

NOV. - DEC.

STRANGE DETECTIVE MYSTERIES



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NOV. - DEC.

SLAVES OF THE MURDER CLINIC

A NOVELETTE OF EERIE MENACE
by DONALD G.
CORMACK

IT'S RAINING CORPSES IN CHINATOWN

A SPINE-CHILLING
MYSTERY NOVELETTE
by RUSSELL GRAY



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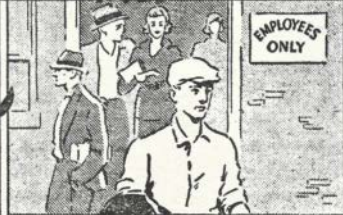
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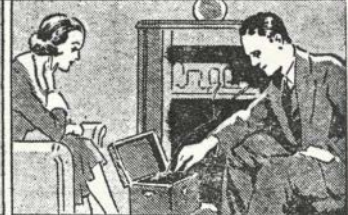


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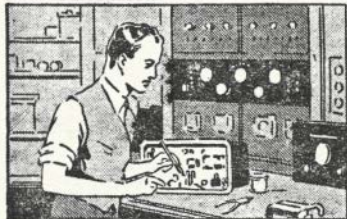
HERE'S
How it
Happened
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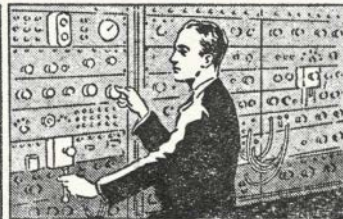
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STRANGE



DETECTIVE MYSTERIES

Volume Four

November-December, 1939

Number Two

Full-length Novel of Eerie Crime

DEATH SENDS HIS MANIACS Emile C. Tepperman 6

Anabelle Shannon didn't want a bodyguard, and the voice over the telephone offered Chick Lester a hundred thousand dollars if he'd let her be killed. . . . But Chick didn't like to be bribed, any more than he liked the murderer's poison darts—when every homicidal madman in the city was trying to kill the movies' most glamorous star!

Four Astounding and Bizarre Mystery Novelettes

IT'S RAINING CORPSES IN CHINATOWN Russell Gray 36

Where the East meets the West, in the twisted lanes of the Big City's foreign quarter, the fabulous secret of a fiendish terror league was sealed forever on the cold lips of the dead. . . . Ethan Burr, the Practitioner of Death, saw one way of finding the truth, when all clues failed—in the bone-crushing arms of the killer's dragon!

WORKSHOP OF THE LIGHTNING-MAKER R. S. Lerch 56

Four had died already in the blue flame that stabbed from the unearthly murderer's finger. . . . Could Clay Breton, the free-lance detective, track down that man-made lightning—by answering the invitation to the ghastly crematory for the living?

SLAVES OF THE MURDER CLINIC Donald G. Cormack 72

A lovely red-headed client begged Stone to forget she had ever asked for his help against the fantastic Half-Moon Murder Cult. . . . But two, as well as one, could go slumming in the underworld—on a spine-chilling trip from which none had ever returned alive!

THE CHARRED WRIST KILLINGS Stewart Sterling 92

The first of the weirdly charred corpses, hidden under the blonde girl's sofa, told Mal Varney half of what he wanted to know. . . . And a cop's sub-machine gun, leveled at his belly, made it very clear he'd have to solve the amazing case—or die!

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DEATH-PROOF The Editor 4

They laughed in the face of the spitting Tommy-guns—and turned the flaming bullets back into the throng of helpless, paralyzed bystanders!

FANTASTIC BUT TRUE Illustrated Feature 91

The human brains in that Alpine laboratory may have been dead—but the inhuman wailing that filled the room warned Bertillon not to take any chances!

CALENDAR OF CRIME A Department 112

ALL STORIES NEW



NO REPRINTS

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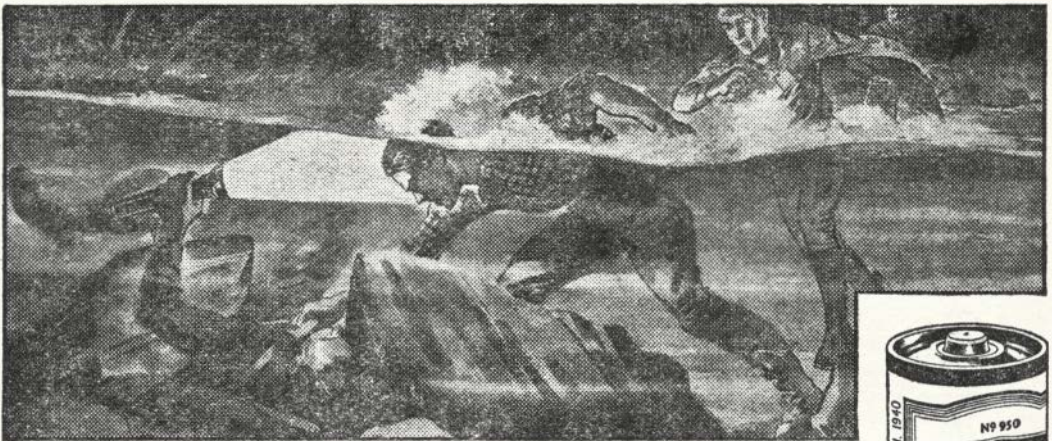
MOOSE HUNTER FIGHTS FOR LIFE IN RAGING TORRENT!

J. V. KIRSCH
Palmer, Alaska



① "I bagged a giant moose, the dressed meat weighing 982 pounds," writes Mr. Kirsch. "Starting back to camp at dusk, we foolishly decided to ford Willow Creek, a very fast mountain stream. We figured the 150-pound packs of moose meat would keep our feet on the bottom.

② "We were wrong! When the water reached my chest, I was swept from my feet and trapped beneath the foaming mountain torrent! Wedged against a rock, and held down by the current and my heavy load, I couldn't budge! I thought I was done for!



③ "I had been carrying my lighted flashlight in one hand, and still held it. And just in time, one of the packers located me by its beam! He rushed in, seized my pack rope and managed to drag me ashore. I most certainly wouldn't have lived to enjoy that moose meat if those 'Eveready' fresh DATED batteries had failed me.

(Signed) *J. V. Kirsch*

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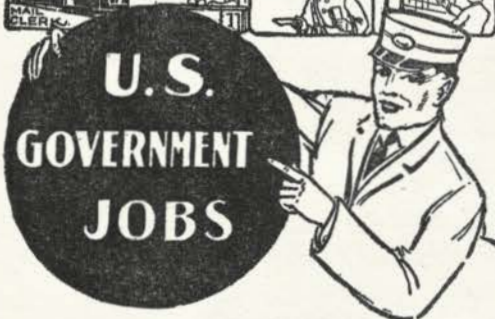
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DEATH-PROOF

SIRENS sounded from three different directions. Squad cars swung into the street, careened toward the bank, and stopped with screeching brakes. Officers piled out, weapons in their hands. Some of them gripped sub-machine guns. They advanced at a run, converging on the entrance.

Four of the weird bandit figures, clad from head to foot in translucent amber armor, stood guard before the iron-barred doors of the bank, each holding a Tommy-gun. They made no movement, gave no sign that they were disturbed by the gathering forces of the law.

Behind them, at the iron doors which the burglar alarm had automatically swung shut, appeared two of the six bandits who had entered. The shooting inside had ceased. The larger of the two, a veritable giant of a man, placed his Tommy-gun against the wall and took what looked like an ordinary .45 revolver from a holster strapped to the outside of his amber armor. He fired three shots, one at the top bars that fitted into slots in the iron head frame of the doors, one at the lock, and one at the bottom bars locking the doors to the threshold. Three thundering explosions, accompanied by flashes of blinding light, followed the shots. The doors swung idly open, their lock bolts shattered. The two men passed through, the big man replacing his deadly revolver and picking up his sub-machine gun, the little man stepping quickly to his side, his automatic rifle level at his hip.

It was then that the lieutenant of police opened fire. He moved his sub-machine gun so that the muzzle flashes outlined an arc of thirty degrees and spotted everything within ten feet on each side of the bank entrance. No movement from any of the strangely clad men indicated that a single one of his shots had taken effect.

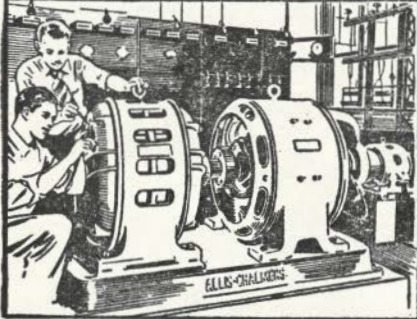
Others of the police opened up. Calmly, deliberately, and with deadly and vicious intent, the mailed men then swung their guns into action. After fifteen seconds there was no more shooting from the police; there were none left who were able to shoot.

With unmitigated viciousness, the bandits turned their guns on the horrified crowd. Men and women sank moaning. A girl of eight started to run across the street, screaming wildly. The sub-machine gun in the big man's hand swung in a short arc, chattered briefly. The child made two stumbling steps, collapsed and lay still. . . .

It was the first of the brutal massacres that brought a great and powerful city under the murderous, merciless domination of a league of super-criminals who couldn't be killed. . . . Clay Breton, introduced this month to *Strange Detective Mysteries* readers in "Workshop of the Lightning Maker," will tackle this strangest of detective mysteries in one of the two full-length novels that will appear in the January-February issue.

THE EDITOR

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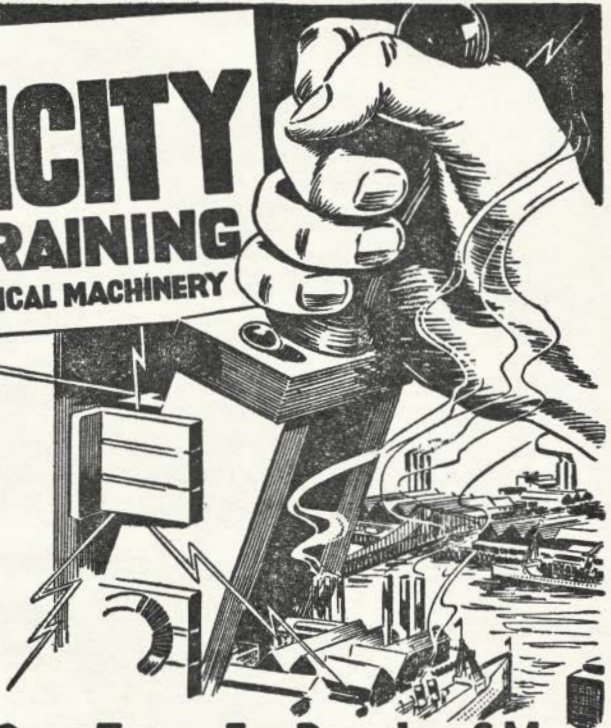
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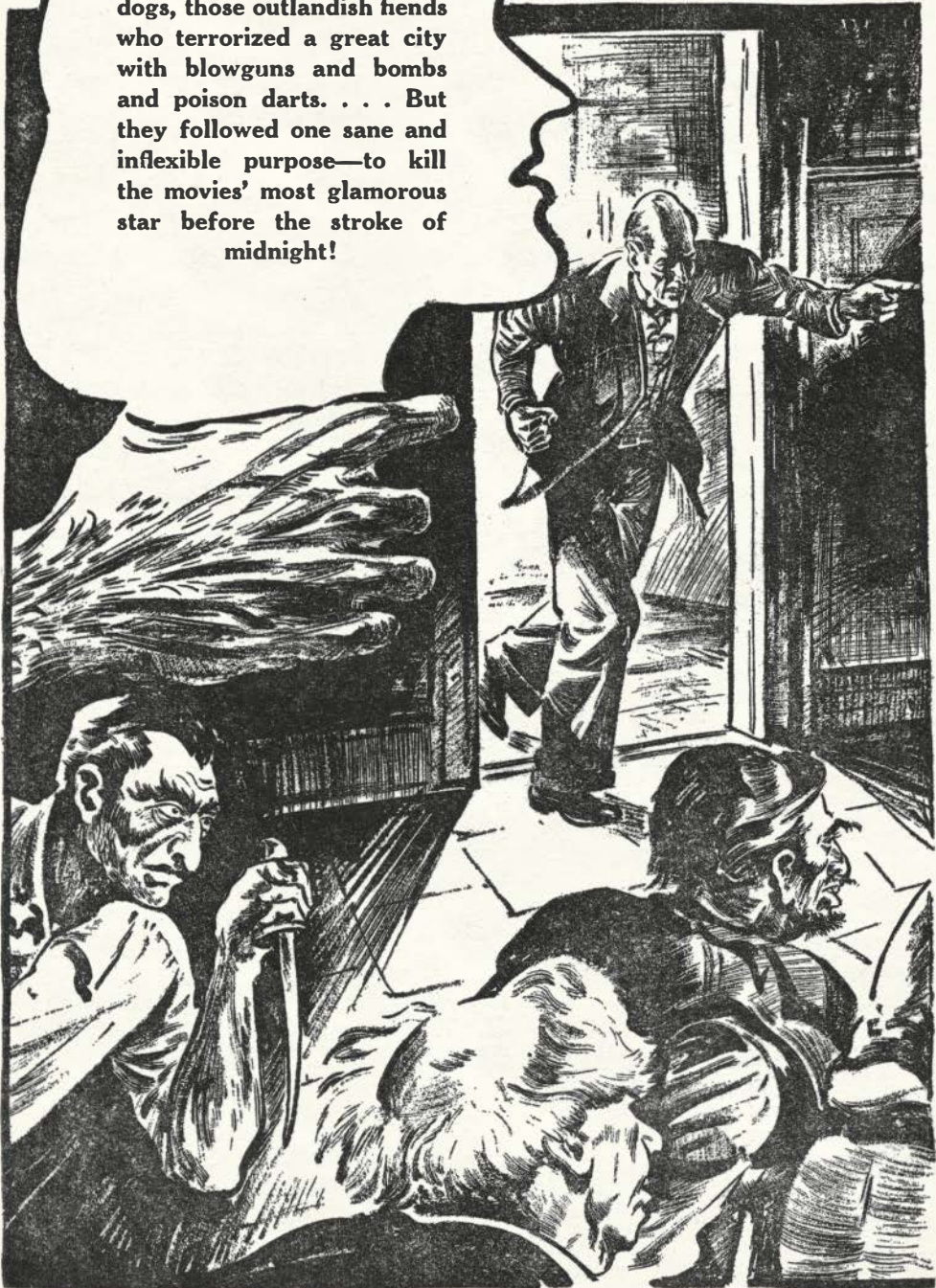
ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

• DEATH

They were crazy as rabied dogs, those outlandish fiends who terrorized a great city with blowguns and bombs and poison darts. . . . But they followed one sane and inflexible purpose—to kill the movies' most glamorous star before the stroke of midnight!

