wearing a ring a long time. It was hard to tell because blood had covered the dead man's hands, and Vanney didn't dare rub it off. McCoy got ideas.

The phone was ringing. Half believing that it was McCoy calling back about



Patrick, Vanney swore at it. But it kept on burring, insistently, until he picked it up. His voice was not pleasant as he growled something into the mouthpiece.

But the voice on the other end was silky smooth. "Is that you, your majesty?" it asked. "Highness, this is Bleecker of the Daily News. Can you give me any information—"

"What's this?" Vanney asked sharply. "A horse?"

"Is this Prince, I mean King Josef?" the newspaper man wanted to know.

Vanney replied by rehanging the receiver, silently. "Gawd, I feel terrible," he muttered. He stared at the two dead men without love; they were the authors of his trouble.

Then he started searching the room, a sniffing animal looking not so much for a definite object as for anything that would make this case turn out to be different from what it was. What it looked like was the murder of a man whom Bill Vanney was supposed to be safeguarding. McCoy would make a lot of that.

He found a desk with some books on it, some crumpled papers. The books applied to biology; there was Heredity and Environment, there was Applied Eugenics. A library card identified Josef Patchont as a student at the local medical school.

McCoy slammed open the front door with a jimmy. There was no reason for that; certainly Vanney would have let him in if he'd rung.

Behind McCoy was a whole bunch of minor homicide men.

McCoy was circular. He had a round ball of a chin, a small, globular torso and bowed legs to complete the study in curves. He tilted his door knob chin at Vanney.

"Where's Patrick? Heh? I asked you where Jay Patrick was?" He swung one of his little pudgy arms up and pointed at Vanney. "You was seen with him this afternoon. Heh? Did you say you wasn't?"

"There's two dead men here," Vanney said. "And they tell me you're the homi-

cide squad. Cut yourself a slice of nice, juicy case."

McCoy blinked this away, turned to stare at the men. "So," he yelled. "This fella here worked for this fella here. And they had a fight over wages or something, heh?"

VANNEY stared with disgust. The minor homicide men looked attentive.

"Yeah," Vanney said. "And they took time off to shoot out all the windows. They ran outside and shot him in . . ." he pointed at glittering glass stuck in the corpses, in the rug—"then they ran inside and shot each other."

The private dick turned and went upstairs. Shaw of the squad winked at him as he passed, and shook his head warningly.

Upstairs, Vanney opened a door and stepped back, gasping. For this room, this bed room, was like nothing he had ever seen before. The bed was huge, four-posted, draped with heavy brocade.

On one wall were pictures of two people, a man and a woman. Their features resembled somewhat those of the dead Patchont; but their clothes were ermine and scarlet and gold. They wore gold crowns.

One corner of the room was a shrine, an icon. The features of the image were brightly painted and its eyes followed Bill Vanney as he went slowly through the room.

Bill was tiptoeing now, awed despite himself. This little fellow in the dinner jacket, this medical student had slept like this—as though simplicity was a pose and he needed this grandeur, this drama, for proper rest.

A white tiled bathroom was a break, completely American. It had one toothbrush, one shaving brush, one razor. Vanney sized up the owner as wealthy, as living alone, as—quite possibly—a prince or a king like the telephone call had indicated.

He went downstairs again.



## CHAPTER III

McCoy was barking orders, waving his short round arms like a windmill. From the ferocity with which the captain directed the fingerprint men, from the pains which McCoy insisted the photographer take, it was apparent to Vanney that McCoy had no idea about motive, or about anything but the fact that two men were dead.

"There you are, Vanney," the fat man said. "Thought you'd run out, heh? What did you find upstairs?"

Gravely Vanney told him: "The upstairs checks what you can see here."

This stopped McCoy effectively. He blinked his little eyes at nothing, and was silent until the private detective had almost made the door. Then he barked: "Hold it. What's your in on the case?"

"I was standing across the street," Vanney answered immediately. "Talking to Mullen. A car came along as Mullen was trying to tell me about having pushed a car for a man who wore a ring like the owner of this house."

Vanney cleared his throat, would have gone on, but McCoy had dashed to the body of the thin man, pulled up a blood covered hand. "No ring there," he said triumphantly. "Robbery, heh?" He seemed very happy.

Without acknowledging this, Vanney went on: "A car came round the corner—a Universal seedie, with a license that started 73-j-5, and shot at this house. Mullen ran after it, and got shot, after the guy in the car had almost emptied his gat into these windows."

"And you?" McCoy glared.

"Was trying to get my hat out of my eyes. It was windy."

McCoy said: "Harumph," or a noise like it. The minor dicks all looked in different directions. Bill Vanney colored.

When no one said anything, Vanney moved for the ruined front door. He stopped as a coroner's physician came out of the drawing room. "The young man's been dead about a half an hour," he reported; "the older one about fifteen min-

utes. Both wounded with the same size gun. But I'd say that the young man was hit with the glass after he died."

He stared at the tense bunch of detectives, and went through the door. Vanney followed him, watched the doctor move towards the corner where a morgue bus and a crew of uniformed men stood menacingly around Mullen's body.

When the doctor bent down, Vanney turned in the other direction, started striding hard. His hat had blown away, there was no sign of it in the street. The wind whipped his hair down into his eyes and made them water.

He walked fast, but he'd only reached the corner when running footsteps behind him brought him up. It was Shaw of the squad.

"Skipper's on the phone," Shaw said, breathing hard. "Do you know who that stiff is?"

"Yes," Vanney said softly. "The dead king of Bestria."

Shaw made his mouth wide. "You knew it all along? Hell, Vanney, you oughtn't to hold out on the skipper that way. You ride him much more and he'll take it out on Patrick."

Vanney said nothing.

More lamely Shaw went on: "Where is Patrick, by the way?"

"That's what McCoy sent you to find out, wasn't it?" Vanney asked tenderly. "You tell the skipper, the captain, the honorable officer, Señor McCoy that Mr. Patrick is running down important clues."

"Aw," Shaw said. Then: "He ain't at your apartment, you know. McCoy had me call there."

"He would," Vanney said. This time Shaw didn't try to stop him.

VANNEY walked hard awhile more until red and yellow lights showed him an all night drug store. He used the phone there to ring his own apartment but there was no answer. He was worried about Patrick then; but he shook it off. This was no time to be wetnursing drunks.



Bill Vanney looked up a number in the book, wrote down a street address, and then bought himself a coke with enough spirits of ammonia in it to fight back his headache.

The drug counter clerk looked at him closely. In the mirror behind the counter Vanney could get glimpses of himself between piles of fruit, bottles of ginger-ale. The wind had brought his hair up into a stiff crest, and when he had run his fingers through it, he had left some of Mullen's blood there.

His topcoat was whipped out of press, his tie was around under one ear. The clerk took his dime and went back to the prescription department. Vanney thought he heard the phone clicking.

The private detective stood up, rolled for the door. He stood in the doorway a moment, waiting for a taxicab. A voice behind him made him turn.

The drug clerk was standing about six feet from him, holding a huge revolver in a shaking hand. "You cc-cc-can't leave till the p-pp-p-police get here," the boy said earnestly. "I've ph-ph-phoned them."

Vanney growled, took two steps towards the boy. "So you don't like the way I look, huh?" he asked.

The grave young man said: "If you come any closer, I'll sh-sh-shoot. That's bl-bl-bl-blood on you."

Vanney grinned broadly, and stepped in. He saw the kid's fingers tightening on the trigger, but by that time Bill's hand had closed over the barrel of the gun; he twisted, and it came away in his hand without being shot.

"I oughta knock you out for sticking your nose where it doesn't belong," the dick growled. But instead, he broke the gun, dropped six cartridges into his pocket and handed the gat back. Then he went for the door, juggling the cartridges in his topcoat pocket. The clerk made no move to stop him.

When Vanney reached the next corner, he tossed the cartridges into an area-way. The police hadn't gotten there yet. He found a cab at the next corner, gave

it the address he had copied out of the phone book, and lay back on the cushions, blowing cigarette smoke around the hack with subdued fury.

He dismissed the cab at the corner of the block he wanted, strode down the street until he saw a brightly lighted door with a coat of arms inlaid into it. The seal was not unlike the description that Mullen had given: a lion, a leopard, some stars.

Vanney stood there staring at it. A voice barked in his ear, a hard hand swung him around.

This was a cop, with blue uniform complete and a fresh young face. Vanney didn't know him. "What d'ye want here, fella?" the patrolman asked. "No loitering on this block."

Vanney got that. There'd probably been rioting there that day, the bohunks from the mills had probably marched on their consulate. "I'm Bill Vanney."

"Get along with ya," the rookie barked. Bill tried to get his credentials out of his pocket, but the cop roughed him down the street, shoved him past a radio car parked in the shadows, and away. Evidently the patrolman's orders had been to move every one along, and to make no arrests.

Two more patrolmen in the car hooted. "Catch yourself a drunk, Pete?" The rookie snarled at them. Disheveled, the detective did look like a drunk.

## CHAPTER IV

**A**WAY from the radio car, Bill Vanney stopped. He ran his hand through his touseled hair again, muttered: "Am I popular!" and winced a little when his fingernails picked up dry dust in his hair that was left from Mullen's blood.

He slung through the night, now, keeping out of lights. Here was no noise of rioting, and he had seen only the three patrolmen; probably the riot squads had been withdrawn. Vanney cut down the block behind the consulate.



Opposite what he took to be the back of the Bestrian building, he paused. He was in front of a small warehouse that looked deserted. He tried the front door, but it was locked. Vanney threw a shoulder against it, and it gave.

He threw himself to one side and waited. There was no sign of life in the building, no sound. The smell was that of a dump that hadn't been aired in months.

Vanney started working his way to the rear. He tripped once, and went flat as he caught his toe on a board that had warped up higher than the floor level. When he picked himself up, a long splinter was imbedded in the flesh of his hand.

He pulled it with his teeth and went on. As he stumbled through the dark, he wondered what McCoy was doing. The fat captain had worked out two theories about the killings before Vanney had left; probably by now he had worked out three more. Any of these might bring him to the consulate, and it was supremely important that Vanney get there first.

A gleam of light caught his eye. He went for it, found it to be a window pane so covered with dust that only a little light filtered through. Vanney scrubbed on it to the further disgrace of his top-coat.

When he could see out, he saw the back of a building brilliantly lighted. While he watched, many figures threw shadows on the shades; he knew he was in the right spot.

Vanney began to grin. The window gave him a little trouble by creaking but he got it open anyway. Then he held his breath and dropped through.

He landed at the bottom half conscious, swearing viciously between his teeth. There had been a ten foot drop, where he had been ready for a six foot one. He had not noticed that the ground sloped here.

After a minute Bill Vanney got up, and limped towards a wooden fence at the back of the warehouse yard. It was too high for him to reach; his ribs were sore

from the fall. It took minutes to manipulate the fence; his final success was neither dignified nor pleasant.

Sitting on the concrete on the other side, he murmured: "Cat man risks all in daring backyard journey." Then he rose, and looked around.

There were no cops posted here in the back of the consulate. A large garage was on his right, and an alleyway led from it to the street. There was no back porch to the larger building, and some garbage cans marked what was probably the kitchen door.

He went for the garage first, glad that there was no place in its architecture that that would allow sleeping quarters for chauffeurs or servants.

The front door of the garage was barred with a huge padlock. He blinked at this a moment, contemplating McCoy's glee if he caught Vanney removing the padlock. Then he removed it with a dime and not much difficulty.

THERE were six cars under cover. One of them was a big limousine, foreign make. He wasted no time on this, but struck a match and knelt to look at the license plate of the first small car.

As the light flared up, he saw that he had a Universal sedan—the same model, make and year as the death car—and that its license plate was 73-j-56. He'd found it.

But he lit another match, meaning to explore the radiator of the car and swore. There were five Universal sedans in that garage, and they were licensed serially: 52 to 57. He felt radiators, but the cold wind outside had chilled the cars down, and it was impossible to tell which of them had been driven recently.

His hunch had been right so far—some one from the consulate had killed Patchont—King Josef—but the consulate was full of people, and he had no clue as to the identity of the killer. It had been too dark on Washington Street to see faces.

He left the garage.

Vanney walked up to the back door of the consulate first, trying to figure out



what he could say that would get him in. His brain whirled rapidly, digesting nothing, producing nothing. He lifted his hand once to knock, dropped it again.

He had to make this good. It was his only chance. Finally, as his mind evolved a plan, he groaned.

Then Bill Vanney made his undignified trip across the fence again, got back into the warehouse by kicking in a window that led to the basement, and so made the street. He prowled a block and a half before he found a drug store.

"I slipped into an areaway," he told the pharmacist. "If I could have some court plaster for my knee?"

He got a chance to wash and comb his hair out of that, and the court plaster was a help. His knee was scratched from the trip of the backyards.

This druggist was not as curious as the clerk who had phoned the cops. But Vanney was not through yet. He sent a grin at the chemist that could have meant anything, and then used the phone booth.

"Police headquarters?" His voice was two octaves higher than natural. "There's a man prowling around on the roof just below my bedroom window . . . 72 Suther Street . . . oh, please hurry. . . ." He hung up.

"That was a nickel well spent," he told the druggist, emerging from the booth.

"Your girl?" the druggist asked. Vanney used another smile. "Well—you'll be none the worse for your fall tomorrow."

Bill Vanney faded out of the shop. He stayed in shadows, in doorways, until he was almost on top of the radio car. Then he lurked there, waiting. The wind blew the sound of the radio away from him; but he had timed it neatly, and the car started up almost at once, slid away. He could see, in the light from the dash, the two officers in it, their faces tense, alert.

He started running. He ran as fast as he could, hoping that his wash had changed his appearance. When he had run a dozen feet he opened his mouth in a quavering howl.

"Pooliice! Poollice!"

The rookie stationed at the consulate appeared from the shadows, grabbed at him. "Pipe down, guy! You wanta wake the neighborhood?"

"There's two cops being beaten up down at the corner," Vanney gasped. "One's down, and some big men have the other one out of his . . ."

The rookie was already gone, running hard into the wind. Vanney nodded gravely after him, stepped to the door, and rang the consulate's bell.

Almost immediately it opened, but just a crack. Brilliant lights in the hallway showed Vanney a good deal of gold braid and a brightly colored uniform on the man in the door. What could be seen of his features was Bohunk, Bestrian.

The liveried servant looked Vanney over carefully, from his touseled hair to his torn pants. "The consul, he cannot see any newspaper gentlemen," the man said, clearly, and started to shut the door.

VANNEY put one hand on the shield that had a leopard, a lion and some stars, and shoved. He got enough on that to put his foot into the door.

"My orders are," the servant said, "to use force—if necessary."

"I'm not a reporter," Vanney said, quickly. He had to get in before that rookie came back. "I'm a detective." He made his face very hard, and shoved more fiercely on the shield. The door gave a little.

"More police." A voice behind the servant sighed. There was a good deal of foreign accent in the voice. The servant, well-trained, stepped back, and Vanney was in. He shut the door quickly, blew his breath out with relief.

"There have been police here all day," the man said. He could not have been much older than Josef Patchont, but his face was wiser than the dead face that Vanney had seen earlier that evening. The nose was long and thin until it reached the end, where it flared out cruelly. The mouth was a slit in the wax-like young face.

"I am Nikolas Karnoff—attaché com-



mercial to the consulate. I am, you understand, the Consul-General's man of business. I have told the police all I can tell. In my country, in Bestria, when these canaille riots occur, we shoot them. Here, I cannot say what you should do. So, now, what is it I can tell the police more?"

"I'm not here about the riots," Vanney rasped harshly. "I'm here to find the murderer."

"The murderer?" Karnoff looked very tired. "The king and Prince Carol were killed by a mob. Who then was the murderer? And what concern is it of the police American?"

"Stop horsing me," Vanney snapped. "I'm looking for the murderer of Josef Patchont. Come on, now, wise guy. Tell me you didn't know at this consulate that the heir to your throne was croaked—in this very city—this very night."

Karnoff fluttered his eyelids, the very picture of a bored young man of the world. "So sorry. So many, many killings. We are, you understand, upset. This Josef, Prince Josef, was the nephew of the king. Yes, he was killed, of course. But we—we do not know what government we have, whether we are still a consulate, or only exiles from our land. We do not know, you can see, anything. His excellency has been trying to get through to Belgathia on the trans-Atlantic radio. The revolutionaries have seized the offices in Bestria, and we cannot even do that."

"None the less—" Vanney began, doggedly. But the doorbell rang again.

The servant looked at Karnoff, and the attaché nodded. "See who it is, Michael."

THE door was opened, that same discreet crack. A fat man's voice boomed: "Police," and McCoy and Shaw elbowed in, past the servant. McCoy saw Vanney first. "Trying to get ahead of me, fella? I got it already figured out, huh? It was the next heir to the throne done it. These guys told you where he is?"

Vanney looked at Shaw and said: "This

third theory of Captain McCoy. One: the dead servant did it. Two: a guy did it to steal a ring. Three: the heir not so apparent wanted to get a little more apparent. Good old Captain McCoy." Vanney did not sound happy.

"Always horsing," McCoy complained. "You and that Patrick." He turned to Karnoff. "We don't want no trouble if we don't have to. Heh? Where's Josef's brother?"

Karnoff stared at him wildly. "Dead—all of them," he said sepulchrally. "Three in the war. One yesterday, defending the king. Dead!"

McCoy swallowed.

Vanney's aid to Shaw: "Is there anything in this? How did the skipper get the steer?"

"As you'll never get one," McCoy said. "With my bean. It happens all the time. With Josef dead, this guy gets to be king. Wouldn't you kill for that?"

"Not to get a job that the last three holders of had been bumped off in twenty-four hours," Vanney said.

McCoy snorted, and turned back to Karnoff. "Come on now," he ordered. "Come across."

Behind Karnoff in the hall massed uniforms were gathering. The place seemed like some other world, far removed from the twentieth century. Massive walnut panelings and high lights and bright uniforms of the servants of the consulate all combined to give Vanney a feeling of awe.

McCoy, less sensitive, kept on questioning Karnoff. The attaché was not answering.

## CHAPTER V

A SERVANT came trotting down the steps, carrying two huge suitcases, saw the plain clothes men in the hallway, dropped the suitcases, and let them bump the last step or two. Then he backed into the knot of his colleagues behind him.

A tall man with white imperial and a long black opera cape followed the servant down the stairs.



"What is this, please?" he asked. "I am Consul General of Bestria. What is this?"

McCoy repeated his question about the prince's brother.

The consul stood on the stairs holding his cloak about him. He looked very old, very tired.

"There is no younger brother of Prince Josef," he said simply. "The King, God rest him, had four sons. They were Josef's cousins, and they are all dead. He had three nephews, Josef was the youngest. One brother was killed in the war, one yesterday. The dynasty is over. There are no more Patchonts." He spread his hands wide. "They called them cruel," he cried. "But they were glorious!" Then he seemed to recall his surroundings, and shrugged.

Vanney was chuckling. McCoy shot a fierce look at him, growled at the consul. "There has to be some heir," he said. "There always is. Who's the next king of Bestria?"

The consul stared at him queerly. It was Vanney's move to keep grinning, to keep from letting McCoy know he was worried, but there was something about the old consul that made it hard to do.

The old man was tugging at his beard. "If you read your paper, sir," he said, "you would know that here will probably be no more kings in Bestria. But—you, Karnoff. See in the book. I think it is a Harnowsky."

There was an abrupt movement among the servants that died down again, immediately.

Karnoff went into the next room, and Vanney scanned the crowd. Somewhere in here was the murderer of Josef Patchont. He had shot Prince Josef, and his car had stalled. When it was going again, he had gone back, shot the policeman and the servant who had seen him. That sort of man. And he was here. He had brought the car back here. But only Vanney and the murderer knew about the car.

He looked from the suitcases to the old consul in his cape. "You were going

some place?" Vanney asked.

The consul nodded, spoke in a voice as old as time itself. "This is the end. I was leaving. This is revolution. There'll be no more kings in Bestria. There are many Bestrians in this city—that is why we had our consulate-general here. Therefore I go. They rioted today, and surely they will not let me live if they find me. I was loyal to the Patchonts in life, but I do not want to follow them to the grave."

He came down three steps to stand on a level with the detectives, the servants.

"I am a count, you understand," he said. "I was general during the war. Now that is all over. I am not count, general, not consul. I am just plain mister—a mister without a country."

He leaned on the newel post, shoulders drooping under the opera cape. His servant, the man who had carried the bags down, came and put an arm around the old man's shoulders.

It occurred to Vanney that regular police methods wouldn't be much good against these people. They were a race apart. Surely, they must know that one of their number was suspected of murder.

It was silent until Karnoff returned. The commercial attaché drew himself up tall in the doorway, and levelled a finger at the consul's servant.

"Bestrians," he cried, "salute your king. King Jacquin of Bestria. Jacquin Harnowsky, the Exile!"

The silence trembled and grew stronger. The neat, beautifully groomed body of the attaché was like a signpost. But—and Vanney snapped back to earth—the man's finger was scratched, badly. The dried, clotted blood on it was real, not acting as the rest of this was. It was like a crumpled old newspaper found in an immaculate drawing room. It lent perspective to the whole scene.

THE servant who had been supporting the consul stepped forward. The consul instantly swayed and went to his knees, groped for his servant's hand,



raised it. There was a ring on it—a ring that bore the emblem of Bestria—the emblem that had been on the door, the emblem that Mullen had seen on a ring.

"The king is dead," the consul said, in a choked voice. "Long live the king! King Jacquin the Third!" He kissed the ring, clutching the blunt fingers of the exile as though salvation lay in their touch.

Jacquín Harnowsky was half weeping himself. "I knew," he muttered. "Of course I knew—when I heard that the last of the Patchonts was dead. But why more blood, more civil war?" He stopped and stared down at the kneeling old man. "You are right," he said clearly, though the consul had said nothing, "it is my duty. We sail for Bestria. And you—you my only loyal subject—shall be premier. Count, I name you Duke of Belgarthia!"

Vanneý felt blood pulsing in his throat. His lungs were choked, constricted. He was third generation Irish and Scotch mixed, but even his democratic blood reacted wildly to the sight of the two men posturing in front of the massed livery of the servants. He wanted suddenly to step forward, pledge his services to King Jacquin, the Exile.

## CHAPTER VI

**M**CCOY smashed it. The minute broke and was normal as the captain's harsh voice laid words across the tableau.

"That's all very pretty," he barked. "But you—King Jacquin—are wanted for murder." His hand went under his coat, came out with shiny handcuffs. McCoy stepped forward.

The old consul threw himself between his king and the police captain. "Back!" he shouted. "The king has been here—with me—all evening."

McCoy chuckled, and Vanney hated him for it. "Who'd want to kill a king?" he asked, "but the next guy for the job? And your word—nuts, you just said you'd lie for your king, croak for him if

necessary. It's open and shut—like shooting fish. Move, baby."

He shoved the consul aside, made another pass at the king. The old man caught his sleeve. "You've no evidence," he said, shrilly, "and this is consulate territory. You have no authority, either."

"No evidence," McCoy asked. Vanney started edging towards the drawing room door, where Karnoff still stood, half pointing at the king. "The dead guy had a ring. It was gone. Now it's on this mug. . . ."

He pointed at King Jacquin III of Bestria.

The king moved, and McCoy flashed handcuffs again. Shaw went for his gun.

One of the servants acted on that. A knife came down the brightly lighted hall, making a streak of silver. It caught McCoy in the shoulder, turned the police captain around and sent him slamming against the door.

Vanneý reached Karnoff, whispered in his ear sharply. "This isn't our fight, buddy. Let's you and me scam."

Shaw's gun was in his hand. He fired at the man who had thrown the knife. A Bestrian near the newel post grabbed up a copper statuette, slammed it at Vanney's head.

The consul came past Vanney, hustling the king, and Karnoff opened the door. "Later," he called to Vanney, but then the three Bestrians had disappeared.

Vanneý had ducked to miss the statuette. Someone turned the lights out, and a fist buried itself in Vanney's damp hair. It didn't hurt him, but he turned, brought out an uppercut through the dark. It connected with something that felt like a chin. A man groaned.

Then there was a clear space ahead of Vanney for a moment. He plunged into it, rolling his arms like a windmill.

Breeze messed his hair. He jerked his head quickly enough to take the blow slanting across his ear, and onto his shoulder. He used a right cross this time, and again there was a free space and he waded into it, flailing and beating out with his arms.



A siren sounded outside, a whistle screamed. The door plunged in, letting street light with it. At that moment the old consul appeared in the door of the room in which he had hidden the king.

Vanney slumped back against the wall as an emergency squad of cops separated the battlers. In their rear ran the young rookie whom Vanney had fooled. The kid's jaw was set grimly. Vanney took one look at it, and then sidled along the wall, to slip into the room that should have held Karnoff and the king. Vanney figured it was better not to let that young patrolman see him till the battle was over and the nightsticks sheathed.

Vanney slammed the door shut behind him, and leaned against it. Behind him was the noise of nightsticks and heads cracking. Oaths in two languages rode over the sound of the consul's voice, trying to stop the battle.

"The king's upstairs," Karnoff said. "He slipped up the back staircase."

VANNEY carefully kept his eyes away from the attaché's fat, beautifully manicured hands. "Nuts with the king," the private dick said. "I've taken all the beatings I want for one night. I'm not on in this act—I'm only a private detective—and neither are you. Drive me home."

Karnoff stared at him. "You want to get out?" Vanney nodded.

The noise in the hall stopped abruptly, and McCoy slammed in. "Where's the king?"

"Upstairs," Vanney said.

McCoy would have gone, but the patrolman off the beat was behind him. "Hey, skipper," he bellowed, "that's the guy started all this." He levelled a forefinger at Vanney. "He told me the guys down at the corner were in trouble, and I ran down there, and they was just coming back from a phony call, and . . ."

"Let it go," McCoy told him sourly. "This Vanney's a smart alec. Tell Shaw to take a crew upstairs and pinch this King guy. You, Vanney, get along home."

Vanney looked at Karnoff. "I can't," the dick said, weakly. "You'll have to get a cab. My stomach—someone kicked it. I'm sick as a pup."

"Get your own cab," McCoy said, nastily. "The cops has got something more to do than phone for you."

Karnoff said quickly. "I'll ride the officer home."

McCoy nodded absently, intent on the beat of feet upstairs. Then he left, and they could hear his fat little bowlegs drumming upwards.

The two men left in the room went out into the deserted hall, and moved towards the rear. Karnoff opened the back door; they stepped out into the yard; and Karnoff began to lead the way to the garage.

Inside the door, however, he stopped, suddenly swore, and looked at Vanney. "Go on, kid," Vanney chuckled.

Vanney's eyes were small in his head, watching. "Go on," he said again. "Let's get out of here."

"I have, you see, forgotten my keys," Karnoff said. "I must go back to the consulate for them." But he had already made a move towards one of the cars. Vanney nodded, Karnoff took a few steps towards the consulate. Vanney let him go because he knew that a shot or the threat of one, would halt the attaché.

As soon as Karnoff got moving, Vanney was on the Universal that the Bestrian's eyes had picked out. The dick's hand shot inside, groped on the floorboard. His fingers closed over the starter pedal, and bore down.

The starter gave a faint whine, brief and bubbly. That was all.