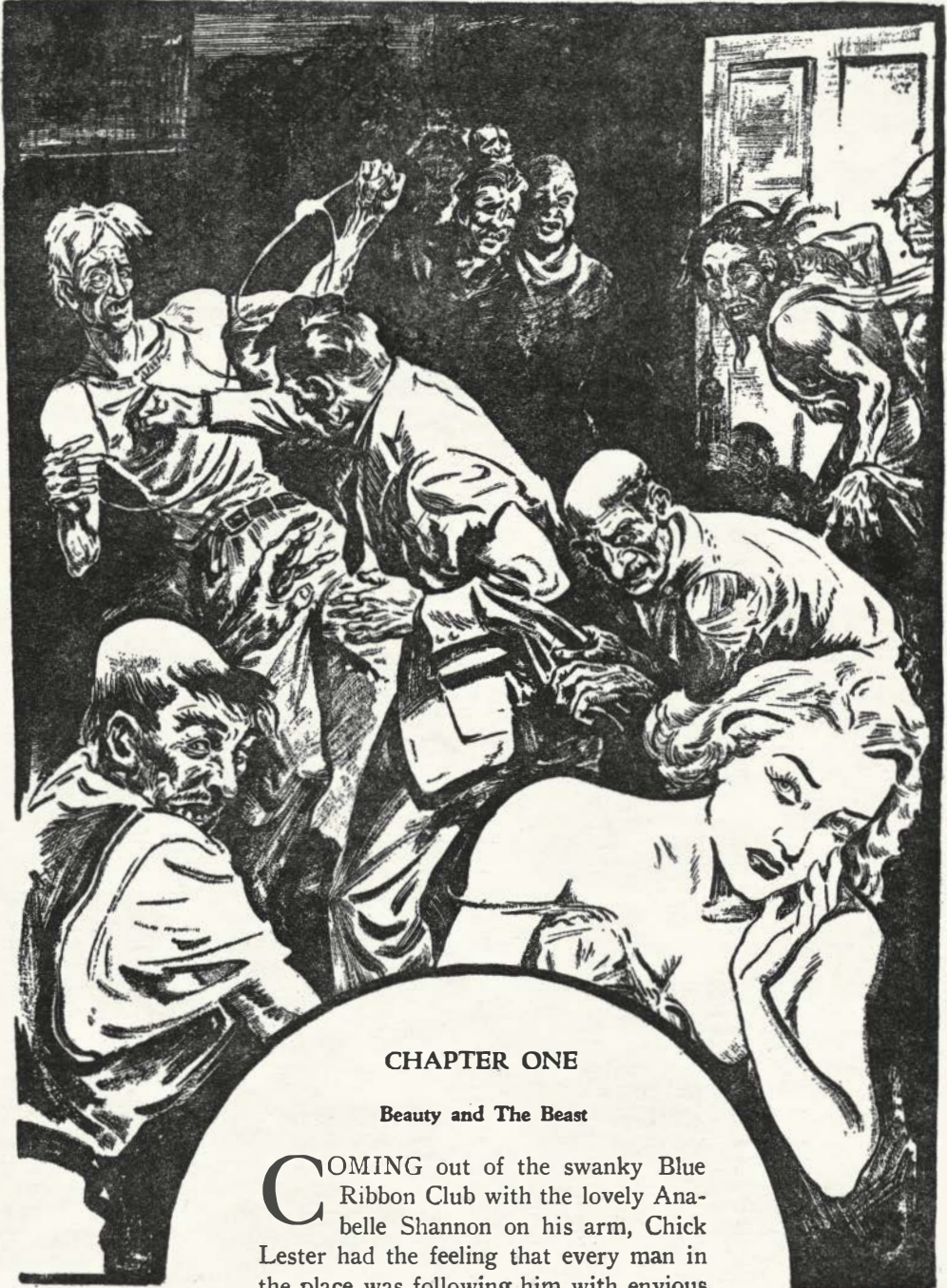
"Get him, boys!" he bawled. . . .
The slaving band of lunatics leaped in.



SENDS HIS MANIACS

A smashing, amazing novel of weird crime

By EMILE C. TEPPERMAN



CHAPTER ONE

Beauty and The Beast

COMING out of the swanky Blue Ribbon Club with the lovely Anabelle Shannon on his arm, Chick Lester had the feeling that every man in the place was following him with envious

glances. But he wasn't particularly happy about it.

He gave the hat-check girl the bit of pasteboard with Number 16 on it, and she brought out his black felt hat and Anabelle's sable wrap. As Chick helped Anabelle into it, his fingers rested for just an instant longer than necessary upon the soft velvety smoothness of her bare shoulder.

She threw him a frigid glance. "Don't forget, Mister Lester, that you're just paid to protect me—not to paw me!"

"Nuts to you, Shannon," he growled. "Any time you want to change bodyguards, just yelp. I didn't want this job in the first place. What do you think you are—a piece of Chinese porcelain? Are you so fragile you break when you're touched?"

Two angry spots of red appeared in her cream-and-ivory cheeks. "I'll certainly ask Dan Metzger to get me another bodyguard. The first thing tomorrow. And I hope he fires you when I tell him what I think of you!"

"Suits me," Chick said. "If you can get me fired, I'll buy you a carload of orchids. I've been trying to break my contract with Metzger for the last six months. Now come on. It's home and to bed for you!"

He took her arm roughly, and started with her toward the door.

But the hat-check girl called out, "Oh, Miss Shannon! Would—would you care to give me your autograph?"

Anabelle Shannon shook Chick's arm off her. She said haughtily, "Stand aside, slave." She smiled sweetly at the girl behind the counter. "Of course, my dear!"

The hat-check girl was not bad on looks herself. She was taller than Anabelle, and a brunette, whereas Anabelle Shannon had glorious platinum hair.

Miss Shannon took the pen the girl handed her, and bent down to write her name in the autograph album which the dark-haired girl had reversed on the coun-

ter. In doing so, she threw back her sable cloak, and made to rest her white arm upon the counter.

Chick Lester's hand was on the small automatic in his tuxedo pocket. His eyes were everywhere, watchful and alert for danger. The reason Chick received a salary of one thousand dollars a week from American National Pictures was that he could spot danger where no one else would think of looking for it. His mind was like an X-ray machine, which could look into and through a situation, and unerringly point to the dark spot of peril.

He spotted the danger now. . . .

IT wasn't much—just a little nail protruding from the top of the hat check counter. Anabelle Shannon's arm was coming down on it as she leaned over to sign the autograph book. There wasn't more than an eighth of an inch of the nail protruding from the wood, and a scratch from it might hardly be noticed. Another man wouldn't have given it a thought.

But Chick Lester acted in the same split-instant in which he perceived it. There was no time to call a warning. His arm swept out and around, and he seized Anabelle about her slim waist and fairly lifted her up in the air and away from the nail.

Anabelle squirmed and kicked back at his shins with her small silver-slippered feet. Her hands, clawing wildly, caught at the hand of the hat-check girl. She clung to the dark girl's hand, dragging her across the counter as she was carried back by Chick Lester.

The brunette's left breast scraped across the top of the counter, sweeping the autograph book off. . . . The girl screamed once, madly!

Anabelle Shannon let go her grip on the girl's hand as Lester put her down. She swung on him with blazing eyes.

"You—you vicious beast! What do you mean, doing that to me?"

But Chick Lester wasn't listening to her. He was taut, and his quick and inquiring eyes were fixed upon the hat-check girl. She had pulled herself up from the counter, and was doing a bewildering thing. She was ripping her blouse away from her body, ripping away also the brassière underneath it. There, upon her left breast, was a small scratch, hardly more than a half inch long. But she was staring down at it with eyes that were wide and full of an unholy terror.

She had screamed only the one time. Now she was utterly silent. Suddenly she began to claw and tear at her breast. Her long painted fingernails ripped the skin off in bloody streaks.

She stopped that as suddenly as she had begun. Her shoulders dropped hopelessly. She looked up at Chick Lester and said, "You fiend! You lucky fiend! How did you know?"

With the last word, her body became dreadfully rigid. Her eyes seemed about to burst from their sockets, and her mouth opened wide, as if she were going to scream. But no sound came. Her body arched back, as if under terrific inward pressure, and she collapsed behind the counter.

Perry Grayson, the manager of the Blue Ribbon, came running over and pulled open the half-door. He knelt beside the girl, looked up with frightened eyes.

"She's dead!" he gasped.

A CROWD was gathering in the lobby. Anabelle Shannon stood dumbly staring at the stiff and rigid body of the hat-check girl, and she began to shiver. She did not protest when Chick Lester took her hurriedly by the arm and dragged her out of the place. There was so much commotion that no one noticed their departure.

In the street, the doorman was not on duty. He had come running in to find out what was the matter.

Anabelle Shannon looked up at Chick.

"W-what happened? How—did that girl get killed?"

"She got what you were supposed to get," Chick told her grimly. "That nail on the counter was poisoned. She was supposed to get you to autograph the book so you'd rub your elbow against the nail. If I hadn't yanked you out of the way, you'd be lying there on the floor."

"I knew it," said Anabelle. "I knew they'd try to kill me today!"

"Who's trying to kill you?" Chick asked sharply.

But she shut up like a clam. "Come on." She was shivering. "Take me home. Get me behind locked doors!"

Chick scowled. "Look here, Shannon, if you know who's behind that business inside, you better talk up."

"No, no. I don't know a thing!"

"But you just said—"

"Forget it. I—I was excited. Just take me home. Please!"

"All right," said Chick Lester. He raised his hand to summon a taxi from the cab rank down the street. But just then another cab came swinging in toward them. It had apparently been cruising slowly down the block. It cut in ahead of the one from the cab rank.

Chick said, "These hackies! Fighting for a little business!"

He started to lead Anabelle to the curb.

But the cruising cab didn't stop at the curb. Chick got a quick glimpse of the driver, twisting the wheel in toward the sidewalk. The man was wearing a uniform cap with a low vizor, so that very little of his face was visible, except for a broad cleft in the chin. That was all Chick got a chance to see. The motor accelerated with a mounting roar, and the taxi leaped the curb. It bounced up on the sidewalk and bore down upon them—a thundering juggernaut of steel that would crush them to pulp when it struck.

Anabelle Shannon uttered a little frightened squeak of a cry, which died at once

in her throat. She stood there, transfixed with terror, unable to move.

Not so Chick Lester.

He gave Anabelle Shannon a terrific shove between her shoulder blades, with the flat of his hand. It sent her sprawling on the sidewalk, out of the path of the roaring cab.

The driver saw what he had done, and madly twisted the wheel to swing the car around so that it would strike her.

But in so doing, he gave Chick the chance he wanted. The automatic in Chick's pocket began to cough, belching through the cloth, as he squeezed the trigger. The slugs poured through the open window of the car, riddling the driver's head.

The man fell away from the wheel before he could complete the swift half-turn. But his foot must have remained upon the accelerator, for the car went hurtling between Chick and Anabelle Shannon, to crash into the entrance of the Blue Ribbon Club. The hood accordioned upon itself to the accompaniment of rending metal and hissing water, with the screams of frightened women from inside the club rising to mingle with the reverberating echoes of Chick's shots.

CHICK ran swiftly around the wrecked car, and lifted Anabelle Shannon from the ground. He got her by the armpits, and hauled her to her feet.

"You—you killed that man!" she gasped.

"Yes," he told her. "What did you want me to do—kiss him? Come on. Let's get out of here!"

"But—but don't you have to explain to the police?"

"Later. First, I'm taking you home. Do you want to get your name in the papers from coast to coast?"

He hurried her down the street, not looking back. Behind them, the wrecked cab suddenly erupted in a shattering ex-

plosion, and flames licked high in the air. As if by magic, crowds of people came running from every direction. No one even noticed Chick and Anabelle. A block away he flagged a cruising cab and bundled her into it.

"Parkside Hotel!" he snapped.

"But I don't live there!" she protested, as the cab got under way. "I live at the Northern View."

"Never mind where you live. You're checking in at the Parkside under another name—till I get a line on whoever it is that's trying to knock you off."

"You—you think that cab driver wanted to kill me? Wasn't it an accident?"

He laughed harshly. "An accident? Yes. It was an accident that he didn't get you. And an accident that the girl in the hat-check room didn't get you. Shannon, someone is trying damned hard to make you dead—and you know who it is. Now are you going to come clean?"

She stiffened, turned her head away from him. "I don't know what you're talking about, Chick Lester."

"You know what I'm talking about all right!" he said grimly. "You admitted it. Now I can't work blind. This enemy of yours is slick. Too slick to tackle without knowing more about him. You going to tell me about him?"

"You're crazy, Mr. Lester. That business with the cab was only an accident. It jumped the curb, and you imagined the man was trying to kill me. The hat-check girl just wanted my autograph, and you dragged me away—"

"And I suppose," he broke in bitterly, "that she died of a broken heart!"

"Anyway," she said, "I want to go home. I'm not going to any hotel with you." She tapped on the glass panel. "Driver! Take us to the Northern View Hotel!"

The driver nodded, and swung the cab west at the next corner.

Chick Lester's mouth tightened. He

rapped on the panel. "Slow up and let me off right here."

As the cab slowed down, he pushed open the door. "Well, so long, Shannon."

"Wait!" she called. "Where—where are you going?"

"Home," he told her, with a crooked smile. "I wash my hands. You can go wherever you damned please. Get yourself killed any way you like. Me, I'm through."

"No! Wait! Don't leave me."

Chick kept one hand on the door. "Look, Shannon," he said patiently. "I'm paid to protect you. While I'm on the job, I'll do it my way. You take orders from me, or you can go sit on a tack."

"I hate you," she said. "I hate you very much. I despise you."

"Okay, Shannon. So long. I'll be looking you up in the morgue."

"Come back, you beast. All right. After all, you've saved my life twice in ten minutes." She was rebellious, but cowed. "I'll—do what you say."

Chick nodded. "That's better." He climbed back into the cab. "Make it the Parkside Hotel, driver."

"Wait," she begged. "Just let me stop at the Northern View and get a few things—my pajamas, toothbrush—you know."

He shrugged. "All right. But it's against my better judgment. The guy that's after you is no one to fool around with."