Vanney was sure now. To have made the pinch before would have meant interference; but this time he had the dope. His .38 got into his hand; he started to turn, meaning to stop Karnoff outside. Something cracked the top of his head, hard enough to knock him down but not out.

A hard voice said, with a good deal of accent: "Get up, detective, and drop the gun."



## CHAPTER VII

**A** MUZZLE pressed between Vanney's kidneys. He turned his head enough to see a .32 then he let his own gat clatter on the concrete. "Sucker," he hissed at himself.

"Precisely," Karnoff said. "You see, I recognized you as the man who was with that officer. I went back to kill him because he saw me when the motor failed. Now—detective. I needed you, don't you see? You are American. So you will know car motors. You will manage so one of these other cars will run. Me, I have only the key to this one. And its battery—you were waiting to see, weren't you?—is no longer usable. So—you will fix one of these other cars."

Sweat was streaking Vanney's face though the lake wind had chilled the city. "I don't know cars," he muttered surlily.

Karnoff shrugged, coolly. "Then you are dead—do you see? For I only need you to start a motor. Come—I have a knife as well as a gun. They would never hear." His voice sounded sure of itself.

Vanney nodded, his brain working furiously. He strode to one of the other little cars, ripped the hood up, fumbled with the wires. "I've disconnected the lock," he snarled, after a few minutes.

"I thought, you know, that you could," Karnoff said. "So. Now I will drive. I drive well with one hand, officer. You will be covered."

He started the car, ran it out of the garage with one hand, the other always covering Vanney with the gun. He had been right, he was an excellent one hand driver. The car moved down the driveway like a ghost.

"Soon—I shall dispose of you," Karnoff promised. "Tell me—you recognized me in the car?"

"No," Bill Vanney said through gritted teeth. "No. I was smart. I recognized you from the scratch on your hand. You had worn the dead king's ring to fool Mullen, right?"

"Of course, of course," Karnoff said.

"You see—we are clever, we revolutionaries. I wanted to kill both heirs. The farther we get from the straight succession, the less the people will follow the new king. But I could not kill Jacquin. So I was going to wear the ring knowing he was the only other man in the city, in this country, who wore the ring of royal blood. You see, I wanted that officer to see my hand. But when I got back to the consulate . . ." they were just rounding the building then—"that fool servant was alive, and trying to phone. I took the call, and said I would go over, help him with Josef. He did not know I was from the consulate."

They had made the road. Vanney slumped in his seat, feeling bitter. Even if he lived, which was dubious, he'd flubbed the case. His conceit had given Karnoff too much rope, letting him get away till Bill Vanney was sure that he was the driver of the stalled car. Bill grabbed for the gun that bored into his waist.

But before he finished the movement, the upward sweep of the sights knocked his wind out, and Karnoff said: "I am alert—a good revolutionary. There will be no more kings. They will hang Jacquin, yes? And you, you will not try and get my gun."

Then Vanney rose from the depths to the heights. For the end of the street was barricaded, cops, dozens of them, their blue uniforms and silver shields bright under a street lamp. Karnoff slowed the car down, and Vanney took a deep breath. Even if he was killed, he'd give the murderer away. . . .

The gun swiveled around, caught Bill Vanney square in the solar plexus. He doubled up, grabbing at his stomach.

Shaw was at the edge of the car. "Oh, you two? How's Bill's stomach doing?"

Bill tried to get his breath to answer, but couldn't. Karnoff said: "Badly."

"Tough," Shaw said. "Listen, mister. When you get to Bill's apartment, we'll phone you. We're looking for a guy named Patrick, and he may be there." He moved away.



KARNOFF nodded, and the barricade opened to Shaw's flashlight before Bill could get his breath.

The car ran along. "Listen," Vanney said. "That's twice you've socked me. Lay off." His head felt woozy. But his wits were coming back. Jay Patrick! He'd forgotten about the rum-soaked homicide man.

"Now," Vanney said, "you got to go to my shack. They'll phone you there, and if we don't show, they'll ring the city, so you can't get away."

Karnoff drove on. They were coming towards the lake. "It might be well," the foreigner said, "for me to drive out of the city, and leave you in the first, how-you-call-it? ditch. But—where is this apartment?"

Vanney said: "Near here. They'll only give you about five minutes. First turn to the right, if you want it."

Karnoff made the first turn to the right. "Yes," the murderer said, "I have done a good day's work for my country. Josef is dead, and surely they will electrocute Jacquin. It was that fool of a servant. He I hit over the head, but he must have survived. I got him later, with my gun through the window. You saw?"

"Now to the left," was all Bill said. Later they stopped in front of the apartment house. The lake, Bill saw, was dying down. He wondered abruptly, if this was the last time he would ever see it. He felt already dead; there was an atmosphere of the other world about his recent memories, about the dead king, about the consulate.

Karnoff prodded him across the pavement with the muzzle of the gun concealed in a pocket. Vanney thought harder than he had ever thought before. There was the elevator boy. Could he get some signal to him? Vanney turned it over for five paces, dropped it. The kid was not a hard mug of the pavements, who'd recognize the gun in Karnoff's pocket. And furthermore, nothing subtle would go.

For the college boy elevator operator was too dopey by this time of night,

from studying, from overwork, to get anything. Vanney put a curse on higher education, and shoved open the door of the apartment house. Karnoff's gun still kept up its contact.

While the kid ran them up with his eyes shut, Vanney thought. If Jay Patrick had sobered up, and had not left the apartment, the two of them could take this Karnoff. A guy can only shoot once—Jay would get him while Vanney went down. Maybe it wouldn't be a fatal slug that Karnoff would send into his ribs.

"Well," Karnoff said, "are you going to open that door?"

Vanney looked at the familiar numeral painted on the apartment door. Once it was open, he'd know. Either there was Patrick, and hope, or no Patrick and no hope. Inside the door the phone was ringing.

"There are the police now," Karnoff said. Metal clicked behind Vanney's back. "Your keys will be in your pocket. I could knife you and open the door to answer the phone. . . ."

Vanney wished he carried a derringer, a knife, something he could get out under pretense of fumbling for his keys. He finally fished them up.

"Patrick is not there," Karnoff said. It was as though he had read Vanney's mind. "Or else he would answer the phone."

Vanney opened the door. The murderer's gun threatened him, was changed abruptly for a knife that pricked through clothing. "Answer the phone," Karnoff whispered. "Tell your friends your stomach is all right."

VANNEY reached for the light switch. He might as well shout the truth into the phone and go down then as lie Karnoff's way out, and then be killed. The revolutionary, he was sure, had no intention of letting him live.

His thumb clicked on the light switch. Yellow light flooded the living room—and showed Jay Patrick—still drunk—motionless in Vanney's big chair. The homicide squad man's face was pale, his body



sprawled at an impossible angle.

Vaney got the first inspiration of an hour. "Lord, lord," he moaned. "Karnoff. They know—the cops have been kidding me."

Karnoff, startled out of his murderous trance, shivered. "What, what?" he asked. "I do not. . . ."

"Look!" Vaney shrieked. "Look!" He jerked Karnoff out of the lobby, and to the point where he could see Patrick sprawling. It was notable that the gun and knife continued to cover Vaney.

"I killed him," Vaney sobbed, "down on the lake front. The cops must have found him, brought him up here—we're trapped." He began to sob.

Karnoff spluttered in some foreign tongue. "Eh, you killed him? How, what is this?"

"We fought," Vaney said hysterically. The weapons still covered him. "I hit him over the head—he fell. He couldn't have gotten up here. The cops brought him."

They stood there a moment, and Vaney prayed that Patrick wouldn't stage a come-back and open his eyes. Karnoff snapped finally: "He is not dead. He can't be. Feel his heart!"

"No," Vaney sobbed. "You do it!"

Karnoff got suspicious. "Move, detective. See if that man is dead. Stop your

noise. Stop it. . . ."

He pushed Vaney forward so that the dick stumbled, half fell on top of Patrick. "Feel his heart, detective," Karnoff shouted.

Bill Vaney pushed a trembling hand under Patrick's coat, over the left breast. His hand stopped trembling there, however. He felt his fingers close on Patrick's gun—and he was on his feet.

The .38 faced the .32 and the knife. Karnoff's eyes popped, his fingers tightened. But the .38 spoke first.

Karnoff staggered backwards, his shoulder reddening, his gun clattering to the floor.

Vaney stepped in while the Bestrian red was still staggering, and kicked Karnoff's feet out from under him. Afterwards handcuffs clicked, and then, finally, Vaney answered the phone.

"Hello, McCoy? Well, I'm sorry, but I ran into Jay Patrick on the street. Where had he been? Arresting the murderer of Josef Patchont, of course. Sure, I told you. He and I together . . . What? . . . No, we won't be in till I've phoned the newspapers."

He slammed the receiver, sprinted for the bathroom, turned on the cold water in the tub. He was laughing as he stripped off Patrick's clothes, and started to sober his friend up.

## NOTICE

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# Fiction Becomes Fact

It has been said so often that truth is stranger than fiction that one hardly dares to reiterate the cliché—yet every day the newspapers print articles to prove that the old bromide still has force.

Recently the various forces of law enforcement of the United States and Rhode Island combined and uncovered a situation that is entirely unbelievable—yet entirely true. In Warwick, Rhode Island, the law forces discovered a beautiful house which had been turned into a fortress and headquarters of a gang of criminals organized with a lovely skill and simplicity such as would be a credit to any of the present day captains of industry.

The “crime syndicate” was headed by Carl Rettich, who personally planned such jobs as the \$130,000 Fall River mail robbery and who had at his beck and call about two dozen lesser organization heads scattered throughout the United States. One, Ira Steele, is now free on \$25,000 bail and another, Herbert Hornstein, was arrested in Los Angeles, California—quite a widespread “empire” for one man to control—especially where all the links in the organization are made up of treacherous and dangerous criminals.

So widespread and varied were the activities of this criminal organization that officials working on the case are confident that they will clear up the disappearance of Judge Crater and the \$429,000 armored car holdup in Brooklyn.

A rather curious human interest story has come out of this situation where a desperate criminal was glad that the men calling for him were officers rather than his own confederates.

Johnny McGlore—alias “Sonny” McGlore, an ex-convict and alleged free-lance torpedo—was trapped at his mother’s apartment in New York by detectives and postal inspectors who had information stating that he was in hiding there.

It is contended by police and federal

authorities that McGlore is the twenty-fourth and last uncaught member of the Providence, R. I., gang.

He is supposed to have received \$20,000 as his share of the Fall River holdup, which netted the mob \$130,000, but he is alleged to have spent it all at Florida resorts.

Through him the authorities expect to link the gang with the \$429,000 armored truck robbery in Brooklyn last winter. McGlore, who was released on bail, gave his address as West 27th St., New York City. He is also suspected of having engineered a \$10,000 armored truck holdup in Perth Amboy, New Jersey.

The detectives went to McGlore’s mother’s apartment, having been tipped off that he was there, and posted men in the superintendent’s quarters, stationing other men in McGlore’s car and in the immediate vicinity of the house. When the men had all taken their posts Detective Hymie Levine slipped a note under Mrs. McGlore’s door, which read:

“Come down and meet me. It’s getting hot.”

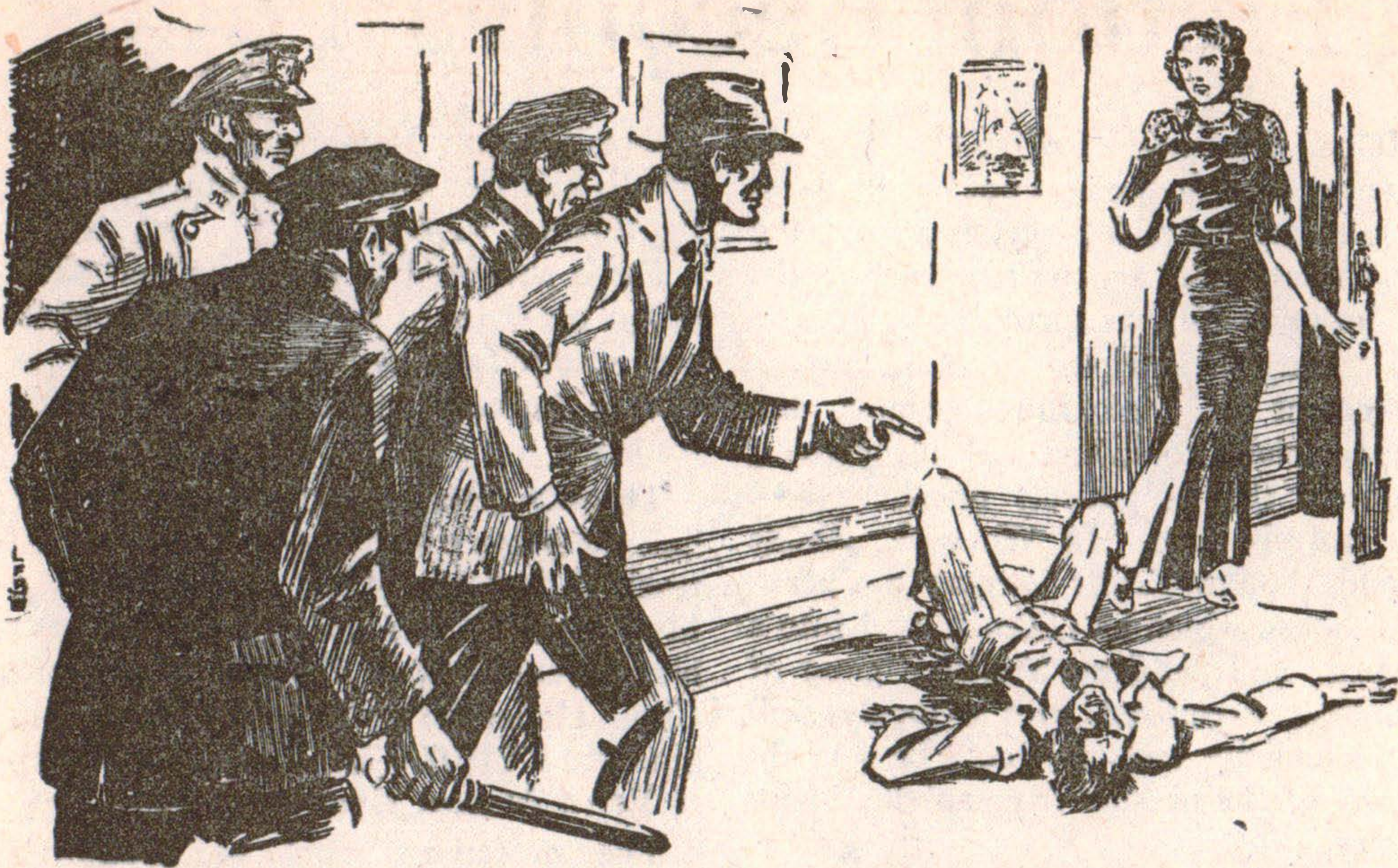
A few minutes later, McGlore dashed from the front door and sprinted for his car. Seeing the officers, guns drawn, rushing in on him—he paled and almost fainted. Then he noticed the shields which the officers displayed and looked relieved. As he submitted to capture he said, “I thank God. I thought I was being taken. I thought the mob was after me. You’re cops. That’s fine. That’s O. K.”

A few moments later he recognized Detective Levine and said to him, “I’m glad it’s you, Hymie.”

The detectives explain McGlore’s fear that he was being taken for a ride by the fact that he recently participated in some labor terrorism on the water front.

At any rate, it is safe to say that he is one of the very few criminals who actually was glad to be arrested.





# MURDER MAGIC

By **GEORGE A. McDONALD**

**B**ARRY DESMOND'S dark eyes were somber as they stared into the mirror of his dressing room at the Liberty Theatre. A deep frown furrowed his forehead as he started removing the make-up from his lean, dark face that was shadowed with trouble.

The Swami Sleuth swore beneath his breath and tried to shake off the presentiment of evil that had been riding him, like an old man of the sea, all during the evening performance. He told himself that his return to the stage had brought a bad case of the jitters.

For there never had been a time in the career of Black Barry Desmond, ex-spirit medium, magician, confidence man and amateur sleuth, when trouble had seemed less imminent.

He felt that for the moment, he had nothing to fear from the police. When Don Horgan had made the offer to star "Desmond, the Master of Magic" in the current edition of the "Frivolities," which Horgan was backing, the Swami Sleuth

had gone directly to John Deming, the District Attorney, and asked for a chance to prove that he was going straight.

Deming had been frankly skeptical. For months, the police had been trying to pin something on Desmond, whom they regarded as one of the cleverest swindlers that ever escaped the clutches of the law. But Desmond argued that his guilt was only a matter of police opinion. There was absolutely nothing against him in the police records. Deming finally agreed to give him the chance he demanded. The police would let him strictly alone, as long as he confined his activities to the performances in the show in which he was to be starred.

The show proved to be a smash hit. Desmond was packing the theatre with his marvelous feats of legerdemain, his startling escapes from ropes, chains and packing cases. Through his mastery of illusion, he was performing acts that seemed little short of miracles, acts that had never been attempted on the stage



before. The breaks at last seemed to be with the Swami Sleuth.

Desmond knew that it was not for himself that he was troubled. It was because of Heather Carol, the leading lady in the show, that Desmond was worried.

There was a bitter twist to Desmond's lips, as he recalled the ugly look that had shown in the eyes of Don Horgan, when Heather had slapped the show angel, just before the evening curtain lifted. Neither Horgan nor the girl knew that Desmond had witnessed the short but turbulent argument.

The magician was still frowning as he passed the doorman. A big, blonde kid spoke to him. Desmond's eyes brightened as he saw Stuart Carew. He said: "She's coming right along, son."

A big, blonde kid spoke to him. Desmond's eyes brightened as he saw Stuart Carew. He said: "She's coming right along, son."

Young Carew was crazy about Heather, and she seemed to be equally fond of the young law clerk. Carew had no money to speak of, but he had a good job in the district attorney's office. The youngster would have a chance to step up the ladder, if Deming, the D. A. was successful in his hope of being the next Governor of the State.

The lobby of the Lancaster Hotel was nearly deserted when Desmond turned in about two hours later. As he hard heeled across the lobby, he saw Hughes, the hotel manager, talking with Joe Kane, a detective on the Broadway squad. They were waiting for an elevator and Hughes looked badly worried.

A cage door shot open. The three men stepped in and Kane asked:

"Where's the body?"

"On the fifth floor," Hughes said shakily. His eyes moved to Barry Desmond's face as he added: "Just outside Miss Carol's door."

Kane, the city dick, followed Hughes' glance and for the first time, he caught a look at the face of the third occupant of the car. The detective's brows tangled in a scowl, as he rasped:

"What in hell are you doing here?"

"I live here," Desmond said flatly. He made no effort toward resentment at the snarl in Kane's voice. The presentiment of evil that had been with the Swami Sleuth, was wrapping cold fingers of fear around his heart. He tried to shake it off, telling himself that nothing could happen to Heather Carol.

The car halted at the fifth. Desmond started to get out. Kane gave him a piercing look and said:

"Do you live on this floor, Sharpshooter?"

"I live on the eighth—I'm stopping to see Miss Carol about a special rehearsal in the morning," Desmond replied evenly.

Kane looked as if he was going to object, but before he could voice his squawk, Desmond was halfway down the hall, moving with swift, long strides toward Heather Carol's room. As he swung around a sharp turn in the corridor, a load lifted from the ex-spirit medium's heart. He saw Heather Carol, standing there, a few yards from the door to her room. Three men were with her; Terris, the house dick; the assistant manager and a porter.

Desmond's breath whistled through his teeth as his eyes riveted on the body slumped on the floor at their feet. He shot a swift glance at Heather Carol's white, frightened face, and his pace quickened. He moved to her side, and stared down at the dead man.

"Don Horgan—murdered!" he gasped.

His eyes lifted to the girl's face. She nodded her head. Her eyes were glassy with fear.

"So — you know Horgan?" Kane's voice sounded at Desmond's elbow.

"He's backing the show that Miss Carol and I are playing in," the Swami Sleuth said quickly. Kane looked at him and muttered:

"Oh, yeah. I remember now. We got orders to lay off you, since you gave up rooking suckers with your crystal ball and your fake spirit messages. You're still fooling the public, but they call it legitimate down at the D. A.'s office."



The sarcasm and the implied inference in the detective's voice were plain. But Desmond chose to avoid challenging Kane's remarks. He awaited further developments; watched silently as Kane knelt and examined the knife wound in Horgan's body, just over the heart.

Kane looked up suddenly. His eyes fixed on the girl in a hard, penetrating stare. He barked:

"What did you do with the knife, sister?"

For a second, Heather Carol stared at the detective blankly. Then her eyes went wide with fright. She said shrilly:

"I didn't kill him. It was the masked man."

"What masked man?" Kane's voice was sharp.

Heather Carol's eyes closed. Desmond moved closer to her, slid his arm under her elbow. He said tonelessly:

"You're barking up the wrong tree, Kane. This girl's no killer."

Kane's voice got hard. His voice was frosty as he said:

"Maybe you know who killed Horgan?"

The Swami Sleuth's lean dark face was blank and expressionless as he met Kane's icy stare. He said tonelessly:

"No—I don't know who killed him, Kane. But I know Heather Carol didn't!"

The elevator door around the corner clanged shut. All eyes turned toward the bend in the corridor. A few seconds later a short, stocky man in a grey suit appeared. He looked down at Horgan's body, then he asked sharply:

"Who killed him, Kane?"

"I just got here, Mister Deming," Kane answered. "I figure that this girl knows something about it. Horgan came here to see her. Called her room on the house phone in the lobby—then he came up—and got a knife stuck in his heart."

"Any sign of the knife?"

"Terris, the house dick, searched the floor. He didn't find it."

Deming's eyes moved from Kane, slithered across the face and came to rest

for a second on the white, strained face of Heather Carol. Then he saw Desmond, and his eyebrows crawled up. He said softly:

"Oh—so you're here, too, Desmond."

"I live here," Desmond said quietly.

The District Attorney's face was emotionless as he said: "I see!"

Desmond's eyes narrowed a trifle as he looked at Deming. Deming was firing questions at Heather. When the girl realized the D. A. was trying to pin the murder on her she got hysterical.

"I didn't kill him," she screamed. "I didn't talk to him. He said he wanted to see me. I tried to avoid meeting him; I put on my hat and coat and started to leave my room. But Horgan came out of the elevator just as I got to the corner there. He saw me, so I started back to wait. He came around the corner—then a masked man—in a dark suit came along the hall behind him—" The girl's eyes closed and her slender body quivered.

"What happened then?" Deming asked softly.

"The man called Horgan by name. Horgan turned—I saw a knife flash in the hand of the masked man—it lifted and fell—Horgan groaned—a horrible, gurgling sound. Then he seemed to crumple—he fell to the floor—jerked a little—then he was still." She shivered again.

"Didn't you scream—or call for help?" Deming asked harshly.

"I tried to, but my voice was frozen in my throat. The masked man started toward me—with the knife in his hand still dripping blood—I ran back to my door—but I fainted. When I came to—he was gone. I tried to unlock my door—to telephone the desk—but I couldn't work the key—the porter came then and notified Mr. Hughes."

**D**ESMOND watched Deming's face as Heather told her fantastic tale.

Deming turned to Kane and said coldly:

"The knife must be around here. Have you searched her room?"



Desmond felt the hair along the back of his neck lift at the implacable, threatening undercurrent that showed in Deming's voice.

"I was just going to look there when you arrived," Kane said. Deming looked at Heather Carol and said:

"Have you any objections to my searching your room? I can get a warrant if necessary." She shook her head slowly, turned on her heel and used her key to unlock the door. Deming waved a dismissal to the others, saying: "I'll talk with you people later."

"You come with me, Desmond! I need you!" Heather said shakily.

Deming's eyes fixed on the magician's face in a frowning, searching look. Then a thin, sardonic smile twisted his lips, as he said:

"Yes—you'd better come too, Desmond. She needs you."

Inside the room, Desmond sat down beside Heather on a sofa. Deming recited the routine formula, warning the girl that anything she said could be used against her. Then he told Kane to get the routine questions answered. Deming moved about the room, searching for the knife, while Kane talked.

Kane's questions were blunt and brutal as he tried to build up a motive for the murder. Desmond objected pointedly to some of them. The detective's eyes smouldered as they speared the ex-medium. Finally Deming said acidly:

"I'm beginning to think that you're trying to help this girl hide something from us, Desmond. You certainly aren't helping her any—nor yourself either for that matter."

Desmond met the district attorney's bleak stare with a level gaze.

"That's just one man's opinion, Deming," he said softly.

Deming's eyes flashed as he rasped:

"I don't want any of your stage wisecracks. This is a murder investigation, not a benefit vaudeville performance."

Desmond clamped his teeth and choked back an angry retort. He leaned back and reached in his pocket for a cigaret.

His fingers brushed against something hard; something that was tucked between the cushions of the sofa. His heart skipped a beat. The metal was smooth—like the blade of a knife.

He let his eyes drop, then lifted them quickly. Don Horgan's cigaret case was hidden between the cushions of Heather Carol's sofa. There was no mistaking that black and silver case. Desmond had seen it too often in the pudgy hands of the show angel.

His brain whirled. Heather had lied about Horgan being in her room. Then his eyes hardened. If Heather had lied, she had a good excuse for doing so. But—if Deming found the case—and identified it—her whole alibi would be torn down.

Desmond's hand flicked down in a lightning movement. His trained fingers lifted the cigaret case and flashed it toward his pocket. His hands were skilled in movements that were so fast that they deceived the eyes of audiences who were watching him closely. Kane, who was sitting a few feet in front of Desmond, missed the movement completely.

Desmond turned his body a little, screening his right hand from Deming's view. Kane bent forward to search Desmond's coat pockets. A slight movement of the Swami Sleuth's left hand attracted Kane's attention for a split second. As Kane's eyes lifted, Desmond's right hand flicked down, lifted the case out of his own pocket and planted it in Kane's suit coat pocket, all in a single movement that was too swift for the eye to follow. Then Desmond was motionless.

Deming quit his search and moved toward the girl. His jaw was hard and his eyes looked flinty at the failure to unearth the knife. He stood in front of the girl, rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. Then he rapped out:

"Where did you plant it, Miss Carol?"

Deming's one-track procedure angered Desmond. He said acidly:

"Maybe she ate it, Deming. She used to do a sword swallowing act in vaude-



ville." Kane cursed under his breath, looked at Deming and snarled: "This mugg's getting in my hair. Will I smack him quiet?"

Deming looked as if he wanted to assent. Then he changed his tactics and said softly:

"Why don't you come clean, Miss Carol? Horgan was trying to force his attentions on you, because of his position as backer of your show. You could plead self defense and no jury would convict you. I'll see that you beat the rap on a second degree murder charge."

**B**UT the girl was adamant in her denial. Deming turned to Kane in disgust and told Kane to book her on suspicion of murder. She looked scared. Desmond told her he'd get her a lawyer and take care of her bond.

He walked to the elevator with her, and bumped Kane as he put his arm around her shoulders encouragingly. With that brief bump, the cigaret case was transferred from Kane's pocket back to Desmond's.