He grudgingly let her tell the cabby to go to the Northern View Hotel first.

The cabby said, "Well, I hope you mean it this time!" and sent the cab ahead.

CHAPTER TWO

With the Killer's Compliments

"NOW suppose you come clean," Chick said to her as the cab rolled north to Central Park. "What's this all about? How come two attempts were made on your life, one on top of the

other? Who wants to see you pushing up lilies?"

Anabelle Shannon was staring straight ahead, with one hand pressing hard against her breast.

"It—it's nothing that concerns you. I can't talk about it. Leave me alone."

"Sure!" he said bitterly. "Just leave you alone. It doesn't concern me at all! I'm supposed to stick with you, and protect you against something I don't know a thing about—and get killed with you, maybe. Outside of that, it doesn't concern me!"

"Are you afraid?"

"Sure, I'm afraid. Who wouldn't be—with cabs that come bouncing out of nowhere to crunch you down to powdered bones! And how do I know that the guy back of it isn't going to try again—and again? He's bound to get you sometime. And that puts me on the same boat!"

"Very well, then. If you're afraid, you can quit. All I wanted was for you to take me home, anyway."

The cab had pulled up in front of the Northern View Hotel. Central Park South was quiet at this time of night. There was no one about except a sandwich man carrying front-and-back signboards advertising an all-night barber shop on Columbus Circle. Then the hotel doorman appeared, hurrying out of the lobby, where he apparently had been catching forty winks.

Anabelle Shannon pushed open the door of the cab while the doorman was still in the lobby. She stepped out without waiting either for the doorman or Chick to help her. Fire was flashing from her eyes as she flared at Chick: "I'm not going to the Parkside. I don't need you any more. And I never want to see you—"

Chick Lester came flying out of the cab like a halfback making the last yard against a solid wall of opposition. His shoulder struck Anabelle in the stomach and sent her crashing backward to the

sidewalk. At the same instant, something whistled through the air directly over the spot where Anabelle had been standing, and *spanged* against the body of the cab just above Chick's head.

Chick rolled over once, and came to his knees with the automatic in his hand spitting flaming streaks of lead at the sandwich man.

The sandwich man had a long tube at his mouth, and he was swinging the tube to aim once more at Anabelle, when Chick's first shot crashed through the wooden sign and sent him staggering backward. Chick fired twice more, because the man still had the tube at his mouth. The third shot struck the blowgun and squashed the man's face into pulp. The shots were echoing back from Central Park, across the street, as Lester came to his feet and ran to where Anabelle lay.

She was doubled up with pain from the blow she had received in the stomach, and her face was white. She looked as if she were going to retch.

Chick helped her to her feet, with the aid of the doorman, who was talking and yelling incoherently at the same time.

"Gor blimey, the guy was blowin' *darts* at her! Looka that—there's the dart that missed her!"

Anabelle had both hands at her stomach. "You—hit me—that—hard—on purpose—you snake!" she managed to gasp.

CHICK said disgustedly, "You dumb bunny! If that dart had hit you, you would have died like the hat-check girl!"

He let go his hold on her arm, and she almost fell over, but the doorman held her up on the other side. Chick glanced over at the dead sandwich man, and then went to the cab and picked up the dart which had fallen to the ground.

He was examining it when the cab driver said timidly, "Excuse me, mister. But who's payin' the cab fare?"

Chick thrust a hand in his pocket and

handed the man a dollar bill. He turned in time to see a cop come running down the street, and a prowler car rounding into Central Park South from Sixth Avenue.

It took him fifteen minutes to explain to the cops what had happened. They were incredulous.

"Nuts, mister," said the sergeant from the prowler car. "Guys don't go around New York blowing darts at people. It just ain't done!"

"Well," said Chick, "here's the dart." He led them over to the dead body of the sandwich man. "And here's what's left of the tube."

The sign on the sandwich man read:

ABE'S TONSORIAL PARLOR

OPEN ALL NIGHT

SHAVE, HAIRCUT, SHAMPOO

MANICURE

HOT & COLD SHOWERS

Have You Got That

"Hangover Feeling?"

Let Us Fix You Up Before You
Go Home!

"Nice work," said the sergeant, "if you can get it. You shoot pretty good, Mister Lester. This listens to me like an Arabian Nights' tale. I suppose you're gonna tell me the dart is poisoned?"

Chick grinned. He stuck the dart out at the sergeant. "Want to test it? Just scratch yourself with it—"

"Hey! Nix!" The sergeant backed away. Chick took out his handkerchief and wrapped the dart carefully. He handed it to the sergeant. "You can have it analyzed in the police laboratory. Also, you may be able to identify this dead guy. He may just have picked up the job with the barber shop, posing as a bum."

"Okay, Mister Lester. That's all well and good. But you haven't told us yet who is the dame that was with you."

Chick shrugged. "I guess we can't keep it dark any longer. Come on over—"

He turned around, and stopped short.

He broke off, with a tensing of the muscles around his jaw. Anabelle Shannon was gone!

QUITE a crowd had gathered around them by this time, and the two uniformed cops were busy keeping them back from the body of the dead sandwich man, so they hadn't kept an eye on her.

"Maybe she went upstairs," said Chick. He started for the door, but one of the elevator boys, who had come out to see what was going on, shook his head.

"She didn't go up, mister. I seen her get in that cab at the curb. The cab turned into Central Park."

Chick groaned. "Did you hear her tell the driver where to go?"

"Nope. She got in and bent over and kind of whispered to him. The guy drove right off."

Chick gave the boy a bill, and dug his hands into his pockets. He glared at the sergeant. "She's gone! That dizzy dame has gone and driven off somewhere in the city. And the next time they try to knock her off, I won't be around!"

"You know," said the sergeant, "this kind of smells to me. You ain't yet told me who she is."

"Oh, nuts!" Chick exclaimed. "What's the use of trying to cover up? These elevator boys would tell you, anyway. She's Anabelle Shannon—the dizziest, nuttiest skirt in these United States. Someone is trying damned hard to kill her, and she goes and gets temperamental at a time like this!"

A bellboy came out of the hotel and shouted, "Is there a Mister Lester out here? Mr. Chick Lester?"

"That's me," said Chick. "What's up?"

"There's a call for you on the switchboard. Party said you were out here in the crowd. Said you'd give me a buck for paging you."

"Okay," said Chick. He peeled off a dollar bill. "That's Shannon, all right,"

he told the sergeant. "She's come to her senses and is calling to tell me where she went."

The bellboy took the dollar. "It ain't a woman, mister. It's a man."

Chick scowled. He gave the sergeant a hopeless look, shrugged, and went inside with the bell-hop. He took the call on one of the extension phones at the desk.

"Hello. This is Lester talking."

"How do you do, Mister Lester," said a smooth, well-controlled voice. "It is very unfortunate that you shot the sandwich man. He is a full-blooded Porto Bello Indian. It cost me five hundred dollars to bring him into the United States."

Chick gripped the phone tightly. "Who are you? Are you the yellow-livered murderous skunk that's been going after Anabelle Shannon?"

"Now, now, Mister Lester," the suave voice at the other end said reprovingly. "This is no time to indulge in personalities. I merely want to help you."

Chick laughed harshly. He was waving wildly to the switchboard operator as he held on to the phone, trying to make her understand that he wanted the call traced. "How do you want to help me—by greasing the skids to hell for me?"

"Not exactly, Mister Lester. I merely want you to stop interfering with my efforts to kill Miss Shannon. Really, you have been a nuisance. You are a young man of very quick perceptions, and quicker action. I should like to have you step out of the picture. I'll make it worth your while."

CHICK'S eyes narrowed. "Sure, sure. I understand. You want to kill Miss Shannon, and you don't want me butting in. That's reasonable. Suppose we meet some place and talk it over. How about getting together right now?"

The man at the other end laughed good-naturedly. "You think I'm a lunatic, Mister Lester."

"Oh, no," Chick said earnestly. "Far from it. I think you're a wonderful guy. Brainy. I bet we could get along fine together. Suppose I meet you at Childs Restaurant—"

"Wait, Mr. Lester. Please forget any ideas you may have about my being a lunatic. I assure you, I am extremely sane. I have a purpose in wanting Miss Shannon's life. If I were insane, I could not control the many men and women who do my bidding. Please consider carefully: *I have guaranteed that Miss Shannon shall be dead before midnight tomorrow.*"

"Guaranteed?" Chick asked. "To whom?"

"I'm sorry. That is a professional secret which I cannot disclose. But I can tell you that her death is worth one million dollars to me. Step out of the way—leave me a free hand to kill her—and I will make it worth your while to the tune of a hundred thousand dollars. Doesn't that sound worth your while?"

"How do I know I'll get the money?" Chick demanded craftily.

He had already succeeded in getting the switchboard girl to understand what he wanted, and he could see her frantically talking into her mouthpiece, while Sergeant Gluck stood over her shoulder, motioning to Chick to keep the unknown caller on the wire as long as possible.

"I don't even know you," Chick said into the phone. "How could I trust you to pay me off?"

"My name," said the other, "is not known to you. You may call me Doctor Sardo. As for your money, you must accept my promise. Now—I have no more time. Your efforts to trace this call may be successful at any moment. Do you accept?"

"Sure, I accept."

"Ah! Then tell me at once where Miss Shannon has gone."

"She went to the Parkside Hotel," Chick lied.

"That, my friend," said Doctor Sardo very coldly, "is a prevarication. The Parkside Hotel is at Seventy-second Street. Miss Shannon's cab went downtown, not uptown." The doctor's voice became cold and ominous. "I am afraid, Mr. Lester, that you are not amenable to reason. I regret that I shall have to dispose of you. Good-bye, Mister Lester."

The phone clicked dead, and Sergeant Gluck, at the switchboard, tore his hair as he saw Chick hang up. "Why didn't you hold him another minute? We would have traced the call!"

"Can't be helped," said Chick. "He was wise, anyway. At least, I got his name—or the name he calls himself by. Doctor Sardo."

"Hell," said Sergeant Gluck. "That's little enough to go on. Lemme call downtown. Inspector Nason of Homicide will want in on this. Maybe they got a line on this Sardo guy at headquarters."

WHILE he put in his call to headquarters, Chick Lester went around the lobby asking everybody if they had seen or heard anything to indicate where Anabelle Shannon had gone. Nobody could give him a lead.

Gluck came away from the phone looking bewildered. "The inspector is coming up personal to talk to you. They identified the hat-check girl and the taxi guy that you shot over at the Blue Ribbon. The girl's name is Vixie Walters. The cabby's name is Mike Smits."

"What the hell," Chick said disgustedly. "It should have been easy enough to identify them."

"It's not just their names, Lester. It's their records. Listen—the girl escaped from the Women's State Hospital for the Violent Insane about two months ago. She just got the job at the Blue Ribbon yesterday. The cabby, Mike Smits, was arrested on a charge of manslaughter four months ago. He pleaded insanity, and

was committed to King's Park Hospital for the Insane, but he managed to escape from the train."

Chick Lester gasped. "Both of them were nuts! Sardo is using murderous maniacs to do his killing for him!"

"But what has he got against your glamour girl, Anabelle Shannon?"

"How do I know?" groaned Chick. "Shannon won't talk. All I know is that she's in the middle of a two million dollar picture for American National Studios, and she suddenly got a yen to come to New York. Dan Metzger let her go, because they're shooting some scenes where they don't need her. She got here this morning and immediately phoned Metzger that she was in danger of being killed, so Metzger phoned me to take care of her. I've been piloting her around all evening."

He stopped, looking intently at a handsome man who was coming into the lobby in a hurry. "I know that guy!" he said quickly to Gluck. He's Ronald Rodes, Shannon's ex-fiancé. He was her leading man in two pictures, and then they got engaged. Then Rodes started drinking heavily, and lost his contract with American National. He went on the skids fast, and Anabelle broke off the engagement. Rodes has been playing vaudeville since then."

"Oh, yeah!" said Gluck brightly, just as Rodes came up to them. Ronald Rodes was well built, with wide shoulders and narrow hips. He had wavy black hair and a square chin. He was the kind of man whom women flock to see in the movies, but his face at close range could be seen to be lined and shadowed by dissipation. He disregarded Sergeant Gluck entirely, and seized Chick Lester by the shoulder.

"Lester! Where's Anabelle? I just heard on the radio about what's been happening, and I rushed over. God, I'm still crazy about that girl!"

"Oh, yeah!" Sergeant Gluck butted in.

"And where was you for the last couple of hours? Do you know anybody named Sardo?"

Rodes scowled at Gluck, and Gluck pushed around in front of him. "Look, mister, no high-hat goes here. This is the law. There's been murder attempted, and some people are dead. You talk and give up a straight story—or you go in the can!"

Rodes drew himself up haughtily. "To answer your questions—I've been at the Actor's Club most of the evening. And I never heard of anybody named Sardo. . . . I hope that satisfies you."

He swung back to Chick. "Where's Anabelle, Lester? Is she safe? By God, if you don't tell me I'll choke it out of you!"

Chick smiled faintly. "Funny. Someone else was just asking me where Anabelle is. And he said he'd kill me for not telling."

"I think," Sergeant Gluck said heavily to Rodes, "that I'll just take you in custody till the Inspector gets here." He took out his handcuffs. "Let's have your wrists—"

A UNIFORMED messenger boy pushed through the revolving doors into the lobby. "Mr. Lester?" he yelled. "Mr. Chick Lester?"

"Here!" called Chick.

"Package for you," said the boy. "Sign here."

Chick frowned. "Who's it from?"

"Dunno, mister."

The messenger thrust the package into his hand, and pushed the receipt book up under his nose. "Sign here."

Chick scrawled his name, and started to fumble for a tip, but the boy didn't wait. He pocketed the receipt book and turned and went out.

Chick said, "What the hell! This is pretty heavy for such a small package."

Ronald Rodes' voice broke in on him,

talking to Sergeant Gluck: "Good God, sergeant, you can't hold me! Let me out of here!"

That was followed by a dull blow, and Chick swung around to see Sergeant Gluck staggering back from a nasty uppercut which Rodes had clipped to his jaw. Rodes turned, with wild desperation written on his dissipated features, and dashed past the desk toward the side exit of the hotel. Chick started after him with the package in his hand, and collided with Gluck, who was making a wild leap in the same direction.

Rodes disappeared through the side door, and Gluck's clumsy effort spun the package out of Chick's hand and sent it flying along the tiled floor to end up against the bowl of the potted palm beside the front door.