Desmond punched an up button, and a frown creased his brow as he tried to figure it out. Who had killed Horgan? Was there a masked killer—or was she covering some one—young Stuart Carew for instance? The magician swore under his breath. If Heather had told him what the row at the theatre was about—he might do something to help her out. As it was—the girl might be headed right for the electric chair. Unless young Carew could help her out. Carew worked in Deming's office. Why hadn't the girl mentioned her sweetheart, knowing that Carew stood in well with Deming?

His frown deepened as he examined the case in his own room. There was no mistaking the initials engraved on it. It was Horgan's case. The Swami Sleuth whistled softly as he opened the case. A puzzled look showed in his eyes. The case was empty, except for a few cigarets. Why had Heather Carol risked a first degree murder charge by taking it from Horgan's pocket after the kill? Pro-

vided, of course, that Horgan had not been in her room. Deming could build up an air tight case of premeditated murder, if the case had been found in the girl's room. Was it possible that she had lured Horgan into the dimly lighted hall so Stuart Carew could knife him? Desmond could think of no one else the girl would want to shield. He realized that there was something big behind the murder of Don Horgan.

He shook his head stubbornly. He wouldn't let himself believe that Heather Carol was implicated in murder. It just wasn't in the girl's make-up. He tossed the case on his bureau and got ready for bed. Just before he turned in, he changed his mind. If the case was valuable enough for the girl to risk detection in keeping it, he ought to make sure that it was kept safely until she wanted it. He tucked it in the corner of one of his bags with a box of his magical props. Then he climbed between the sheets and turned out the bed light.

**D**ESMOND awoke with a vague feeling that he was not alone in the room. Without moving his head from the pillow, he let his eyes stab at the semi-gloom of the room. His gaze riveted on a dark, shadowy figure bent over his bureau. As he stared, the dark clad intruder noiselessly opened a bureau drawer and probed the depths with swift, precise movements.

In the half light, Desmond saw that the man's face was covered with a silk mask. The magician felt the blood pounding at his temples and a surge of relief went through him. Heather Carol's story about a masked murderer wasn't imagination after all. Savage elation tingled in the Swami Sleuth's veins. Don Horgan's murderer was here, in his room. A swift rush, and the murderer would be his prisoner—and Heather Carol would be free.

Desmond's feet moved silently from beneath the sheets, swung over the side of the bed, then rested on the floor. The magician eased his lean, tall body up-



right, balanced a second on the balls of his feet, then threw himself forward at the dark, crouched figure.

A board in the floor creaked beneath Desmond's weight. The man at the bureau whirled. Then Desmond's arms went around the masked man, as the force of his rush carried the intruder back against the bureau.

A flash of surprise went through the ex-spirit medium's brain as he locked his arms around the struggling man. The masked burglar was short and wiry, and he possessed incredible strength for his slight stature. Desmond found it difficult to pin the man's arms. The masked man's heel went in back of Desmond's leg, and the magician had to shift his grip to keep his balance.

Savagely, and in complete silence, they struggled; Desmond trying to bend the masked man back over the edge of the bureau so that he could whip a knockout punch to the man's chin, while the man in black fought furiously to free his arms from the Swami Sleuth's vise-like grip.

Slowly but surely, Desmond forced the man back against the bureau. From above the mask, dark eyes burned murderously into Desmond's face. Just as the man's back touched the edge of the bureau, his knee jerked up in a blow aimed at Desmond's groin. The magician arched his body to avoid it, and as he did the masked man's right hand jerked loose from the grasp of the Swami Sleuth.

Something sharp stung Desmond's leg, as the magician's right fist balled and drove upward. The leg went numb, pitching him sideways. A low-pitched, savage laugh grated in his ears. Beads of sweat gathered on Desmond's brow as he felt a sort of paralysis creeping through his veins.

His leg crumpled beneath him and he tried to cling to his adversary to keep from going down. But now the paralysis had reached his arms. He slumped to the floor, completely helpless. His brain was functioning clearly but every nerve and muscle seemed atrophied.

The masked man stood by the bureau

laughing softly. In his hand he held a small hypodermic. As Desmond watched, the man shoved the syringe into a small sheath fastened to his belt.

"Thanks for waking up," the masked man's voice was a sardonic whisper. "You saved me a lot of trouble. Please tell me where the cigaret case is—the one you pocketed at the Carol girl's room."

The effect of the powerful drug was beginning to wear off now. The Swami Sleuth did some fast thinking. Had the masked man been hiding in the corridor of the hotel and seen him lift the case from Kane's pocket? That seemed unlikely. His uninvited guest must be bluffing. There was no way that he could know about Horgan's cigaret case. Desmond tried to stall.

"You're barking up the wrong tree, feller," the magician said coldly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

THE politeness went out of the masked man's voice. His eyes got hard and ugly, glinting over the mask in a basilisk stare. His fingers went to his belt, lifted the hypodermic, and he said:

"You've had an example what this needle did to your nerves. A jab near the base of your brain—and that goes blotto too. Come clean, brother—or you'll get it—right in the neck. And I can't promise that you'd ever get over it."

Desmond shuddered involuntarily, then said:

"Okay, mister. It's in the alligator-skin bag. There's a box of magic props there. The case is in that box."

He watched as the man took the case from the suitcase, opened it and tore each cigaret apart, closely examining the paper wrappings of each tobacco tube. Evidently he did not find what he was seeking for. There was a burr of anger in the masked man's voice as he turned and said:

"Where is it?"

"The case is just as I found it," protested the ex-spirit medium. "I haven't the faintest idea what you're looking for." For a few seconds the masked man's



fingers toyed with the syringe at his belt. There was stark murder in the flaming eyes that were bent on the magician. The hair lifted along Desmond's neck at the venom in that glance. Desmond figured that he would be taking his last curtain call in a very few minutes.

"Don't stall with me," the masked man rasped. "Hand over the paper that was in that case—or, by God, I'll make a driveling idiot out of you!" He stood over Desmond, menacing him with his murder-flecked eyes. The magician steeled himself for the cruel jab of the needle.

"I've told you the truth," he said steadily. "I'd be a damned fool to try to hold out on you, if I had the paper you want. I'm not as screwy as all that."

Something in his voice convinced the masked man that Desmond was handing him the truth.

"Then the girl must have it," he muttered. He turned toward the window leading to the fire escape. As the masked man swung one leg over the window sill, he turned and flipped a black gloved hand at the helpless magician in a ribald salute. His voice was honey sweet, as he said:

"Better confine your cleverness to the stage, Desmond. Because if I find you're getting too curious in the Horgan case—hard luck will overtake you all of a sudden. The cops will find the remains of Black Barry Desmond in some alley."

Desmond's eyes narrowed, and something clicked in his brain as his eyes fastened on the cuff of a white shirt that was exposed in the man's parting salute. An idea that was so startling that it almost bowled him over, popped into his head.

Slowly and painfully the blood began to circulate in Desmond's veins as the effects of the drug diminished. As he sat there waiting for motivating power to return to his nerve centers, Desmond revolved the facts in his mind. He believed that he had a clue as to the identity of the masked killer. But it seemed incredible.

Desmond found that he could move his fingers, then his hands and soon the entire effect of the drug had been thrown off by his system. He got to his feet,

switched off the table light that the masked man had lighted and went back to bed. He tossed and turned for nearly an hour.

Desmond's lean, tanned face was deadly serious as he paced the floor of Heather Carol's room. He had been successful in getting her a smart lawyer and in raising the bond for the heavy bail required. The girl watched his long legs driving up and down the room, with a somber expression that was almost sullen.

The magician stopped flatfooted in front of her. There was a note of exasperation in his voice as he said:

"Don't you see what kind of a set-up you're bucking, kid?"

She nodded and said in a low voice: "I know, Desmond."

"Then why don't you tell me what it's all about? What's the secret of that cigaret case?"

"I can't tell you that, Desmond. It's—it's too big—to be talked about. It's so big—that Don Horgan was killed—on account of it."

"And you stand a damned good chance of getting the same treatment," he rasped. "You're bucking a ruthless, clever devil who wouldn't hesitate to murder you if he finds that you're in his way. The fact that you are a woman means nothing to him."

**T**HE girl's face paled and her frightened eyes fixed on his face.

"You talk—as if you knew who killed Horgan," she said in a shaky voice. "You do believe, then, that there is a masked killer."

Desmond's voice was low and hard as he recounted his experience of the previous night. As he finished, the girl was jittery. She said:

"Then he'll be looking for me next. What will I do, Desmond?"

"That's up to you," he said evenly. "I think you're a sucker for covering young Carew in this case, but—"

She interrupted him with a quick motion of her hand.

"Stuart Carew isn't in the picture. I'm not trying to cover him."



"Okay—if that's your story," his tones showed a lack of belief. "My advice is for you to disappear for a few days. Haven't you any friends in the city that you can visit? Let your understudy do your part in the show."

For a few seconds the girl stared at the floor. There was a frightened, hopeless look in her eyes that tugged at Desmond's sympathies. He said cheerfully:

"Cheer up, kid. It isn't that bad. Give me a couple days—and I'll locate your masked killer."

"You mean—that you'll help me?" she asked eagerly. "Even if I can't tell you what it's all about?"

"My folks didn't raise any pacifist kids," he said grimly. "I'm looking to take a crack at that mugg on my own hook, as well as for your sake. I owe that smart chiseler plenty for the way he took me over."

Heather Carol's face lighted for a minute. Then her eyes were shadowed with fear again.

"I can't put you on the spot for those rats," she said in a low voice. "I'd be sending you right to your death. I got myself into this jam—I guess I'll have to get out alone—if I can."

"Try and keep me out, sunshine," Desmond said grimly. "You pack your suitcase and get out of the hotel for a few days. The masked killer can't hurt you—if he can't find you. If you haven't any friends in town—you can go to another hotel. Though the crowd that we're up against will probably search every hotel in town, when they find you've checked out here."

The girl said she would move in with a friend in an uptown apartment. She gave him the address and telephone number, in case he wanted to get in touch with her. He advised her to walk down the rear stair and leave by a rear exit, the lobby might be spotted. He said he would arrange things at the desk.

He left the girl packing and went to his own room. Ten or fifteen minutes later the phone rang. It was Joe Kane, the city dick, calling from the lobby. Des-

mond scowled at the transmitter, then said he would be right down.

The city detective smiled as Desmond approached, but his eyes were bleak as he said:

"Sit down, Desmond. I want to talk to you."

The Swami Sleuth dropped into an easy chair, lit a cigaret and let a tiny cloud of blue smoke trickle from the corner of his mouth. Then he said:

"What do you want to talk about, Kane?"

"About the cigaret case you copped in the Carol dame's room last night."

DESMOND kept the surprise out of his face. Behind bland, expressionless eyes, his brain was clicking fast. How did Kane know that he had gotten Horgan's cigaret case? Where did the city dick fit into the picture? Desmond knew that he was in a tough spot. If he confessed that he had lost the case, Kane would be justified in arresting him as an accessory. His past record would be enough to convict him of any charge Kane wanted to lodge against him.

"Did she say she lost a cigaret case?" he asked blankly.

Kane's jaw hardened. His voice had an ugly rasp as he growled:

"Cut out the stalling, Desmond. I want that cigaret case—the case that was lifted from Horgan's pocket by the Carol frail."

"I haven't any cigaret case that belonged to Horgan," Desmond said flatly. "You're barking up the wrong tree, Kane."

"Maybe you'd like to spend a few hours in the can—while we search your room," Kane said softly.

"You can come up and search now, if you want to."

For a long minute the detective's bleak eyes locked with Desmond's. Then Kane said: "I suppose you've ditched it by now, or you wouldn't act so chesty. I think a trip down to the sweat box might do you a lot of good. There's a lot of the boys that would welcome the chance to work on you."



"That's an idea," the ex-spirit medium's voice was flat and level. "And a suit for false arrest might do you a lot of harm. So what?"

Kane stuck his jaw forward and rasped:

"You're a smart heel, Desmond. You've always been too damned smart for your own good. Some day we're going to get you right. Hiding evidence can get you a sweet rap. You're just sticking out your block for some one to knock it off. And I'm just the baby that's going to do that little thing for you."

"That's worth remembering," Desmond said tonelessly.

"Here's something else to remember," growled Kane. "You're heading for the hot squat, when you try to cover the trail of this Carol doll. She killed Horgan and we're going to burn her for it. You'll be right along with her, if you don't watch your step."

"I'll take a chance on that," Desmond said levelly. "You won't find it easy—hanging a frame on me. Anything else on your mind? I've got a rehearsal at ten."

Kane's brows met in a savage scowl. He said:

"If I find out that you held that cigaret case out on me—I'll nail your hide to the wall—if it's the last thing I ever do."

The detective swung on his heel and pounded out through the lobby. Desmond watched him with hard, bleak eyes. Then his brow corrugated in thought. Mentally he listed the people who might have killed Horgan. First there was Heather Carol. She had been afraid of Horgan—afraid of something he wanted her to do. She hated him too. The Swami Sleuth remembered her expression as she rasped: "Damn Horgan. I wish he was dead." Had the thought been father to the deed? Then there was young Carew. Desmond had a feeling that he was tied up in the kill. Whatever it was that Horgan wanted Heather to do concerned Stuart Carew. The boy was madly in love with Heather. He would have committed murder to protect

her. Lastly—there was Deming himself. It was a startling thought—but not an impossible one. Desmond had many friends in the underworld. He had heard ugly rumors of wholesale blackmail that was being carried on in the city, under the very nose of the District Attorney. The very fact that Deming and Kane were so anxious to pin the kill on Heather Carol was suspicious.

The Swami Sleuth's eyes narrowed. Supposing some important evidence had been concealed in the cigaret case—evidence that would point to Deming's complicity in these blackmail plots. It would be duck soup for Horgan, if he could have gotten hold of such evidence. Carew working in Deming's office, might be able to get his hands on such incriminating evidence. Unless—it was Carew himself who was implicated.

Desmond's brain traveled in a dizzy circle. Heather—or Carew—or Deming? He decided that Carew was the connecting link. He'd call on Heather's boy friend right after rehearsal.

He tried to get Stuart Carew on the phone at the district attorney's office right after rehearsal and was told that Carew was not at the office. He could get no information as to where the young law clerk might be located.

The magician had a feeling of panic. Had Carew flown the coop, leaving Heather holding the bag? Or had he felt the menace of the masked murderer and hid out somewhere? There might be a chance of locating him at his home. There was no time to don the make-up of Swami Lasrah.

Carew lived at a small hotel in the Grammercy Park section. Desmond had dropped in there one night after the show when Carew was throwing a party. He rode the elevator to the fourth floor and went down the hall to Carew's room.

A radio was going full blast in the room as the ex-spirit medium's knuckles lifted to rap on the panels. Then he heard voices, and a sharp metallic sound like the clash of a typewriter carriage. Desmond thought he recognized the



sound. He was sure he did a second later, when he heard the thump of a falling body.

Desmond stood riveted to the floor. His hand dropped to the doorknob. It turned in his grasp. He threw open the door and rushed to the side of the crumpled body on the floor. Stuart Carew was dead!

**B**LOOD still oozed from the bullet wound over Carew's heart and his body was still warm. But the room was empty. Cold fear gripped Desmond's heart. The killer had struck again. Struck—and disappeared like a ghostly wraith. Unless—unless the murderer was still in the apartment. The magician's blood pounded in his veins. The noise he had heard had been unmistakably the sound of a silenced gun.

Desmond cursed the folly that had sent him on the trail of Horgan's killer without a gun in his pocket. He was in a tough spot—if he had been recognized in the lobby—Black Barry Desmond was slated for a one way ride to the chair—if he wasn't recognized—the murderer who had struck twice certainly wouldn't hesitate to kill again.

A low, grating laugh whipped Desmond's eyes toward a closet door across the room. His heart skipped a beat as he stared into the muzzle of a silenced automatic, rigidly held by a thin faced, cold eyed man who lounged against the door jamb.

"Is this my lucky day?" chuckled the gunman. "You walk right in, when I was supposed to go look for you. Just back up there, Mister Magician. I want to do a nice, clean job on you."

Beads of perspiration formed on the Swami Sleuth's brow as he straightened up, under the menace of the silenced gun. A swift glance at the gunman's face told him that the man was a junky, doped to the gills, and eager and ready to kill.

Desmond spoke and he tried to make his voice sound calm. He said:

"So the Big Shot put the finger on me too, did he? I didn't think I was impor-

tant enough to be marked for a killing."

The gunman's eyes narrowed perceptibly. A tight grin split his thin face, as he said:

"You got guts, brother. I thought all you stage muggs were a bunch of pansies. Yeah—the finger was on you for being too damned nosey. Got any last words for your dear public?"

Desmond's thoughts were shuttling through his brain. He knew that in a few seconds a lethal bullet would be hurtling from the snout of that unwavering silencer, a bullet would lodge in his heart. Desperately he fought for time. He scarcely recognized his own voice, as he said calmly:

"How about a drag on a cigaret before I go? I don't want to go yellow on you."

The man's eyes were glittering and sharp as they followed the slow, deliberate movement of the magician's hands. Warily he watched Desmond take a dull metal case from his pocket, snap it open and extract a cigaret. His eyes never left those lean dark hands, as Desmond took a paper pack of matches and lit one, holding it to the end of the cigaret.

The Swami Sleuth inhaled deeply, let a cloud of smoke drift from the corner of his mouth, then said casually:

"Where do I stand for the execution?"

"Right where you are," the man grinned evilly. "I like the lighting effect."

Desmond flicked the ash from his cigaret, lifted it to his lips and inhaled again. The glowing ring of fire ate deeply into the paper tube. Then he took the cigaret from his lips, glanced at it for a split second—then suddenly snapped it to the floor, directly at the man's feet.

As the glowing stub left his fingers, Desmond's body jerked sideways. His movement was synchronized with the sound of a miniature explosion. The cigaret was a tiny, but powerful smoke bomb, such as he often used in a disappearing act on the stage.



THE gunman's finger jerked on the trigger of the gun at the crack of the exploding cigaret. Then acrid smoke billowed up, partially blinding him. He squeezed the trigger again and again, firing at the spot where the magician had been. The first bullet clipped through Desmond's coat as he threw his body sideways. When the second and third shots were smashing into the wall in back of him, Desmond's lean, hard body was diving from an angle, through the smoke screen. He saw the foggy outline of the gunman's head and his fist smacked square against the killer's jaw, before the gunman could whip the gun around to cover him. The man staggered back and the Swami Sleuth's left fist flailed against his chin, followed by a short, swift jolt from his right.

The gunman's body arched back. His head cracked against the door jamb and he slid to the floor. Desmond bent down, scooped the gun out of the killer's hand and straightened up, with a light of fierce exultation burning in his eyes. At last he had the whip hand. He'd soon have the name of the murderer of Horgan and the man behind Stuart Carew's death.

Desmond eyed the telephone on the table, and considered calling the police. He immediately banished the thought. He knew that the police wouldn't believe him—and there was only his word that the unconscious gunman had killed Carew. Black Barry Desmond would be charged with the murder—the real power behind the murders would go scott free. Desmond knew he had to trap the masked murderer himself—to get him red-handed, if he could—so there would be no doubt of his guilt.

Folding his lean frame into an easy chair, Desmond waited for the gunman to regain consciousness. The smoke from the cigaret bomb eddied to the ceiling and faded away. With the silenced automatic cradled in his lap, the Swami Sleuth's bleak eyes fixed on the gunman's body.

The man sat up, and after a few seconds, his eyes focused on the gun in Des-

mond's lap. The magician saw that the glitter had gone out of the man's eyes.

For a long minute, the Swami Sleuth let his bleak, cold eyes bore into the man's face. Then he said:

"I ought to bump you off—but I'm letting you live—because you're going to tell me who sent you to kill Carew."

A sullen light flickered in the gunman's eyes. His mouth twisted in a cruel snarl as he growled:

"Like hell I am!"

"Oh yes, you are," Desmond said softly. "Because if you don't, I'm going to hand you over to the cops. They'll slap you into a nice cold cell—with nothing but iron bars to look at. You'll be kept there for days—with no snow to soothe your tortured nerves—detectives hammering at you—giving you the third degree—the goldfish and the rubber hose—and all the time every nerve in your body will be crying for a shot of dope—"

For ten or fifteen minutes he tortured the man with the spectre of life without the drugs that had become a vital necessity. He saw the man's morale go to pieces, saw craving desire flame in the man, while he kept him subdued with thoughts of death and agony—death from the gun Desmond held—or in the electric chair for the murder of Stuart Carew.

A half hour later, the man cracked. He said sullenly:

"Do I get free, if I name the Big Shot? You won't double cross me?"

"You go free," Desmond said coldly. "After you've told me the name of the devil who sent you out and where I can find him."

A CRAFTY look showed in the man's eyes. Desmond's faculty for reading facial expressions warned the ex-spirit medium of deceit. His jaw hardened and he said:

"On second thoughts, I'll let you take me to the Big Shot. Then I know you won't pull any fast ones."

Fear showed in the man's eyes as he whispered:



"Jeeze, I can't do that. He'd croak me sure."

Desmond's upper lip pulled across his teeth in a snarl. His voice was brittle as he said: "Did you ever hear of Black Barry Desmond?" The man's eyes widened and he nodded his head.

Desmond asked: "Then you've heard of me, and you know I'm not bluffing when I say I'll croak you, if you don't take me there. Make up your mind, damned quick."

The gunman read the message of death in Desmond's eyes and he wilted.

"Don't shoot me," he shrieked. "I'll take you to the place where I was to report to the Big Feller."

Desmond said grimly: "I thought you would."

Fifteen or twenty minutes later they got out of a cab in front of a three story wooden apartment house on the west side. The gun in Desmond's pocket bored through the cloth of his coat into the ribs of the gunman as they walked up two flights and down a hall to a door marked "30."

The gunman rapped twice, waited a second, then rapped three times. Desmond heard someone stirring inside. He felt his pulse quicken as a familiar voice rasped: "That you, Tony?" Tony grunted an assent. Exultation thrilled in the Swami Sleuth's veins. In a second the door would open to reveal the masked murderer—the man who had killed Don Horgan, and who had ordered the deaths of Stuart Carew and himself—and, no doubt—Heather Carol as well. Desmond's eyes flamed with hatred, and his forefinger tightened on the trigger of the automatic.

The door swung open and Desmond stared at John Deming!

There was no mistaking the jagged outline framed in the cloth of the Swami Sleuth's coat. The muzzle of the gun lined on Deming's stomach. The district attorney backed away from the fury in Desmond's eyes. Desmond herded the gunman inside, then stepped into the room.

"I had a hunch I'd find you here, Deming," he said softly. "I thought I recognized the peculiar shape of your cuff links, the night the masked murderer visited me."

Desmond had to admire the man's nerve. Not a flicker of an eyelid showed Deming's surprise. Deming smiled a little, said easily:

"A pair of cuff links isn't much evidence to convict me of Horgan's murder, especially in the hands of a known criminal like you, Desmond."

"It will be enough coupled with the evidence that Heather Carol has—the evidence that you're at the head of the blackmail ring that has been mulcting a fortune from the victims you framed with phoney arrests."

"So you know about that?" Deming's voice had a harsh note.

Desmond knew his shrewd guess had hit home. He said:

"I know that you've had a bunch of crooked women working for you, vamping wealthy men into making dates. Then you'd send a couple of your crooked dicks to make a pinch. Unless the victims kicked in heavy, they would face a heavy rap and a lot of dirty publicity. They always kicked in to have the charges *nolle prossed*. Young Carew grabbed off some evidence to hand over to Horgan. You killed Horgan—but you missed out on the evidence. And that's what's going to send you to the chair, Deming."

"You're screwy," Deming said steadily. "Carew was in the racket with me. He wouldn't dare to double cross me."

The Swami Sleuth's eyes grew wary. Deming was altogether too confident. The magician's eyes glittered around the room, in a quick glance but saw no sign of danger. He said:

"Sure, Carew was with you. But he was crazy in love with Heather Carol. And when Horgan put her on the spot, Carew kicked in—"

Desmond saw a smile dawn in Deming's eyes, as they went over his shoul-



der. It was an old gag but Desmond sensed that it wasn't a bluff on Deming's part. He slewed his head a little, saw a man standing in the bathroom door. There was a business-like look to the automatic in the man's hand and an invitation of death in his voice as he growled:

"Drop that gun, mugg—or take a bellyful of hot lead!"

THE hand in Desmond's pocket came out slowly, lifting the automatic and dropping it to the floor. The ex-spirit medium felt sick. He cursed himself for a sap, for not having searched the whole apartment.

Deming said silkily: "Thanks, Nicko." He leaned forward and picked up the gun, dropped it into his own pocket. Then he said:

"Now—Mr. Black Barry Desmond—you're going to call the Carol dame and make her bring the evidence you boasted about."

"That's your opinion, Deming," Desmond said levelly. "I don't see it that way. You can knock me off—but the girl will still have the goods on you. She'll use the evidence, too—when she learns that her boy friend, Carew, has been bumped off."

Desmond shivered under the lethal glare in Deming's eyes. There wasn't a chance in the world of getting out of this jam. The crooked district attorney's eyes moved to the man by the bathroom door, and he said: "We'll have to work on this fellow, Nicko."

Nicko grunted, took a long step toward the Swami Sleuth. The magician saw the light gleam dully on the gun barrel. He tried to duck but was too late. Something exploded inside his skull. He heard Deming's cold, rasping voice lifted in a curse, then blackness settled over him.

Desmond's head ached and throbbed and his mouth tasted like a motorman's glove. He tried to lift his hands to his aching head and found that he was handcuffed. Shackles bound his ankles. His shoes and stockings had been removed and the irons bit into his flesh.

A cool, sardonic voice cut the fog in his brain. Deming said harshly: "He's coming out of it, Nicko. Go to work on him."

Nicko chuckled softly, took a splinter of wood and jabbed it under Desmond's toenail. He winced, and Nicko laughed aloud. Desmond cursed at him between clenched teeth. Then a match lighted the splinter of wood. The Swami Sleuth felt an agonizing pain darting up his leg that brought beads of perspiration out on his forehead.

"An idea I got from the Chinese," Deming purred. "Smart people, the Chinese."

Desmond clamped his jaws and choked back a groan. He tried to lash out with his other foot, forgetting his ankles were shackled. His head ached from the blow of the gun butt. Finally, when he thought he could stand the pain no longer, the room pitched and tossed before his eyes.

Cold water sloshed in his face and he came out of the pit of blackness. Deming stared coldly, said: "Feel like talking now?"

Desmond cursed him malevolently. Deming said, "Go ahead, Nicko."

Another sliver was burned under the other great toenail and again Desmond passed out under the excruciating pain. When he came to, Deming was laughing softly. Then he said: "This can go on all night. Better get sensible."

Cold reason settled in Desmond's brain, quenching the fires of hatred that had prompted his stubborn refusal. If he could stall for a little while and get rid of Deming—there might be a chance. He let his eyes close wearily and said faintly: "You win, Deming."

Deming grinned cruelly, turned to Nicko and said: "Take him into the other room to the phone."

The Swami Sleuth staggered into the next room, leaning heavily on the shoulder of the gunman. Deming's smile was almost pleasant as he said:

"I'll dial the number. It will save the bother of unlocking the handcuffs."



Desmond gave him the number, and let a look of defeat show in his eyes. But behind the mask of defeat, his brain was clicking fast. Deming spoke into the transmitter:

"Is Miss Carol there? It's a message from Barry Desmond."