It was lucky that there was nobody near that door at the moment, because the package exploded when it struck, with a terrific detonation, which sent bits of metal flying in every direction. The force of the air pressure sent Chick and the sergeant crashing backward into the desk, and the noise of the explosion shattered against Chick's eardrums.

"Boy!" he said to Gluck. "That was a lucky bump you gave me. If I'd been holding it when it exploded, I'd be nothing but a fond memory right now."

"Gawd!" said Sergeant Gluck. "A bomb!"

"Yes," Chick told him grimly. "A bouquet from Doctor Sardo."

Gluck took out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead. "No wonder that Rodes guy was so anxious to get outta here! Those babies play rough."

CHAPTER THREE

The Razor Is Sharp

IT WAS almost two o'clock in the morning before Chick Lester got through explaining everything to the police. First,

he had to explain to a precinct lieutenant who arrived with a squad of reserves to keep order on Central Park South. Then he had to go over it again with a captain of detectives who came to take charge of the headquarters men. And then he was compelled to tell the story all over to Inspector Nason, in charge of Homicide.

A city-wide alarm was put on the short wave for Anabelle Shannon and Ronald Rodes.

Chick finally managed to get away from the Northern View, and walked across to Columbus Circle. He found Abe's Tonsorial Parlor without any difficulty. It was just off the Circle, on the ground floor of a dowdy loft building. The two other street-floor stores in the structure were occupied respectively, by a second-hand book shop and by a greasy lunchroom. The barber shop was wedged in between them.

There were two barbers on duty when Chick came in, but no customers in the chairs. The only other outsider present was a plainclothes detective who was questioning the proprietor about the sandwich man.

Abe the Barber was a square-headed, gold-toothed Hungarian, with a barrel chest that almost burst the seams of his dirty white barber's jacket. He was gesticulating volubly with his hands.

"I tellink you, meestar," he said to the detective, "I no gotch no sandwiches. Dees ees barber shops. No coffee pots. No sandwiches. Go next door."

The detective sighed and started all over again. He saw Chick come in, and started to say something, but Chick shook his head warningly. He knew the detective, whose name was Harry Stevens. Stevens caught on, and gave no sign of recognizing Chick. He went to work on Abe once more.

"Listen, you dumb monkey. I don't want no sandwiches. I want to know about the man that carries the sign advertising

the store. You know—haircut, shave, shampoo, hot and cold showers—”

“Ho, sure!” Abe exclaimed, flashing his gold bridge work. “You vanna get does works. You seet down—”

“No!” Stevens roared. He glanced helplessly at Chick, who had removed his coat and seated himself in the second chair. “Make it a shave,” he said to the second barber. “A close shave.”

Harry Stevens was sweating over Abe. “Look. You got a man who carries a sign for you. You know—a sign on the front and the back. Advertising.”

The light of understanding came into Abe’s face. “I gotcha. You mean dose bum vich carry sign.” He shrugged. “I no seeink heem sence ten o’clock. He suppose come back getch paid. No comink back.”

“When did you hire him?”

“I just gettink heem tonight. Wan dollar for whole day.”

“I thought so,” said Stevens. “The guy just got the job so he’d have an excuse for hanging around the Northern View. Don’t you go home yet, Abe. The Inspector may want to talk to you. Stick around for a while.”

“I notch goink home,” Abe said. “I vorkink all night.”

“Okay.” Harry Stevens threw a quick wink to Chick, and went out.

Chick Lester was stretched out in the chair now, and the second barber was lathering his face. Chick looked through the lather, and noticed the fellow eyeing him queerly. He was a small, dark chap, wiry, with no expression on his dead-pan face. He saw Chick looking at him, and calmly put the brush away, and opened the razor.

THE fellow honed the blade a couple of times, then started on the right side of Chick’s face. Chick could tell at once that he was an experienced barber. His touch was sure and light.

He finished the right side, and turned Chick’s head around to get at the left. In so doing, he got Chick’s face in a position so he could see the rest of the shop.

Abe the Barber was fiddling with the radio. In a moment he had it on the short wave, and they were getting the police announcer’s voice:

“All Precinct Commanders: Call all reserves to duty immediately. Hold them in readiness for further orders. All patrolmen in training, and second and third grade patrolmen will be formed into squads of six men under command of members of your precinct detective details. They will conduct street-to-street inquiries for the missing Anabelle Shannon, believed to be in danger of death. . . .”

Chick listened while the razor scraped his cheek and descended to his throat. He saw that Abe the Barber was listening with intentness, as if he understood everything that was being said—although his conversation with Stevens certainly wouldn’t have indicated it.

Chick said casually, “I wonder if Doctor Sardo will manage to kill her anyway.”

He felt the razor jerk over the skin of his throat, but the man steadied his hand at once, and went on without answering. Abe the Barber scowled, and shut off the radio with a decisive click.

Just then the door of the shop opened, and a tall, cadaverous man came in.

Chick felt his barber’s hand tremble just a little, and the razor nicked him. Abe the Barber seemed to come to attention at the appearance of this man, like a soldier on parade.

The new arrival threw a quick look around the shop, out of black and lusterless eyes. He saw Chick in the chair, and the eyes blinked once, then opened and stared. A little pin-point of fire danced in each of them for an instant, and then they were veiled. The stranger turned away from Chick, and began to talk swift-

ly to Abe the Barber in a foreign language that might have been Hungarian, but which was Greek to Chick Lester. He ended on a rising inflection, as if asking a question. And Abe immediately picked up the ball and began to hurl back a stream of Hungarian, throwing significant glances sideways at Chick as he talked.

Chick's barber had ceased shaving him, and stood with the razor poised over his throat, watching Abe and the newcomer. At last Abe finished.

The cadaverous man smiled queerly. When he smiled he reminded Chick of one of the giant puppets he had seen in the Pharmacy Building at the World's Fair, in the puppet show where they pictured the sorcerers of the middle ages performing their obscene incantations.

Then the stranger said a few words very softly in the same foreign language, and turned to go.

Those words had not been spoken to Abe, but to Chick's barber. Chick tore his eyes from the stranger's departing back just in time to glance up and see the burning gaze of the barber fixed upon his exposed throat. The razor was coming down slowly, with the edge at an angle which would cut in right under the chin!

CHICK yelled, "Hey!" and thrust himself upright in the chair. His sudden motion brought his throat clear of the razor. The blade sliced into the cloth of his vest instead of his jugular vein.

He erupted out of the chair like a spouting volcano. His left hand caught the barber's razor-wrist, and his right came up to clutch the fellow around the back of the neck. He pushed up on the hand holding the razor, and pulled down with his hook-hold on the barber's neck. The result was that the barber's face came down against Chick's chest, while his arm went backward in a bone-breaking grip.

The two of them went sliding across the floor against the rear partition, with

Chick hanging on like a bulldog, and the barber fighting madly to get his locked arm free for just one good slash with the razor.

Out of the corner of his eye, Chick got a glimpse of Abe dancing over them, with another opened razor, waiting for a chance to slice down.

Chick was underneath, and at the moment the dark-skinned barber was his best protection against Abe. The wiry fellow must have realized that, and he must have realized also that he stood very little chance of getting his own right hand free. So he changed his tactics, and tried to heave over and put Chick on top.

Chick let go his grip on the fellow's neck, and concentrated both hands on the knife-wrist. He allowed himself to be jockeyed on top, and then, gauging his timing to a nicety, he lashed out with his left foot. He heard a bellow of pain behind him, and knew he had connected with Abe's shin. For a minute he'd be free to concentrate on his antagonist.

He bore down with a wickedly crushing grip on the fellow's wrist, and elicited a grunt of pain. The fellow dropped the razor, but Chick didn't let go. He followed through, putting all his weight on that wrist. A bone crunched, and the dark-haired barber screamed.

Chick heard a rush of feet behind him, and knew that Abe was coming in again for the death-blow. He twisted his head and saw Abe's gold bridge flashing in a fearful snarl as he swung the razor down in a deadly slashing blow which was calculated to slice off half of Chick Lester's skull.

Chick heaved over, and yanked the dark-haired barber on top of him just as the razor came down. Abe yelled, but couldn't stop his swing. The blade cut deep into the neck of the dark-haired barber, and blood geysered out.

Chick ducked out from under, and jack-knifed to his feet.

Abe the Barber growled murderously in his throat, and pulled the razor out of the dead man's neck. He swung around from the hips and came after Chick again, with the blade held up high in front of his face for a backhanded slash.

Chick skipped away from him, swept off the white sheet which was still tucked under his collar, and which had taken up most of the dead man's blood. He flipped the sheet up across his left arm, like a matador confronting a bull, and tried to catch the razor blade in it. But Abe knew all about that. He changed his position abruptly, lowering his hand and shifting the razor for an upward, hamstringing blow.

Chick said, "Nuts!" and flipped the cloth up over Abe's head. It covered his eyes for a second, and Abe started threshing about in a desperate effort to free himself, at the same time swinging wildly with the razor so as to keep Chick at arm's length.

Chick said, "Nuts!" again, and stepped around him with a beautiful exhibition of fast footwork. He brought his right up in a sweet rabbit-punch that clicked with precision, and Abe the Barber stopped yanking at the sheet. He dropped the razor, and sank down very slowly to a squatting position, and then he gently toppled over and lay still.

Chick Lester massaged his knuckles, and looked in the mirror. Half of his face was shaven, and the other half had lather on it. But the lather was mixed with blood, making it look as if he had been smeared with a strawberry-and-whip-cream sundae.

He turned at the sound of squealing brakes outside, and saw that Detective Stevens had returned in a squad car with Inspector Nason. They came rushing into the barber shop. Nason skidded to a stop, staring at the mess of blood, the dead man and Abe the Barber.

"For the love of Pete, Lester," he

barked. "What the hell have you been doing here?"

"Getting a shave!" Chick Lester told him mildly.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Number Is Disconnected

THEY had a lot of trouble bringing Abe the Barber out of the peaceful slumber into which Chick's rabbit-punch had put him. And when they did, he wasn't talking.

"I knowink nottink," he said stolidly. "I wanna lawyer."

Inspector Nason shrugged. "I'll take him downtown and book him on a murder charge. There's no bail for that. Doctor Sardo won't be able to get him out."

"All right," said Chick. "I'll go up to my hotel and put on some fresh clothes. See you at headquarters."

He took a cab to the Parkside Hotel, on Riverside Drive above Seventy-second Street. As he was crossing the lobby to the elevator, the clerk hailed him.

"Here's a telegram for you, sir."

It was from Dan Metzger, president of American National Pictures, in Hollywood.

MR. CHICK LESTER
PARKSIDE HOTEL
NEW YORK, N. Y.

FOR GOD'S SAKE WHAT IS HAPPENING TO SHANNON? WE ARE HOLDING UP FIVE MILLION DOLLAR PRODUCTION WHILE SHE TRAIPTSES TO NEW YORK. IF SHE GETS KILLED WE HOLD THE BAG. WHAT AM I PAYING YOU FOR? I REPEAT WHAT AM I PAYING YOU FOR?
METZGER.

Dan crumpled the telegram viciously.

The clerk called to him. "Er—Mister Lester!"

"Well?" growled Chick.

The clerk leaned over the counter confidentially. "The young lady said to tell you, sir, that she is registered in room 704—next to yours."

Chick scowled. "Young lady?"

"Yes, sir. She signed the register as Mary Smith. Very pretty. She looks vaguely familiar to me. Seems like I recall seeing her in the movies. But you can trust me, Mister Lester. I'm like a clam."

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Chick.

He hurried into the elevator and went up to the seventh. He knocked at the door of 704, and a very frightened voice asked, "Who is it?"

"Open up, Shannon!" he growled.

She opened the door, and he stormed in. He stood with his hands on his hips, glaring at her. "Well, what kind of a run-around are you giving me? Here the whole damned police department of the city is looking for you. And where do I find you? Safe and sound—in *my own hotel!*"

She was still dressed in her gorgeous silver-trimmed evening gown, with the sable cloak around her shoulders.

"But you *wanted* me to come to the Parkside."

"Sure. But with me. Why did you run out on me like that?"

"I—I saw a man I knew. I had to get away from there quickly."

"Who was the man—Doctor Sardo?"

Her eyes widened. "Doctor Sardo! Why would I be afraid of him? He's a good friend of mine."

A crafty look came into Chick's eyes. "Oh! So he's a good friend of yours. He wouldn't do you any harm, would he?"

"On the contrary. He's going to help me. I've just phoned him."

"You've—*what?*"

"I've phoned him. He's on his way over here now. I'm sure he'll be able to do more for me than you've done."

CHICK LESTER drew a deep breath, and held it. He lowered himself slowly to the bed, facing her. He swallowed hard, and then said, "Now just let me get this straight, Anabelle. You say you

phoned Doctor Sardo, and told him you were here?"

"Of course. He'll be here in a few minutes."

"And may I ask how you got his phone number in the first place?"

"He gave it to me."

"I see. And would it be too much for me to ask *when* and *where* he gave it to you?"

She looked at him as if he were very obtuse indeed. "Doctor Sardo is a clairvoyant. When I arrived in New York this morning, I received a phone call from him. He introduced himself to me over the phone, and warned me that my life was in danger. I scoffed at him, of course, but he insisted that he had seen the danger signs for me in his crystal ball. He said that if I found his prophecy coming true, I was to get in touch with him, and he would endeavor to get the ethereal spirits to intervene. He gave me his phone number. So when I got here, and began to think about that poisoned nail, and the taxi driver, and the horrid little man with the blowgun, I decided to call him."

Chick was holding on to himself by a great effort. "And what is Doctor Sardo's telephone number?"

"Trafalgar 1-3020."

"Thanks!" said Chick. He sprang up from the bed and seized the phone. "Get me Spring 7-3100!" he rapped.

"What are you going to do?" Anabelle demanded.

"Do?" he repeated harshly. "I'm going to get Inspector Nason to raid the place where Sardo has that phone. And I'm going to have a squad of men sent up here. Sardo knows where you are. It's a cinch he'll try for you again. By the way," he went on over his shoulder, "did you know that your old pal, Ronald Rodes, is in town?"

He heard her gasp behind him, but she said nothing. He jiggled the hook impatiently. "Hey!" he called into the in-

strument to the hotel switchboard operator. "I want Spring 7-3100."

"I'm sorry, sir," said the operator. "But that number is disconnected."

"Disconnected!" he barked into the phone. "Are you crazy? That's Police Headquarters!"

"Well, well, well!" said the operator. "Just think of that!" And she hung up on him.

Chick Lester got a dazed look in his eyes. He jiggled the hook sharply. "Operator!"

"Yes, sir?" She came back on the line.

"Listen," he said. "Did I hear right, or is one of us crazy?"

"One of us is crazy, sir," she told him, and hung up again.

CHICK was too dazed to try again. He put the phone back in the cradle, and turned and looked at Anabelle Shannon.

"The strain is beginning to tell on me," he said. "Whoever this Doctor Sardo is—he's got the Indian sign on me. Do you know—he's fixed it so I can't get Police Headquarters. The operator downstairs won't put the call through for me."

Anabelle Shannon was staring at him with the look of a sleepwalker. "Did—

did you say that Ronald Rodes is in town?"

"Yes."

"Then Doctor Sardo was right. He told me his crystal ball showed that the danger would come from someone I had known well in the past."

Chick Lester said, "My God, can't you understand that Doctor Sardo is the guy that's trying to bump you off? He told me so himself on the phone!"

"Couldn't it have been someone else using his name?"

Chick threw up his hands. "Anything is possible tonight." He threw a baffled look at the telephone. "Maybe I'm the one that's nuts, after all. Maybe I didn't hear what I *think* I heard—"

He was interrupted by a knock at the door.



"Ah!" exclaimed Anabelle. "There's Doctor Sardo!" She hurried to the door, and Chick grimly took out his automatic.

"Keep behind the door when you open it," he ordered.

She disregarded him entirely. She stood squarely in front of the door, and turned the knob.

Chick said, "Damn!" and jumped across and grabbed her by the arm. He pushed her over toward a corner, and

<p>MR. WRIGHT FOUND OUT HE WAS WRONG!</p>				
	<p>MR. WRIGHT: Gee, this stuff is awful! Why do all laxatives taste so bad?</p>	<p>MRS. WRIGHT: All of them don't. Ex-Lax tastes like delicious chocolate.</p>	<p>MR. W.: Ex-Lax? That's O.K. for you and Junior, but I need something stronger!</p>	<p>MRS. W.: No, you don't! Ex-Lax is just as effective as any bad-tasting cathartic.</p>

	<p>LATER!</p> <p>MR. W.: I sure am glad I took your advice. It's Ex-Lax for me from now on.</p> <p>MRS. W.: Yes, with Ex-Lax in the house we don't need any other laxative!</p>	<p>The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet <i>gentle</i>! No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax the next time you need a laxative. It's good for every member of the family.</p> <p>10¢ and 25¢</p> 
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pulled open the door, holding the automatic in front of him.

A huge hulk of a man came charging into the room, with a short length of lead pipe in one hairy fist.

Chick had only a single distorted glimpse of the giant's red-rimmed eyes, distorted face and matted hair. Then he was smothered by the murderous rush. The giant didn't utter a single word. He just enveloped Chick with one arm, which felt like an elephant's leg, and started to swing the lead pipe down on Chick's head.

Lester's face was buried against the brute's chest, and the heavy arm around his waist pinned his own arms to his sides. His nostrils flared with the stench of the sweating, bestial body, and then the lead pipe came down on his skull.

It felt as if a ton of masonry were pouring over him. Vaguely he heard Anabelle Shannon scream three times shrilly. Rockets were bursting inside his head from the blow, and he didn't know what he was doing until he heard the muffled, coughing bark of his own automatic, buried somewhere in the giant's stomach.

He had not willed himself to shoot, but he was pulling the trigger with a sort of instinctive reflex action.

The lead pipe came down once more against his head, and Chick felt all the strength leaving him. He slumped in the giant's grip, and his index finger had no more power to pull the trigger. This was the end. His skull would be crushed in by more blows. Whatever was happening to Anabelle, he was powerless to stop.

Suddenly he felt himself falling. He was no longer being held by that monstrous giant. He tumbled flat on his face, and a heavy body thudded down on top of him, almost knocking the remaining breath from him.

Chick tried to heave that vast bulk off him, but he didn't have the strength. His head was spinning, and when he tried to open his eyes the pain that shot through

it was almost unbearable. He sank down under the weight of the giant's body, and felt hot blood pouring over him. That would be from the slugs he had pumped into the brute's stomach.

He tried to think. There was something he had to do. Someone needed him. No, it was no good. It was too painful to think. Let it go. Sleep it off. . . .

And then, from a very great distance, he heard Anabelle's voice: "*Chick! Oh my God! Chick! Help me!*"

THAT did it. Something snapped in his brain. Through the rushing tide of pain that rolled across his head like angry breakers, he snapped back into full consciousness. By a supreme effort of will, he heaved and threw the inert weight of the dead giant off him. He stumbled blindly to his knees, forced his eyes open.

Pain rocketed through his head and blood obscured his vision. What he managed to see brought him to his feet.

Anabelle was in the far corner of the room, behind the bed. She had picked up the floor lamp, and was using it desperately to fend off the attack of a creature that might have come straight out of a nightmare.

It was a man. But it was snarling and drooling like an animal. It had long buck teeth, and its lips were bleeding where it had bitten them in its murderous passion. It—or he—had a long straight knife. He was on the bed, poised in a half crouch, with the knife held low like a sword, and he was swaying from side to side in an effort to take Anabelle Shannon off guard.

She was standing behind the back frame of the bed, with the floor lamp in both hands like a lance, and poking it out desperately at the maniac, trying to fend him off.

The maniac stretched his free hand out to seize the end of the lamp, and she thrust at him with it. It missed, and he seized it, swept it out of her grip, and uttered a little

drooling cry as he sprang in with the knife.

That much Chick saw. He raised the automatic and pulled the trigger. But all he got was an empty click. He must have emptied it into the giant.

The maniac lunged at Anabelle with the knife, and she screamed and ducked down behind the bed frame. He came after her, bouncing on the bed spring, and reached over to stab down at her.

Chick was weaving unsteadily on his feet. He clamped his teeth shut, and hurled the empty automatic. It struck the maniac between the shoulder blades, but there wasn't enough force in the throw to do him any harm. He turned around, saw Chick, and uttered a savage snarl. He bent his knees and took a flying leap from the bed toward Chick, with the knife flashing in his hand.

Chick dropped to the floor, and the maniac landed almost alongside him, with the knife swinging down. Chick rolled over, and the knife slashed his coat.

The maniac jumped up into the air, and landed on top of Chick in a crouch, like a beast of prey about to make a kill. Chick had no more strength. He could just barely raise an arm in a futile attempt to ward off the blow.

The maniac's face was directly over his, and he looked down at Chick with a mad, blood-lustful gloating. He smacked his lips in delighted anticipation, and lifted up the knife, poisoning it over Chick's throat. Then he swept it down in a powerful thrust.

The floor lamp came sailing through the air and hit the maniac squarely in the face. It carried him back, and broke the force of the thrust. He flailed the air.

Chick Lester gathered all his strength into one effort. He sat up and swung around onto his knees, facing the maniac, who had untangled himself from the floor lamp and was getting ready to come in again.

Chick waited for him to charge. The maniac glared for an instant over at Anabelle, who was desperately looking for something else to throw, and then he gurgled madly in his throat and lunged at Chick with the knife.

CHICK dropped back flat on the floor, bracing himself with his outstretched arms. He lifted up his left foot to meet the murderous charge. His foot connected with the maniac's stomach, and the killer's momentum carried him on and up into the air, riding on Chick's foot. Chick straightened his leg, and the maniac went hurtling over him to crash head first into the wall.

There was a terrible crunching sound, and the madman dropped to the floor like a dead weight, with his skull cracked.

Chick got unsteadily to his feet, and felt of his head. There was blood all over it, and his fingers touched an open spot where the lead pipe had ripped it.

Anabelle Shannon came over and helped to steady him. "Chick!" she gasped. "You're hurt!"

He grinned. "Not as bad as these two bozos. That was nice work, kid—throwing that floor lamp. What do you think of Doctor Sardo now?"

She shuddered. "Where—where do all these madmen come from?"

"God knows. But he must have a collection of them."

The phone started to ring, and Chick stumbled over to it and picked it up. His throat was tight, and his mouth was salty with blood, so he just said, "Huh?"

At once he recognized the voice at the other end. "Hello, my little one. Have you done your work well with the knife? Is she dead?"

Chick's eyes narrowed. "Uh-huh," he said.

"And the detective? He is dead, too?"

"Uh-huh."

"Where is Big Bollio?"

Chick was stuck. He couldn't imper-

sonate the maniac any longer. "Big Bollio and Little Bollio—or whatever his name is—are right up here, Doctor Sardo," he said. "And I'm coming down for you—if you care to stick around!"

Doctor Sardo's voice came back through the phone in an exclamation of rage. Then it softened. "You are very hard to kill, Mister Lester. But I am a resourceful man. I have many more servants. I advise you to step out of the picture now. Leave Shannon to me, and you may still save your own life."

"Boy," said Chick, "I'm going to personally supervise your burial. And you better work fast, because I'm going to get a police guard for Shannon. Don't you want to come up here and try it yourself?"

"No, no, Mister Lester. I have better ways. And don't be too sure about getting the police guard. Good-bye for the immediate present, Mister Lester. You'll hear from me later."

Chick put down the phone and turned and found Anabelle sobbing on the bed, with her face buried in her arms.

He staggered over to where the dead giant lay, and managed to push the body over far enough to retrieve his automatic. His hands were fairly steady as he took out the empty clip and inserted a fresh one.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lights Out!

HE went over and lifted Anabelle gently from the bed. "Come on," he said. "We're going downstairs and see what's been going on."

She buried her face against his shoulder so as not to look at the bloody mess, and he led her out to the elevator. The cage was at his floor, with the door open. The night elevator operator lay on the floor of the elevator in a welter of blood. Big Bollio and Little Bollio must have forced

him to take them up, and then finished him.

Chick held Anabelle close to him while he operated the lever and sent the cage downward. They came out into the lobby. It was empty. The clock above the clerk's desk showed 4 A. M. The night clerk was on the floor behind the desk. He wasn't dead, but he was unconscious, with a lump on the back of his head the size of an egg.

Chick led Anabelle around behind the desk, and into the switchboard room. He kept his automatic out and ready, in case Doctor Sardo had remained. But the room was vacant, except for the night switchboard operator, a plump little brunette, who was lying on the floor, bound and gagged.

Chick took the gag off, and she promptly fainted. He got some water and brought her around, and she told how she had heard the sound of a scuffle out at the desk, and how a tall, gaunt man had come in, with a black-haired insane-looking woman. The gaunt man had covered her with a gun, and tied her up, and the black-haired woman had taken her place at the switchboard.

"There's very little telephone traffic at this time of morning," she told Chick, "and your call was the only one that came through. I heard her telling you the number was disconnected. Then that terrible man who looked like a walking ghost plugged in and called your room and talked to you. He hung up in a terrible rage, and I thought he was going to kill me. But he must have forgotten me in his anger. He and the woman went away, and then you came down."

"All right," said Chick. "Plug in and call headquarters. Get Inspector Nason, quick. I may not last much longer."

His head was whirling like a weather-vane in a windstorm. He had a funny feeling at the pit of his stomach, and he was still feeling the warm blood trickling

down his face from the wound in his scalp. But he held on to himself, and turned around to Anabelle Shannon.

"Baby," he said, "from now on you're going to walk around with a police guard like the Queen of England. And you're taking the next plane back to Hollywood."

"I'm sorry, Chick," said Anabelle Shannon. "I don't want a police guard. And I'm not going back to Hollywood—yet. There's—something I must do."

"Listen, Shannon," he growled. "Metzger wants you back. I'm not taking any more chances. You're holding out on me, and I'm not playing sucker any more. You'll go back—and you'll like it!"

She looked at him for a long minute, as if appraising his strength, his condition.

Then she said quietly, "Thanks for everything, Chick. I'm sorry you got hurt so badly. And I'm sorry I can't do as you ask. I know I'm in awful danger. But I've—got to go through with it!"

Chick guessed what she was going to do, and he reached out to make a grab for her, but she slipped back agilely, and ran out into the lobby.

"Hey!" he yelled, and went after her. He rounded the desk, stumbling over the clerk's inert figure, and saw her pushing through the revolving doors. She turned and waved to him with her handbag, and kept going.

Chick broke into a run, and suddenly he felt very weak. The throbbing in his head became intensified, and his stomach tightened into a knot. He stumbled, tried to catch his balance, but it was no good. He crashed to the floor. He wasn't entirely unconscious, but he just couldn't get back on his feet. There was no chance of catching Anabelle Shannon. She'd be too far away by now.

And Doctor Sardo. . . . Doctor Sardo might be waiting out there with more of his murderous maniacs. Frantically, Chick tried to get up. That last effort finished him. He lapsed into unconsciousness.

"HE'S coming round now," someone said. "My God, the guy can take it. Six stitches in his head. . . ."

Chick opened his eyes. He was in a nice, light hospital room, and the sun was shafting in through the window to caress the foot of his bed.

Inspector Nason was there, and so was Dan Metzger, the big boss of American National Pictures.

Chick said, "Metzger! How did you get here?"

Metzger was short and stocky, with a high forehead and a gleaming bald dome. His eyes were keen and brilliant, and his mouth was soft and sensitive—indicating a combination of natural characteristics which accounted for his phenomenal success in the motion picture industry.

"I flew in from Hollywood during the night. Chartered a plane when I got no answer to my telegram."

Chick pushed up on his elbows. His head was wrapped in bandages, but he didn't feel so bad physically.

"My God," he said, "what time is it?"

"Eight o'clock," Inspector Nason told him. "We picked you up on the floor of the Parkside lobby, and brought you here."

"What about Shannon?"

Nason shook his head. "We can't locate her. The reserves are out. They're combing the city. But not a buzz. When she walked out of the Parkside, she seems to have disappeared into thin air."

Chick groaned. "She's in some kind of mess, and she won't confide in anyone. I hate to think of her wandering around—with Sardo after her!"

"Look here, Chick," said Metzger. "If Shannon gets killed, it'll ruin American National. We got five million dollars tied up in the biggest spectacle of the year, and we'll have to junk it if Shannon doesn't finish for us."

"To hell with your five million!" snapped Chick. "What about Shannon?"

She's the dizziest dame on two feet—but if anything happens to her, I'll break Doctor Sardo's neck with my own two hands!"

He swung around to Nason. "What about Ronald Rodes? Have you picked him up yet?"

The Inspector shook his head. "He's just as scarce as Shannon. I've sent his description out on the five-state teletype, in case he tries to skip town. And we've been checking over these lunatics that Sardo uses. Every one of them has a homicidal mania, and every one of them escaped from asylums in the last year. He must have helped them escape, and then kept them somewhere till he was ready to use them. According to the records of escapes from asylums in the past year, there are still nine or ten maniacs unaccounted for."