There was a second of silence, then Deming spoke again:

"Miss Carol? Just a minute, please."

Nicko moved across the room at Desmond's side. Deming said in a low voice: "I'll take care of him, Nicko." He handed the phone to Desmond and grated: "Be damned careful what you say." The gun in his pocket was hard against the magician's side as he said it.

The Swami Sleuth grinned wryly:

"Hello, kid," he said. "I guess I'm a punk detective. I found the masked killer—and got myself into a jam, doing it."

"You found—Horgan's killer?" The girl's voice was harsh.

"Yeah man," he said. "He's right here beside me, with a gun tucked in my ribs. He's going to use that gun on me—if you don't bring the paper here that you got from Horgan's case."

He heard her say:

"Isn't there any other way, Desmond? They'll kill—Stuart—if they get hold of this paper. They'll know it came from him."

The ex-spirit medium took a desperate gamble. He knew that Heather loved young Carew. She might go to pieces at the news of his death—or she might risk everything to avenge the death of her sweetheart. Desmond knew that Heather had plenty of courage—but did she have enough to stand a shock like that? He said harshly:

"They know about that already, kid—and they've taken care of it."

He heard a low moan at the other end of the wire. He prayed that the girl wouldn't faint. From the corner of his eye he saw Deming's eyes resting on him suspiciously. A few seconds later he heard Heather's voice. It was choked, dry and rasping:

"You mean—that—they've killed Stuart Carew?" she asked slowly.

"Just that, honey," Desmond's voice was as sympathetic as he dared make it. "Don't you want to do something about it?"

"You mean—there's a chance—to get his killers?" she asked fiercely. "A chance to get Deming?" His hopes rose at the expression of her voice. He said: "Just that, gorgeous. I mean just that."

"I'll take a cab right now," she said, in a dead, flat tone. "If we fail—well—life isn't worth much without—Stuart." Then she hung up.

Deming grinned evilly, nodded to Nicko and said:

"Take him back in the other room. Give him a shot of rye, and leave him. We've got his trick keys so I don't think he'll pull one of his famous escapes on us."

Nicko showed a set of white, even teeth and said:

"Nicko's got them bracelets on tight as hell. He won't get loose from them." Nicko turned to Desmond and said: "Get going, you big four-flusher." He accented the command with a swift kick. Desmond snarled:

"You lousy heel. You have to have a man tied hand and foot to kick him, don't you?"

Nicko uttered a foreign curse and started to club his gun down the ex-spirit medium's skull. Deming halted him with a quick command, saying:

"Don't let him get in your hair, Nicko. He won't be bothering us much longer. Get him in there in a hurry. You've got to go down and meet the girl when she comes with the stuff we want."

Nicko shoved and pushed the staggering prisoner back into the other room. Deming was busy with a pencil and paper as Desmond went through the door. The gunman slammed the Swami Sleuth against the wall. His injured head cracked against the plaster. Desmond choked back the vitriolic epithets that rose to his lips. He let his eyes roll in his head, a hollow groan emanated from his throat;



then he sank slowly to the floor, apparently knocked out again, by the impact of his wounded head against the wall.

Nicko rasped: "You'll be quiet now, Mister Smart Guy. You can talk with the spirits here." Then the door slammed shut.

Desmond lay motionless for a minute, until he heard Nicko's heels rap across the floor. The gunman said something to Deming, then went down the stairs.

THE Swami Sleuth sat up. The rap on the head had started the throbbing inside his skull again. But Desmond was too busy to let it bother him much. He had made escapes from handcuffs and shackles, both before audiences and screened from view on the stage, but as Deming had shrewdly guessed, he usually had a master key planted either in the cabinet or in his sleeve lining.

This time he had to resolve to the escape artist's last resort, forcing the cuffs open. Fortunately he had on the clothes he had worn at rehearsal. And as he had one particularly tough challenge escape in the show, Desmond was always prepared for trick handcuffs. Strapped to the inside of his thigh was a curved, heavy steel plate.

He maneuvered until he had worked his arms up over his head. Like most of the masters of escape he was double jointed at shoulders and hips. It was a tough, gruelling job, especially in his present condition when every motion he made seemed to increase the smashing pain that beat against the top of his skull.

Desmond knew that unless he got free in the next fifteen or twenty minutes, he would die. He hadn't been fooled by Deming's promise of freedom. The crooked official couldn't afford to let them live. Deming would kill him and the girl, as soon as he obtained what he wanted.

The magician was playing a dangerous game. But he was in a desperate position. Though the chances of getting away with his play were slim—yet anything was better than sitting back, waiting for Deming to bump them off.

Desmond twisted and shrugged his arms over his head. He bent forward, and extracted a thin, pliable, tempered steel wire from the cuff of his trousers. With this, it was but the work of a few minutes to get the shackles loose at his ankles. He clamped them loosely around his legs, and started to work on the manacles at his wrists.

The effort of getting his hands in front of him, and picking the lock of his leg irons had almost proved too much for him. He had to lean back against the wall to wait for the pain and nausea to subside.

Then he heard footsteps on the stairs, the heavy thump of a man's feet, accompanied by the lighter tap that came from a woman's shoes. Desmond ground out a savage curse. Heather Carol was coming in and he was still bound and shackled.

He leaned forward, twisted the manacles to a certain position, then rapped them on the piece of steel that was strapped to his leg. The cloth of his trousers deadened the sound. The cuffs loosened, but were not wholly unlocked.

He heard voices in the next room, then steps coming toward the room where he was a prisoner. Desmond doubled his legs up, shot them between his hands, and nearly dislocated both shoulders, getting his hands in back of him, before the door opened. Somehow he managed to achieve the feat. He still appeared to be safely fettered, when Deming walked into the room with Heather Carol.

Deep pity showed in her eyes as she saw his battered head and bloodstained face. She said:

"I'm sorry I got you into this, Barry."

"Don't mind me, beautiful," he grinned crookedly. "You've paid plenty yourself. Have you got the paper Deming wants? He values it pretty highly—has committed two murders to get it."

She turned blazing eyes on Deming and said in a low, tight voice: "I've got it. And if it wasn't for saving Barry Desmond's life—I'd use it to send you to the chair, you murdering beast."



Deming laughed deep in his throat. There was a cruel edge to his voice as he said:

"You're not so pure and holy yourself, you two-timing little rat. You tied up with Horgan and made young Carew turn traitor on me. It cost your sweetie his life to do that. You killed him—you and Horgan."

"Horgan's just as bad as you are," stormed the girl furiously. "You framed Stuart Carew, made him a party to your blackmail racket before he knew what he was doing. Then you held his guilt over his head like a sword of death. Horgan knew about your racket—and he threatened to expose Stuart, unless the poor kid handed over some evidence that would convict you."

"Carew was a sucker," Deming laughed. "He could have called my bluff any time and gotten away with it. But he didn't have brains enough to know that. So he doublecrossed me—and he paid the price. Just as you and this fortune-telling, stage mountebank are going to pay—"

**H**EATHER CAROL recoiled from the blazing fury in the district attorney's eyes. Her knees hit against the edge of the iron cot, and she sat down suddenly, gasping, "You're going to kill us too?"

"You little fool," grated Deming. "Do you think I'd let you live, knowing as much as you do? Hand over that paper—before I have my man search you."

Her eyes went past Deming to rest on Desmond's face. Behind the killer's back the Swami Sleuth's lips framed a silent message: "Get gun—right pocket." Heather Carol's face got white. Her jaw set in an ugly line. She dropped her eyes to the bag in her lap. Her hand was steady as she opened it and took out a folded sheet of paper.

"There it is," she grated. "I hope it helps to hang you."

Deming grabbed the paper, half turned toward the window, so that his right side was in front of the girl. His eyes were riveted on the paper as he unfolded it.

Desmond looked sideways at Nicko, leaning against the wall, near the door. The gunman's eyes were avidly fixed on his boss. Desmond's eyes slithered to the girl; he nodded his head quickly.

For a fraction of a second, her eyes widened in fright and the color went out of her cheeks. Her teeth clamped against her lower lip. The tableau burned itself in the ex-spirit medium's memory. For days afterward, he lived that hectic minute again in his deams—the minute that would spell life or death for him and Heather Carol.

Desmond suddenly rattled the chains at his wrists and ankles. Nicko's beady eyes jerked from Deming. The gunman figured the Swami Sleuth was trying to escape. The same instant, Heather Carol's hand darted forward and jerked the gun from Deming's pocket. Her thumb snapped down on the safety lock, just as Deming turned, snarling:

"You double crossing little rat—this is a copy—not—"

Heather's lithe body, trained to swift, intricate dance steps, moved incredibly fast. She was off the cot, in the same smooth movement that had lifted the gun from Deming's pocket. Along the couch she darted, keeping Deming's body between herself and the gunman at the door.

Under the menace of the automatic, Deming seemed rooted to the floor. Then he went berserk.

"You dirty little twist!" he screamed. His body bent and swooped toward the girl. The roar of the automatic filled the room.

Desmond moved like a piece of well oiled machinery. His hands jerked free from the loosened cuffs. He twisted his body and launched out at Nicko's legs.

The gunman had whipped into action at Deming's first outburst. A gun had seemed to leap from Nicko's pocket. But he couldn't use it—Deming was directly in the line of fire. Nicko hesitated—then saw Desmond's body hurtling toward him.

The gunman jumped out of Desmond's path, swung his gun toward him, and squeezed the trigger. Desmond felt the



first bullet whip through the cloth of his coat. The second one splatted against the wall behind him.

He tried to twist in the air to reach Nicko. But the gunman eluded him—then suddenly turned and raced for the door and his feet pounded down the stairs.

The Swami Sleuth hit the floor on his hands and knees, catapulted his body erect and whirled toward the girl. He saw the reason for Nicko's sudden exit.

Deming was sprawled on the floor in a crumpled heap. Heather Carol's bullet had found a target in his heart. Just beyond Deming lay the girl, still and motionless. Nicko had fled in fear of being held for a double murder.

Cold fingers of fear clutched Desmond's heart, as he saw the still form of the girl. He hobbled toward her, and breathed a sigh of relief. She had fainted, after killing Deming.

DESMOND reached down and scooped up the paper in Deming's hand. It was a copy of a letter that had accompanied a check for twenty-five thousand dollars, to have a case *nolle prossed*. Heather must have the original, with the signature of the victim. It cinched Deming's guilt as the head of the blackmail ring. No wonder Deming had killed to get it.

The magician's eye dropped to the gun on the floor, just beyond Heather's finger tips. It would be marked with her finger prints. He was reaching for it, when from the street the sharp bark of a pistol stopped him, fingers a foot from the gun on the floor. A gruff voice bellowed, "Halt!" The spiteful roar of a police revolver added an exclamation point to the command. Almost immediately heavy feet were racing up the stairs. It must be the cops—and they had gotten Nicko.

Desmond's eyes darted wildly around the room. There was a closet partly open. But there was no time to drag Deming's body out of sight. Nor was there time for him and Heather to escape. Desmond's thoughts raced wildly. The cops

were in the next room now. He jumped back and sat down against the wall. He had just slid his wrists through the loose handcuffs, when the door crashed open and two cops charged in. Service revolvers swung menacingly in their fists.

The first cop, a stocky, red-faced man, stared at Deming's body and then at the unconscious girl on the floor. His eyes slithered to the handcuffed and shackled magician against the wall. His eyebrows crawled up, as he growled:

"What in hell's all this mean?"

Desmond heaved a deep sigh as he saw the cop had not recognized him. He said:

"Brother—am I glad you came? I would have been next."

The second cop had moved over to the bodies on the floor. He yelled:

"Jeeze, Foley! It's Deming—the D. A. Some dame gunned him out."

Foley whirled on Desmond, leveled his gun and rasped:

"Caught you red handed, didn't we? Lucky we were cruising past when the shot sounded. We got your pal too. He's out there on the stairs, waiting for the morgue wagon."

Desmond's heart sank under the menace in Foley's voice. He was in a tough spot. Deming was dead, and the gun that killed him was there on the floor, plainly marked with Heather Carol's finger prints. They couldn't beat a murder charge now—probably a double charge—for Detective Kane would hang Horgan's murder on them now. True—he had evidence in his pocket that might incriminate Deming—but it was only a copy of the real paper. Desmond knew that Heather would never be allowed to produce a bona-fide letter—Deming was an organization man—and his guilt would have to be covered up—or the whole party would suffer. He tried to bluff.

"You're crazy, officer," he said. "Can't you see I'm handcuffed?"

"Sure you are," grated Foley. "The district attorney probably put them bracelets on you—for some crime that he'd pinned on you. Then your floosey gave him the works—and keeled over, before



the pair of you could take it on the lam. Them irons stay right where they are."

A bitter smile twisted Desmond's lips. No use arguing with a man like that. It was a tough pill to swallow—after getting Don Horgan's murderer—he'd probably fry in the electric chair for accomplishing the deed.

Foley turned to his companion, said bruskiy:

"This is a job for the homicide bureau, Joe. There's a phone down in the hallway on the first floor. I saw it when we came through. You'd better give headquarters a ring and have them send some men up here. I'll bet they find that dame's prints on the gun there. Call the morgue wagon for that stiff out on the stairs."

"Keep an eye on this bird, Foley," the man called Joe said darkly. "He's probably wanted, or Deming wouldn't have come down here after him."

"I'll keep him cool," growled Foley. Joe went out and down the stairs to telephone. Desmond was thankful that the phone in the next room was behind the curtain on the window sill. His eyes shifted around the room, fixed on the closet door and narrowed. A daring scheme came into the magician's mind.