"Which means," Chick said tightly, "that Sardo has nine or ten more tools with which to try to kill Shannon!"

"But it's so damnably fantastic!" Inspector Nason snorted. "Why the hell does this Sardo want to kill Shannon!"

"He told me it was worth a million dollars to him," Chick muttered. He looked questioningly at Metzger. "Would you know anything about that? How could Shannon be worth that much to anybody—dead? Has she got money?"

Metzger shrugged. "At the four thousand a week I pay her, she has saved up a sizeable estate. I handle some of her investments, so I know. She even owns a thousand shares of American National Pictures."

"So!" said Chick. "And has she made a will? Who inherits?"

"Her sister, Florence, gets practically all of it. Florence is only a year younger, and the two of them look pretty much alike. In fact, Florence used to act as Anabelle's stand-in up to a few months ago, when she got sick."

Chick sat up in bed. "Sick?" His eyes

were glittering. "What's the matter with her?"

Metzger shrugged. "Nobody ever knew exactly. It was some family ailment. Florence started acting queer on the set one day, and she was taken home. Then Anabelle announced that she had been sent East to a sanitarium."

"The name of the sanitarium?" Chick demanded.

"I don't know."

"Well, telephone Hollywood and find out! This may be the key to the whole thing. Me, I got to be doing things!"

He pushed his feet over the side of the bed, and started to get up.

"Take it easy!" Metzger pleaded. "You're in no shape—"

"To hell with that! If I waste any more time around here, Shannon may not be in much shape for your damned picture. I have an idea Sardo may be close to his goal by this time!"

HE tried to stand, and got dizzy. Inspector Nason supported him, and he sat down on the bed again.

"You better rest a while longer," Nason said. "The police are doing everything possible. . . ."

"No, no!" said Chick. "I got to be doing this myself. Anabelle doesn't want the police in this, for some reason. She'll let herself be killed rather than have the police. But she *might* trust me, in a jam."

He tried to stand again.

The door of the hospital room opened, and a sleek young hospital interne came in, with a stethoscope hanging around his neck.

"Here, here," he said reprovingly. "You're in no condition to get out of bed."

"That's what *you* say!" Chick growled.

"You talk to him, Doc," Metzger pleaded. "He'll have a relapse."

The doctor came over to the bed. "Just let me look you over, and if you're all

right, I'll discharge you. It'll only take a couple of minutes."

Chick looked up at the interne. He had a very thin face, and eyes that bulged a little. His hair was carefully slicked back, and parted in the middle.

"All right," Chick said, suddenly acquiescent. "If you want to look me over, go ahead."

"Ah," said the doctor. "That's better." He turned to Metzger and Inspector Nason. "If you two gentlemen will kindly step out—"

Nason started to object. "What the hell, we're all men!"

But Metzger broke in, "Come on, Inspector. We can wait in the hall. There's a couple of things I want to talk over with you."

Nason shrugged, and they both went out.

The doctor's bulging eyes bulged just a little more. He rubbed his hands. "Ah, that's fine. Let's listen to your heart."

He applied the stethoscope to Chick's chest. "Now, lie down."

Chick obeyed, and the interne listened again, nodding in satisfaction. "Very good. Nice recovery. If you'll just turn over on your face, now."

"Sure, Doc," said Chick.

He rolled over on the bed, and the doctor lifted his pajama jacket over his head.

For a fraction of a second there was deadly silence in the room. Chick, with his head partly covered, heard the barest sound of a *click* near the door, and the doctor's footsteps returning to the bed. He forced himself to lie rigid while he counted to five. And then, without raising his head or looking around, he set his body in motion and rolled over on the bed.

His timing was perfect. The heavy water pitcher from the night table smashed down into the pillow where Chick's head had just been. The doctor had it by the handle, and he had brought it down with

such force that it broke, even against the soft, unresisting pillow. If Chick had been under it, his head would have split open all over again.

Chick rolled out of the bed on the far side, and stood wavering on his feet.

The doctor let go of the pitcher, and straightened up. He faced Chick, and bared his teeth in a crooked smile.

"Ghastly business, isn't it?" he said.

Chick said, "Yeah. Some fun. What happens now? I yell, and the Inspector comes in, and your goose is cooked. Are you another one of Doctor Sardo's madmen?"

THE interne's long face grew longer with rage. His eyes protruded grotesquely. "So you think I'm mad, eh? That's what they all think. I hate them all. I'd have been a great physician if they hadn't put me away. It's people like you I hate. That's why I'm going to kill you!"

His hand darted under his white jacket.

"Hold it!" Chick barked. "If you bring out a gun I'll yell."

"Go on and yell!" the doctor slobbered. "Didn't you hear me lock the door? You'll be dead before they break it down!"

He brought out his hand. It didn't have a gun. He was holding a surgical scalpel. The fine Swedish steel glittered in the sunlight. He started to come around the bed toward Chick.

"You sap!" Chick Lester hurried on desperately. "Maybe you can kill me with that thing. But you'll fry in the chair."

"Ah, no!" the doctor mouthed the words. "They've certified me insane. They don't execute insane people. They'll just put me back in Matteawan, and I'll wait there till Doctor Sardo helps me escape again. I have nothing to fear. This—is—an—unqualified—pleasure!"

"The pleasure is all yours!" Chick gasped as he ducked away from a vicious

swipe of the scalpel, aimed at his stomach. He felt dizzy and weak, and he didn't think he was equal to the exertion of fighting. This madman was different from the others; he was educated and clever. His warped brain had turned that education and cleverness into a deadly instrument for Doctor Sardo.

The doctor lunged again. Chick jumped on the bed and rolled to the other side. His executioner followed him with leisurely steps.

"You'll tire very quickly, you know. You're weak from your other wounds. When you're all tired out and can't move fast, I'll just step in and—operate."

Chick picked up a chair and held it in front of him as a shield. He backed over to the door, and tried it. Outside, he heard voices raised in excited altercation.

A woman was saying, "I tell you, there's an impostor in the hospital. I ought to know. I'm the head nurse, and I know every doctor here. The one I saw wasn't on the staff, yet he wore a white coat!"

"My God," Chick heard Nason saying, "I bet it's the one in Lester's room!"

Chick looked over at the interne with the knife. He was coming forward slowly now, stalking around Chick, waiting for a chance to dart in around the chair. Chick thrust the chair at him, with the legs poking forward, and the interne leaped nimbly back.

Nason and several others began pounding at the door. Chick took one hand off the chair and felt around for the door catch, to open it.

The interne said regretfully, "It's too bad. I had hoped to carve you. It's much more satisfying. Now I'll just have to shoot you."

He switched the scalpel to his left hand, and reached his right into a hip pocket, bringing it out with a pearl-handled pistol.

Chick wouldn't have time to slip the

catch on the door. Even if he got it open, he'd be plugged before help could come.

He said, "What the hell!" Holding the chair in front of him with both hands, he ran right into the pointing pistol.

The gun barked twice, but the chair deflected it. The interne was carried backward by the force of Chick's rush, and he lost his balance. He went staggering back, clawing for balance, and hit the window sill. Chick was almost on top of him, with the chair pushing against the interne's stomach. The chair shoved harder into the white-coated killer's stomach, and he went through the window.

The fellow's popping eyes almost jumped from their sockets, and his mouth opened wide. A dreadful scream tore from his throat. Then he was hurtling out into space, and Chick was grabbing at the window frame to keep from going over himself.

Chick looked down and saw the crushed figure in white, six stories below, with a crowd already hurrying to surround it. Gasping for breath, he turned and went over to the door.

Nason was hammering at it with the butt of his revolver. The commotion in the corridor stopped like magic when Chick got the door open.

"Where's that guy?" Nason yelled, barging in.

Chick made a little weary gesture with his hand toward the window. "He took a walk." He went over to the clothes rack, resolutely. "And now, for the love of mud, let me get some clothes on and scam out of here. I've got things to do!"

CHAPTER SIX

Mad House of Murder

WHEN he got dressed Chick didn't look very presentable, because his clothes were the same bloody ones in which he had been brought to the hospital. He had a nice clean face though, for he

had been freshly shaved in the hospital.

Nason had gone down to look over the dead interne, and Metzger had left to phone Hollywood and find out where Florence Shannon was being treated. Just as Chick finished dressing, Metzger came back, with a slip of paper.

"This is all I could get," he said, exhibiting the notes he had made. "She was taken away from Hollywood in a private ambulance on May 22nd, and put in a special compartment on the train. She arrived in New York on the twenty-fifth, and was met there by another private ambulance, operated by the Nestor Ambulance Service. But I don't know where she was taken here in New York. It's nine o'clock here, but it's still only five in the morning in Hollywood, and the office isn't open yet."

"All right," said Chick. "Stay on the phone—right here in the hospital. I'll call you in a little while." He flipped open the phone book and found that the Nestor Ambulance Service was on Thirty-fourth Street.

"For God's sake, be careful," Metzger warned. "If you get Shannon out of this safely, I'll give you a nice fat bonus."

"To hell with the bonus!" Chick growled. "All I want is a chance for a private chat with Doctor Sardo!"

He left the hospital in a hurry. He flagged a cab, and almost fell into it.

"Thirty-fourth Street and Eighth Avenue!" he ordered.

The driver looked him over queerly. "Sure you're all right, mister? I don't mind saying you look an awful mess."

"Get going!" Chick barked.

They got to Thirty-fourth and Eighth in fifteen minutes, and Chick told the driver to wait.

The office of the Nestor Service was on the street floor. When he walked in, the woman at the desk almost fainted.

"Do—do you need an ambulance, sir?"

"Listen, madam," he said swiftly. "This is a matter of life and death. Get down your records and find out where Florence Shannon was taken by one of your ambulances on May 25th!"

The woman looked at him queerly. "Well, sir, those records are confidential. . . ."

"Take a look at this," he said, showing her his badge.

She raised her eyebrows. "Just a minute. I'll call the manager and let you talk to him."

She left her desk and went to a door at the back. Chick could see a staircase leading to an upper floor, and behind the staircase there was another door to an open yard where the ambulances were garaged. At the rear was a glass-partitioned office, but she did not go there. Instead, she started to mount the staircase.

Chick's eyes followed her, and he suddenly grew taut. Up at the head of the stairs, he had seen a shadowy figure flitting past, and he thought for an instant that he recognized the face.

The woman was gone almost ten minutes. Chick fidgeted, and was just about deciding to go up after her, when she appeared and came down the stairs. She had a paper in her hand.

She came to the desk, and smiled at him, and when she smiled her face became queerly distorted. Her hair was coal black, contrasting sharply with a chalk-white face.

"Here's the information you want, sir. It's all on this paper."

She handed it to him, and he was about to take it when he saw that she had a queer, tense look in her face. She was watching him, he realized, like a scientist studying an impaled bug.

INSTEAD of taking the paper, he seized her wrist, and twisted it over. She tried to jerk away, but he held on tight,

lifted up her hand. The paper was blank on both sides. And between her third and fourth fingers, under the paper, she was holding a pin about three inches long, with a round black knob for a head. She had been holding it in such a way that if Chick had taken the paper, he could not have avoided pricking himself on it. The pin itself was white, but the point was discolored with a reddish liquid.

The woman's face became contorted with rage. She brought her other hand around and clawed at his face. He caught the other wrist too, and tried to hold her, but she fought like a wildcat. Their bodies were close together, and she was biting and scratching and kicking, all at the same time.

Chick tried to push her away. The pin fell from her fingers, and came to rest between their straining chests, with the point against the woman. She didn't notice it, and kept on struggling, stretching her neck to try to bite Chick's face.

The pin went through the material of her dress and pierced the skin. Almost at once, the woman became rigid. A dreadful look appeared in her eyes. Her mouth fell open, and stayed that way, as if in a seizure of lockjaw. Her body arched backward. A cry like that of a hamstrung animal pulsed through her lips.

Chick let go of her. She toppled over against the desk, and lay still and stiff in death.

Chick wiped perspiration from his forehead. He looked down at the rigid body, and gulped. Her face, in death, was like nothing human. Madness and depravity were reflected in every feature, as if some diabolical sculptor had applied his mad genius to carving a stone image of all that is obscene in the world.

Chick turned away from her, took out his automatic. He went up the stairs two at a time, sloughing off all the weakness of his hurt and wounded body in the sudden realization that this shot in the dark

had landed him right in the middle of the showdown. He was as sure of it as if this were a motion picture whose script he had read beforehand. He knew that the sinister pattern of madness and murder was going to play out its kaleidoscopic course in the next few minutes. With the sureness of instinct, he knew that he would clash with Doctor Sardo here. And the only thing he prayed for was that Anabelle Shannon might yet be alive. . . .

They had heard him coming, up there. A door slammed somewhere.

Chick raced up the rest of the way, and hit the landing at top speed. There was nobody here. He was in a hall, with doors on either side. But the doors were all closed. There wasn't a sound in the place.

For a moment Chick wondered whether it wouldn't be smarter for him to go back down and get the police. He'd need help. He couldn't go through this whole place by himself.

He was half turning around to go down, when one of the doors on the right was suddenly flung open. A struggling, squirming group came lunging through into the hall—two men and a woman.

The faces of the men were brutish, half-maniacal. One of them was abnormally tall, with dangling arms that reached almost to his knees. The other had a head that was almost twice as big as it should have been, and a mouth that seemed to be altogether devoid of teeth, yet which slobbered and foamed like a beast's. His two gnarled hands were twisting and yanking at the woman's hair, holding her back while she clawed and fought. The tall one had a length of cord in his hands, and he was trying to pass it around the woman's throat—with the evident intention of strangling her.

The woman had her back to Chick. She was fighting madly, inching farther and farther into the hallway, and holding her hair so that the big-headed man should not pull it out by the roots.

Chick got only a split-second's impression of that scene. The tall one was just bringing the cord in place to slip around her neck. Then the woman kicked at Big-head's shins, and he squealed and let go of her hair. She ducked and ran toward Chick.

Chick gasped. The woman was Anabelle Shannon!

SHE was hardly recognizable. Her face was changed. There was madness and terror in it, and her eyes were somehow of a different color. Most of the clothes were gone from her, and what was left was hanging in shreds. Her white limbs flashed as she raced toward Chick, with the two madmen close behind her.

She saw Chick and ran into his arms. He grimly raised his automatic, pointing it at the two madmen.

And then something strange and incomprehensible happened.

Anabelle Shannon threw both her arms around Chick, dragging his own arms down to his sides and pinning them there with a desperate, passionate strength. She locked her wrists behind his back and pressed her body against his with all her power.

Then she called out to the two madmen, "All right, Gus, grab him quick. Hurry up, Vincie, get the rope around his neck. I can't hold him long!"

Chick silently cursed himself for a fool. He hadn't realized it until she spoke. *This wasn't Anabelle Shannon!*

It was too late now to do anything about it. Gus and Vincie were upon him, and Gus was getting a grip on his arms, while

Vincie danced around for a chance to slip the rope in place. The woman who looked like Anabelle Shannon let go and leaned against the wall, watching with mad amusement in her eyes. Her struggle in the doorway with Gus and Vincie had been only an act, to take Chick Lester off guard.

Gus was in back of Chick now, and he held both of Chick's wrists in a bear grip, while the tall and gangling Vincie had his rope in a loop and was holding it above Chick's head, trying to drop it around his neck.

Chick couldn't free his wrists. He backed suddenly into Gus, just as Vincie's loop came down. The loop missed, and Vincie looked annoyed.

"Can't you hold him?" he asked petulantly. "Hold him still!"

He fixed the loop again and lifted it up.

Several of the doors along the hall had opened now, and Chick got a quick view of queer and distorted faces watching the fight with evident relish. In one doorway he saw the gaunt and cadaverous man who had ordered his execution in the barber shop.

He caught quick, flashing glimpses of all these things as he struggled with Gus. Gus had his wrists locked together, and was bearing down on them, so that Chick was being pulled backward, with his head up. This made it easier for Vincie to drop the loop over his head.

Vincie's eyes were hot with the mad anticipation of murder. He stretched his long, prehensile arms out as far as possible, and slipped the noose over Chick's squirming head. It settled on his neck.

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Vincie yelled gleefully, "I got 'im!" and started to pull it tight.

CHICK put all his waning strength into one powerful kick that caught Vincie in the groin and brought a scream to his lips.

With the cord still around his neck, Chick started to fall backward against Gus, who tried to sidestep. He tripped on something, and fell heavily to the floor, with Lester on top of him.

For the moment, Chick's wrists were free. He bounced up.

In the doorway of his office, the cadaverous man rapped out staccato orders to the other lunatics, who had been watching the fight with detached interest.

"Get him, boys!" he bawled. "And no noise. The Shannon girl is coming here any minute now, and we don't want to scare her off!"

Almost before the cadaverous man ceased speaking, the slavering band of lunatics leaped in, with hoarse grunts and weird jabberings. There were seven or eight of them, and they piled on, clawing, scratching, gouging and biting. Chick was snowed under.

They had him down then, and were raining blows upon him in an effort to finish him off. Chick squirmed under the onslaught, covering his head with one arm and trying to push himself up out of the murderous maelstrom with the other. His left hand, groping on the floor for purchase, encountered the butt of the automatic which had been forced out of his hand when Gus had grabbed him.

A mad surge of hope thrilled through him. Anabelle Shannon wasn't dead. Somehow, she was being lured here. He still had a chance to stave off the maniacal doom which threatened her.

He gripped the butt of the automatic, and twisted it around upward. He couldn't tell exactly where it was pointing, but the bodies were thick and smelly all about

and on top of him, and he couldn't help hitting someone.

He pulled the trigger.

The shot was almost entirely muffled by the struggling bodies packed on top of him, but he heard the thud of the slug as it smashed home in human flesh. His lips twisted with grim satisfaction as he pulled the trigger again and again.

The blows which had been raining down on him suddenly ceased. One of the lunatics squealed. Somebody else yelped with pain.

The pressure began to lift from off his back as the madmen jumped up and fled to avoid the scorching slugs. A body remained limply across the small of his back, and he heaved over, threw it off.

Groggily, he staggered to his feet. The madmen had retreated to their doorways. The gaunt, cadaverous man had produced a long-barreled revolver, which he was resting on one arm and aiming at Chick's heart.

"Stand very still, Mr. Lester," he said. "Your automatic is empty. Drop it."

At Chick's left, up against the wall, stood the woman who looked like Anabelle Shannon. She was making no attempt to hide her nakedness, and she was laughing and giggling as if at a huge joke.

Chick stared at the cadaverous man's revolver. There wasn't a chance to beat that gun.

He shrugged, let the automatic fall to the floor. "You win, Doctor Sardo—so far."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Doctor Sardo Always Wins"

DOCTOR SARDO smiled a vinegary smile. "Of course I win, my young friend. Doctor Sardo always wins." He kept his eyes on Chick, and slapped out orders at the lunatics, who were creeping out into the hall again.

There were three bodies on the floor at Chick's feet, and Sardo instructed some of the lunatics to remove them into one of the rooms.

"Gus and Vincie," he ordered, "go downstairs and see what happened to our receptionist. Clear the office downstairs, so that when Shannon comes, she'll suspect nothing. Hurry."

Gus and Vincie threw vindictive looks at Chick. "Don't shoot him, Doctor Sardo," Vincie begged. "Save him for me. I like to use my little cord."

"If you work fast down there," Sardo promised, "I'll save him for you."

He turned his attention to Chick. "Now, Mr. Lester, if you'll just step in here—"

Chick grinned. "Why should I? And be saved for Vincie's cord? To hell with you! Shoot me now. A good loud shot from that gun of yours ought to bring the cops."

Sardo kept the gun steady, with the barrel resting across his forearm. "But you would be dead, Mr. Lester. What good would it do you?"

"It would save Anabelle Shannon," he said simply. "I hardly believe it possible, but I'm falling in love with that dizzy dame."

Suddenly a voice from the head of the stairs exclaimed, "Chick! Do you really love me?"

Chick Lester went icy with apprehension. He whirled, and there stood Anabelle Shannon. She had just come up the stairs, and Ronald Rodes was behind her.

Doctor Sardo said suavely, "Ah, Miss Shannon, I'm glad you came. We can finish you off quickly now, together with your friend here."

Anabelle Shannon's eyes widened. "Where's Florence? Where's my sister?"

She broke off as her glance fell upon the half-naked girl who was now cower-

ing against the wall, close to Doctor Sardo.

"Florence!" she exclaimed brokenly. "What have they been doing to you?"

"N-nothing, Anabelle," quavered Florence Shannon. "Ronald and I were—married last week, and Ronald said this man Lester was trying to kill you. So I s-said I'd help them get Lester."

Ronald Rodes, who had been standing just behind Anabelle, suddenly reached out and pinioned her arms against her sides.

"All right," Rodes called out gruffly to Doctor Sardo. "We've got 'em all. What are we waiting for?"

Chick Lester was standing in a half-crouch, gathering all his mental and physical faculties. He was beginning to see all the mad and senseless lines falling into shape to form the weirdest pattern of murder he had ever encountered.

ANABELLE SHANNON was trying ineffectually to twist around in the grip of Ronald Rodes.

"You beast!" she flashed over her shoulder at Rodes. "You told me you'd fix everything if I gave you fifty thousand dollars. You told me you'd free Florence—"

Rodes laughed. "Anabelle, you've saved up almost two million dollars out of your salary. I heard Metzger say so. Why should I take fifty grand, when I can get the whole thing?"

"B-but I don't understand. How—"

"I understand!" Chick Lester laughed harshly. "Rodes is Florence's husband. He couldn't marry you, so he married Florence. With you dead, Florence inherits your whole estate. And since she's an incompetent, her husband manages the money. Maybe he'll even finish off Florence, too, so he won't have to account for his expenditures—such as half of the two million to Doctor Sardo here, for the use of his lunatics. Don't you see, Anabelle,

with these lunatics running wild, your murder would be ascribed to the lust of these madmen, and Rodes would never be suspected. He needed a good, wacky set-up to divert suspicion from himself!"

Chick was looking at Anabelle as he talked, swiftly and desperately, in order to get in everything he wanted to say before Sardo started shooting. But his staccato sentences were really aimed at Florence, who was listening in a dazed, uncomprehending sort of way. Florence was certainly mentally deranged. And she had, in her half-witted manner, taken everything Sardo had told her at face value. If he could only make the deadly truth seep into her consciousness through the veil of madness that sat like a black cloak over her mind! But the time was so short!

The lunatics were closing in again, circling in back of Chick to get at him without stepping into the line of fire of Sardo's gun.

"Our bodies will be found somewhere in the city." Chick hurried on, with frantic emphasis. "We'll be brutally murdered, all three of us—Anabelle and myself, and you, too, Florence!"

Ronald Rodes tightened his grip on Anabelle's arms. He pushed her forward. "Come on," he rasped. "Let's finish this. . . ."

"Wait!"

The single word came like a horrible, wailing wrench of agony from the throat of the demented Florence Shannon.

She was standing close to Doctor Sardo, and looking at him with wide and terrible eyes. "Is it true—what that man has been saying? Are you going to kill Anabelle? Did Ronald only marry me to get the money?"

Sardo laughed deprecatingly. "Don't listen to him, Florence. He's crazier than all of us. Just you wait—"

"No! No!" she screamed. Somehow, all the madness seemed to fall away from

her for one flashing, revealing instant of reason. "Oh, Anabelle, may God forgive me for what I've done! Maybe I can make it up this way. . . ."

Her hands stretched out in clawing talons, and she leaped straight at Doctor Sardo!

SARDO cursed viciously, and swung the gun around to point at her. He pulled the trigger. The gun belched, and a slug blasted out of the muzzle with a lick of flame, smashing into the girl's breast. It brought her up short. A strange, glorious look, like that of a Christian martyr, transformed her face into a thing of heavenly beauty. She forced herself forward, with her hands stretched out toward Sardo, as if to offer him benediction.

Sardo said, "*Damn you!*" and fired again.

By that time Chick Lester was in motion.

He had not thought there was any fight left in him. But in some strange fashion the sight of what Florence had done seemed to pour power into his deadened muscles. His arms flailed out like twin scythes, smashing the encircling lunatics out of his path. His knees bent, then straightened, jackknifing him directly at Sardo. He hit the cadaverous master of madmen square in the midriff with the edge of his shoulder, and sent him hurtling back into the wall with a thudding smash of bone against wood that made his heart feel good.

His hand swept down, snatched up the revolver that Sardo had dropped. He twisted around on his knees, bringing the gun up and firing it in the same continuous motion.

The lunatics were almost upon him as the gun started to belch, and the hot slugs tore into them with blasting deadliness. They fell under the fusillade, piling on top of each other. The rush was brought

up short. Those who were unwounded turned and ran, keening mad and frantic ululations of fear which rose to mingle with the thunderous reverberations of Chick's gunshots.

Their terror-stricken flight carried them to the head of the stairs, where Ronald Rodes was holding a struggling, biting Anabelle Shannon. The lunatics swept them both out of the way and fairly fell down the stairs in their efforts to escape the thundering slugs.

Chick launched himself across the hall. He reached Ronald Rodes just as he was lifting a bunched fist to smash down at Anabelle's face.

Chick uttered a wild and throbbing laugh as he caught Rodes' wrist in both his hands. He had thrown away the empty revolver. He bore down hard on the wrist, and Rodes let go his hold on Anabelle.

Chick twisted powerfully on the wrist, dragged Rodes backward. The man's face had gone suddenly white with pain.

"Let go!" he gasped.

Chick laughed again, leaning his whole weight on the twisted arm. He was too weak now to hold Rodes any other way, and besides, he didn't *want* to let go. He felt Ronald Rodes' elbow crack under the pressure with a sound like the snapping of fingers.

Rodes groaned terribly, and his body

went limp. He plumped to the floor in a faint.

Chick was swaying on his feet. He looked at Anabelle Shannon, who had run across to the pitiful body of her sister. Florence was dead. But there was a beatific smile upon her lips.

Downstairs, they heard the gruff voices of policemen. Heavy footsteps were coming up the stairs.

ANABELLE saw Chick swaying, groping for something to support him, and she came running over. She put her arms around him, to hold him up.

There was a haze in front of his eyes. The wound in his head had opened up again, and he felt things going black. But he suddenly felt Anabelle's lips upon his, in a kiss such as no leading man in any of her pictures had ever received.

"Chick!" she said huskily. "Chick! I heard you tell Sardo you—loved me. Chick. I love you, too. I'll—never—fight with you again. I'll—be meek—and docile—and—"

"Hell," said Chick Lester. "That's no good. You wouldn't be Anabelle Shannon if you were meek and docile. Just—stay the way you—are. I—can—handle you—baby!"

And he slumped into unconsciousness, with a smile on his lips, as the hurrying cops reached the landing.