**F**OLEY dragged a chair into the middle of the room. He took a quick look at Desmond's handcuffs and shackles, growled: "I guess you're safe." Then he sat down in the chair, near Heather Carol's limp body. His back was half turned to the Swami Sleuth who was working softly at the handcuffs.

Heather stirred a little on the floor. The uniformed cop bent over, his eyes fixed on the girl's white face. As he did, Desmond's hands slid through the loose cuffs, and his shoeless feet noiselessly kicked free from the shackles.

The Swami Sleuth crouched a second on his toes and fingertips, like a sprinter waiting for the gun. Then he shot forward, his right fist balled into a hard fist that swung in a short, vicious hook, aimed just below the cop's ear.

Desmond silently prayed that his wallop

would land square. It was a terrific gamble. If he failed—Foley would shoot him down in a minute. Or—if the cop didn't plug him—his desperate attempt would be further evidence of the guilt of Black Barry Desmond.

A thrill of joy went through Desmond's veins, as he felt the impact of his knuckles against Foley's jawbone. The cop never knew what hit him.

He catapulted out of the chair, crashed against the wall and slid to the floor, cold as a Boston Haddock.

The ex-spirit medium bent down, lifted Foley's handkerchief from his pocket. Picking up the gun in the square of linen, he swiftly rubbed it free of finger prints. Wrapping a handkerchief around the gun again, he ran to a window that looked out on a vacant lot. He jerked up the window, and threw the gun as far as his arm could drive it.

Then he closed the window, pulled open the closet door and went back to his former place. The leg irons and the handcuffs were tightly locked in place, on Desmond's ankles and wrists, when the second cop came back up the stairs.

Desmond yelled at him: "Did you get him—did he get away?"

The policeman asked blankly: "Did I get who?" Then his eyes fastened on Foley stretched out on the floor. Anger flashed in the cop's eyes. He started toward the Swami Sleuth. Then he saw the handcuffs and shackles. He halted and a bewildered look showed in his eyes.

"Am I getting screwy?" he asked. "What in hell happened, while I was gone?" He looked around. Foley was sitting up, groggily rubbing his jaw. Then the cop saw a white faced girl getting up from the floor.

"What hit me?" Foley asked stupidly.

"The other gunman cracked down on you," Desmond rasped. "I tried to warn you—that he was hidden in the closet there—but you wouldn't let me." Foley stared at Desmond, then his eyes moved to the girl. Suspicion was mirrored in his eyes as he growled:

"Suppose you begin at the beginning."



"The man that slugged you and escaped was one of the killers who got Don Horgan," Desmond said levelly. "Miss Carol and I trailed them here. We had tipped Deming off and he was to meet us. But he was late. The killers got the drop on us and we were prisoners, when Deming walked in. He went for his gun—but one of the gunmen beat him to it. The one that did the shooting was the fellow you shot downstairs. The other fellow stopped to search Deming's pockets for some evidence that the district attorney had. When he heard you coming he dove into the closet there."

Foley's eyes were hard as he rapped:

"Why didn't you open your mouth about this before?"

"The bird that slugged you was holding a gun on me," Desmond said flatly. "He promised to plant a slug in my heart—if I let out a peep. Do you blame me for not talking?"

The cop named Joe looked puzzled. Desmond saw that he had at least established a doubt in his mind. He was quick to follow it up. He said:

"Just as soon as you went out, the hood slid out of the closet and slugged Foley. Then he grabbed the gun off the floor and beat it up to the roof, I think. I heard his feet on the stairs going up. He kept me covered with the gun, so I couldn't yell to warn you."

Desmond's eyes moved to Heather Carol. She had eagerly listened to his story. The Swami Sleuth knew that he could count on her to back up his play. She said:

"That's right, officer. I saw the man shoot the district attorney. Then I fainted, I guess."

The policeman exchanged glances. Then Foley rasped:

"I think you're a damned liar—but there isn't anything I can do about it. You being handcuffed wrists and ankles gives you an out. And the gun is gone."

Desmond said smoothly:

"Listen, officer. Miss Carol and I are playing in a show on Broadway. We're supposed to be on the stage in thirty-five minutes. How about turning us loose?"

Foley gritted his teeth, and snapped: "What show are you with?"

"The Frivolities. I'm Desmond, the magician. This lady is Heather Carol, the leading lady. You know—if we aren't there—we can file a suit for false arrest."

Foley leaped at Desmond, his face flushed with excitement as he roughly tested the tightness of the cuffs on the magician's wrists, studied the irons closely. His face went glum and hard. He said:

"I thought your face looked familiar. Now I'm more suspicious than ever of you. These ain't fake cuffs—but somehow you must've got out of them. I'm going to turn you loose—because I know I can get you, if we want you. But I'm telling you straight—I think you murdered the D.A. You're lucky this time. But I'll pass the word along to the boys—to keep an eye on you—you're too damned smart to be true. And if we catch you again, you'll pay for this. That's a promise." He pulled out a bunch of keys, and found a skeleton key that released the magician.

DESMOND thanked him sardonically, turned to Heather and said: "Let's go, bebe. Thirty minutes to curtain call." He grinned at Foley and added: "Come up and see us sometime—at the Liberty."

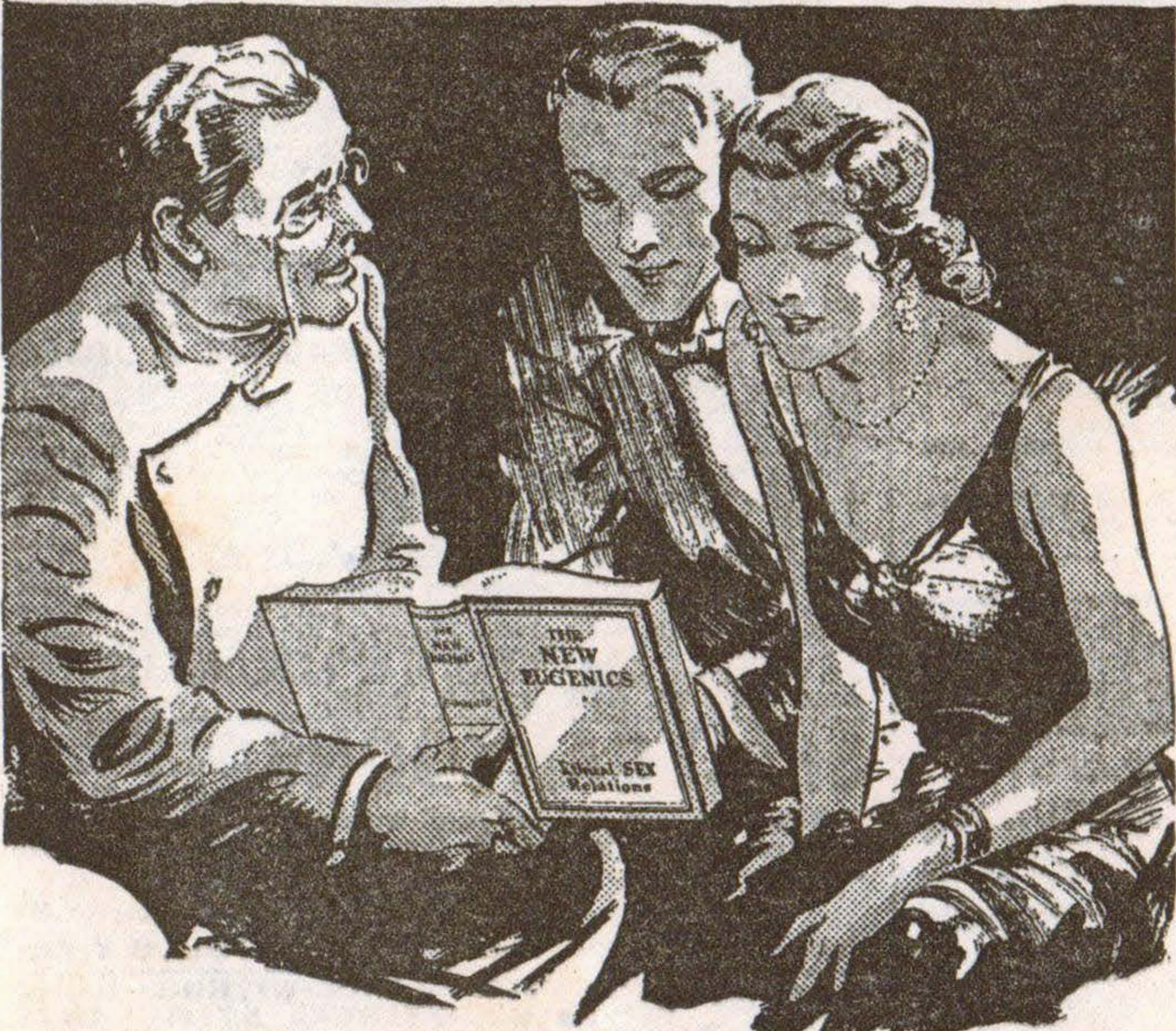




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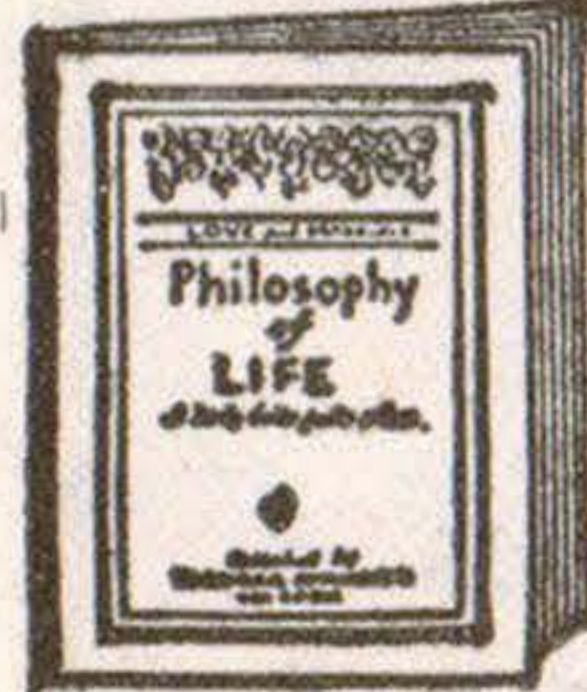
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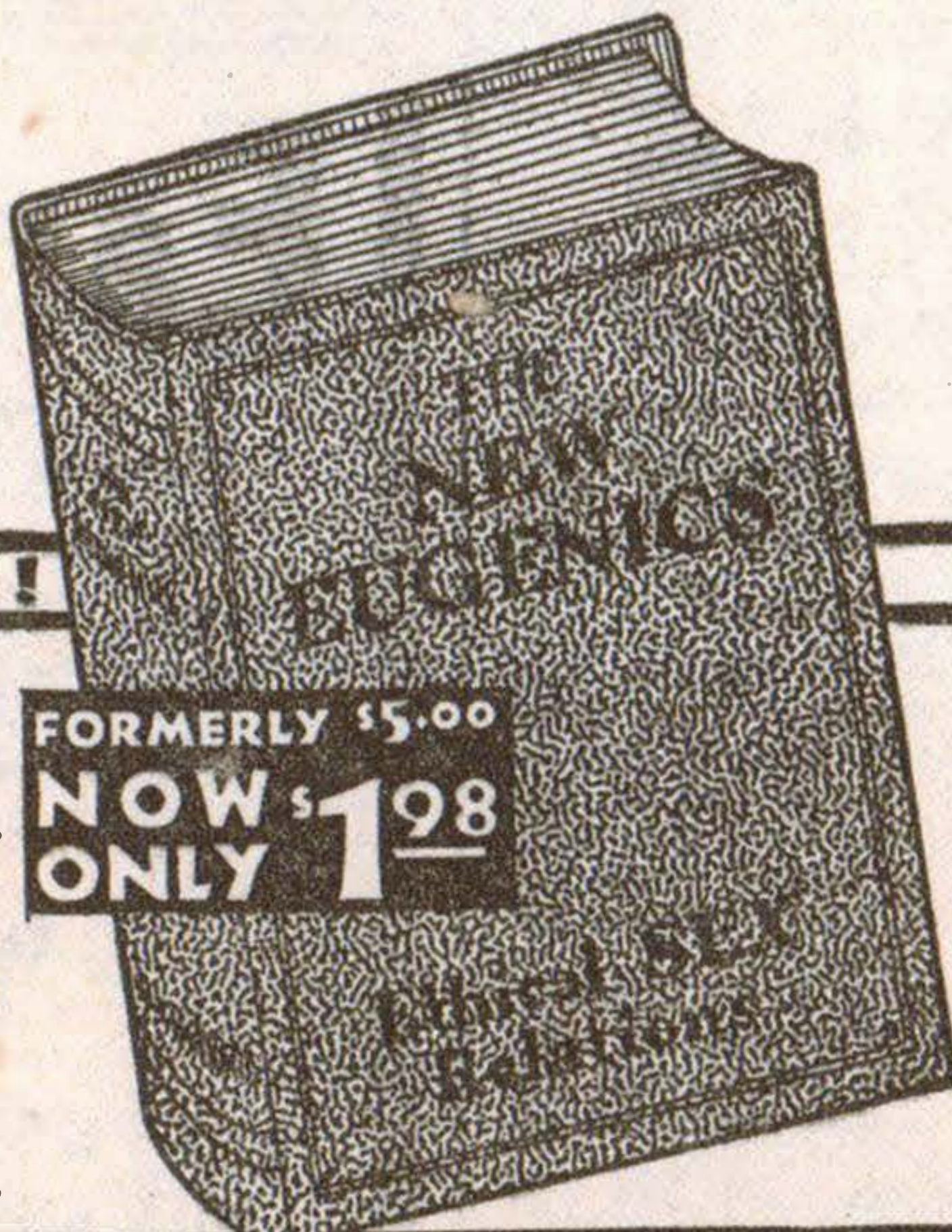
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