THE END

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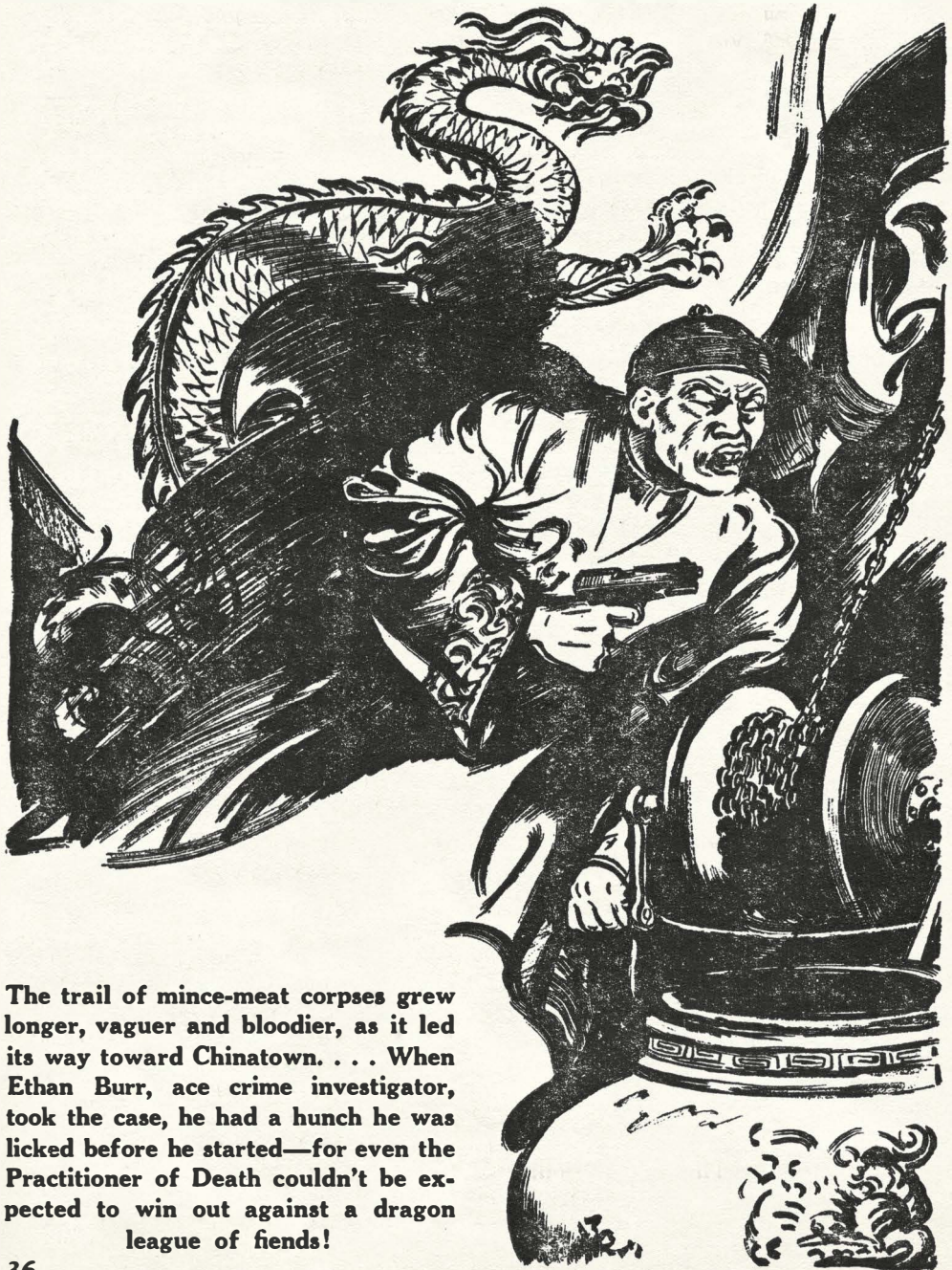
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The trail of mince-meat corpses grew longer, vaguer and bloodier, as it led its way toward Chinatown. . . . When Ethan Burr, ace crime investigator, took the case, he had a hunch he was licked before he started—for even the Practitioner of Death couldn't be expected to win out against a dragon league of fiends!



The Chinese slashed with his knife at the same time that Burr's gun came up.

CHAPTER ONE

The Thing in the Sack

THE sun slanted through the Venetian blinds and lay on the bar in streamers of light. George Simms blinked at the tables which stood in shadows, then turned to the bartender.

"Have you seen Ethan Burr today?"

The bartender appraised Simms suspiciously. He saw a flabby man in a derby who looked like a motion picture version of a detective. But appearances, the barman had learned, didn't mean a thing. Once, a meek-looking little guy had come in. Nobody had paid any attention to him until he had opened fire

on Ethan Burr, who had been sitting at his usual table drinking beer.

The bartender liked to tell how in spite of the advantage of surprise, the meek-looking little guy hadn't been able to shoot more than one bullet, and that hadn't quite hit the mark. Burr's .44 had leaped into his hand, out of nowhere it had seemed, and another corpse had been marked up for the private detective whom the newspapers referred to as the Practitioner of Death.

The bartender played safe with Simms. "He ain't here," he said cagily, "but if you wait maybe I'll find out where he is."

HE FADED toward the end of the bar and disappeared. Half a minute later he beckoned to Simms from the back of the room. Ethan Burr was seated around the L of the saloon, his back against the wall, a half-empty glass of beer on the table.

"Hello, George," Burr greeted. "Sit down. Two beers, Al."

"Fine," Simms grunted. He sank into a chair.

As Burr drank down the rest of his beer, Simms eyed him. He remembered Burr, years ago on the force, when Burr had been a carefree, exceptionally clever, first-grade homicide dick, who was set to go far in the department. Then his charming young wife had died because Burr hadn't been able to afford the necessary surgical and medical expenses to save her life.

The blow had permanently removed any smile from his hard, thin mouth and his steel-gray eyes. He had quit the force, opened an office as a private investigator, determined to make enough money so that his two young children would never know want. His services came high, and if one wanted an utterly ruthless and fearless machine of justice, his fees were worth it.

The bartender brought the two beers. Simms took a deep gulp, smacked his lips, then his eyes went to Burr's face.

Burr leaned back in his chair. "You're jittery, George. Is chasing divorce evidence too much for you?"

"I was a fool," Simms said. "I should have stayed on the force. But when I saw all the dough you were making in private law, I got greedy."

"Not making out?"

"Well, the agency is getting on a good footing. But a couple of days ago I bit off more than I think I can chew. Frankly, Ethan, I'm a little nervous. I sank every cent I possess into the agency and borrowed up to the hilt. If I pass out, my wife and daughter will be absolutely destitute."

Burr said nothing, his face remained impassive. Simms sighed. "What do you know about Chinamen?"

"I know that they don't like to be called Chinamen. They prefer Chinese. Their colony in this town is nothing in size like New York or San Francisco, but it's fairly large."

"Would you trust 'em?"

"In their personal lives they are the gentlest and most honest people I know," Burr stated. "There are exceptions among them, but perhaps not so many as among our own people. Frankly, I like 'em."

"Yeah," Simms grunted. He stared at the wall above Burr's head. Then he said, "Look here, Ethan, how'd you like a piece of a case?"

Burr nodded. "That depends."

"Five hundred," Simms said. "I'll do all the leg work."

"Sorry, George."

"One thousand."

Burr fingered the jagged scar which ran down his left cheek and disfigured his mouth. That had been caused by a blackmailer's knife. He'd got ten thousand dollars for that case.

"I'm not in this game for the fun of it, George," Burr said.

Simms sighed again and stood up. "Maybe a grand isn't money to you. I can't go higher without stepping out altogether, and I need that dough."

He moved away, his feet lagging, his shoulders bowed. Burr opened his mouth to call after him as Simms turned the corner of the L. He changed his mind and lifted the beer glass to his lips. . . .

THE following morning Ethan Burr visited the city morgue. He handed the attendant a pass.

"I'd like to get a look at George Simms," he said.

The attendant screwed his face. "There ain't much to see. He hasn't been sewed together yet."

"I can take it, Higgins."

Higgins shrugged and led Burr into the autopsy room. The various parts of George Simms' body were laid out on a table. It was as bad as anything Burr had ever seen. The head was separated from the torso, and the rest was in a number of pieces. The eyes were open, staring up at Burr.

"I told you," Higgins said, as he followed Burr out.

"What's the dope on his murder?" the detective asked.

"Just like the morning papers said," Higgins told him. "A cop comes across this sack on the sidewalk at about midnight. He sees something seeping through that looks like blood. He opens the sack and in it he finds what you just saw. That's all that's known." . . .

Burr left the morgue, got into his roadster and drove to a neat little cottage in the suburbs. A girl answered his ring. She was tall and easy to look at, in spite of the fact that there was little color in her face and her eyes were red from weeping.

"Mrs. Simms?" Burr asked, not quite

able to believe that anybody so young and lovely could have been George Simms' wife.

"I'm Zelda Simms, her sister-in-law. I'm afraid she's in no condition to see anybody."

"My name is Ethan Burr," he said. "I was a friend of George."

Her eyes fixed on his scar. "Oh, yes. George spoke about you. Won't you come in?"

He stepped into a foyer. Through a side door he saw a small woman sitting stiffly in a chair. With a handkerchief she dabbed at eyes which seemed to have no life. Seated on a footstool was a girl of seven or eight—a pretty little thing with a tumble of blonde curls.

Zelda Simms took his hand and led him into a big kitchen. "It's best that you don't disturb them," she said.

"You live here?" he asked.

"Yes. My brother was good enough to let me share his home." She bit her lips. "I don't know what we're going to do now. We'll have to move, of course. George rented this house. And I understand that he did not leave a cent. Fortunately I have a job."

"How much do you make?"

She looked up at him angrily. Then she smiled wanly. "Having been my brother's friend, I suppose you'd like to help. I make only twenty a week, but we'll manage. We'll have to. I don't want to accept favors."

He thought of the widow and child in the other room. Three women left destitute. And in a way, he thought, it was his fault, because conceivably he might have saved Simms' life. Simms had been slow, a good routine man but nothing more. He had had no business taking a case which called for hair-trigger thinking and action.

He said, "I don't want to give you anything that doesn't rightfully belong to you. George approached me yesterday

and asked me to take a piece of the case which brought about his death. I accepted, so the fee rightfully belongs to you three. It's five thousand dollars."

She stared doubtfully at him a moment. Apparently satisfied that he was telling the truth, she said, "Why, that would be a windfall."

Then she frowned. "But we're entitled only to half."

"Of course. The entire fee is ten thousand. . . . Well, I'll be pushing on."

She gripped his hand warmly, her eyes lighting up. "I can't begin to thank you," she started to say. Then he was gone, an embarrassed look on his face.

THE lovely vision of Zelda Simms stayed with Ethan Burr as he drove to the local Chinatown. He finally submerged it with an effort.

The Chinese quarter consisted of three blocks of the oldest slum area in the city. Nearing it, Burr parked his car some distance away and walked the rest of the distance. In tiny shop windows along the crowded narrow street placards exhorted: "Smash Japanese Aggression!" Farther down the street a huge painted sign announced, under Chinese characters:

SAM MING

IMPORTER

That was his destination.

Burr happened to be glancing up when the thing came hurtling off the roof. For an instant he thought it would hit him and he jumped backward. But it landed a good fifteen feet beyond, narrowly missing an ancient Chinese who had been stolidly plodding along. The old man emitted a wail and his aged legs started pumping. The street cleared instantly.

It required only a glance to show Burr that the object which had fallen was a gunny sack fastened on top with wire.

Blood was seeping through the coarse weave.

Then Burr was running into the house from which the sack had been dropped. He had his gun out. The stairs were poorly lit and rickety and there were five flights of them. No sound issued from any of the doors he passed.

He was panting when he reached the roof. Four buildings had roofs precisely the same height as the one he was on. All were deserted. Whoever had hurled the gunny sack could have gone down into any one of the houses.

Almost at once his eyes fell on the blood which stained the tar and pebbles covering the roof. The trail led to its edge. Obviously the gunny sack had been dragged along and then pushed over.

He followed the trail of blood back, found that the sack had been brought up to the roof from the house immediately to the right. He went down the stairs. No blood was here or in the top floor hall. Either the blood hadn't started seeping through the weave until the sack had reached the roof, or, more likely, the sack had been wrapped in canvas to prevent a telltale trail from revealing its source.

Burr knew that it would be futile to make a search of the apartments of that house. There were at least six on a floor, twenty-four in all; and anyway, there would be no way of telling who the killer was.

When he reached the street he found a patrolman standing next to the gunny sack which he had opened. There wasn't another person in sight.

"Burr!" the cop grunted. "You would be around when there's a corpse."

"Who is it?"

"Only a Chink," the cop said. "Chopped up with one of their nasty little hatchets. We'll never find out who did it. We never do. They shut up like clams."

Burr didn't have much stomach for it,

but he forced himself to spread open the mouth of the sack.

The head was on top. He looked into a thin yellow face—a young, sensitive face. The tattered remnants of tortoiseshell eye-glasses still clung to the ears. The bulging eyes and contorted facial muscles spoke of the horror the young man must have felt just before the death blow had struck.

A prowler car screamed up the street. Burr turned away from the gunny sack and strode rapidly toward Sam Ming's establishment.

CHAPTER TWO

The Hatchet Murder

SAM MING was slim and suave and completely bald. A younger man, who was formed like a round ball, with a button on top for a head and sticks for the arms and legs, showed Ethan Burr into the lavishly furnished office.

"Ah, Ethan Burr," Sam Ming purred as he came from behind his desk to shake hands with the detective. "It is always a pleasure to receive you." He spoke with an Oxford accent.

Burr took the chair which the fat young man pushed toward the desk. He said, "I'm looking for somebody who wouldn't find it a pleasure to see me." He stopped and glanced significantly at the fat man.

"Lin Fu is my confidential secretary," Sam Ming assured him. "You can speak your mind plainly in his presence."

Burr shrugged. "I trust very few men, Sam Ming. That's one reason I'm still alive. You're one of the few. If you say he's all right, let him stay."

Lin Fu bowed his head. Burr loaded his pipe and went on: "Sam Ming, you're known as the unofficial mayor of Chinatown. You've caused the tongs to make peace. You act as judge and arbitrator of disputes and your word is considered final. There's little goes on here that you

don't know about." He paused to light his pipe. "Why was George Simms murdered?"

The faces of Sam Ming and Lin Fu remained impassive. But Burr expected no visible reaction and waited for Ming to speak.

"I have read of the unfortunate incident in today's newspapers," Sam Ming drawled. "Why do you expect me to have special knowledge of his demise?"

Burr rose and went to the window. A little way down the street there were a lot of uniformed cops and plainclothesmen. No Chinese were to be seen.

"You know what happened downstairs a couple of minutes ago," Burr said. "And yet you two didn't even appear interested when I came in. That shows that you are. I had an idea from a conversation with George Simms yesterday that Chinese were involved in the case. There are the chopped up pieces of a poor Chinese boy in a sack downstairs—killed the same way as Simms was. He looked like a nice boy; the kind you'd have working for you."

Keenly he searched the two yellow faces to see what effect his shot had had.

Burr walked around to the front of the desk. He leaned toward Sam Ming. "Look here. I promise to stay away from the police. Simms left a wife, a daughter and a sister who were dependent on him. He had been working for somebody and the fee he would have received would do them a lot of good. I'm willing to take over for the same fee he was supposed to get, so that I can give it to his family."

Sam Ming closed his eyes. Lin Fu sat as solid as a rock with his fat hands on his knees. Burr waited.

FINALLY Sam Ming's eyes opened again. "George Simms was employed by me," he admitted. "The boy whose remains are now being examined by the police was in my humble employ. More

than that I cannot tell you. You have pledged your word that you will not go with this information to the police."

"Afraid?" Burr mocked.

"No," Sam Ming purred lazily, and Burr knew that he told the truth. "We shall settle this our way. It is necessary." His lips twitched at the corners. "There will be no fee for you, Ethan Burr."

"But if I get to the bottom of this, there will be a suitable reward?" Burr inquired.

"I cannot say." His eyes closed.

Burr glanced at Lin Fu who had not moved. He went out. In the street he found Sergeant Howell of Homicide in charge of the Chinese boy's murder.

"Make way for the Practitioner of Death," Howell sneered. "What do you know about this, Burr?"

"I did it with my little hatchet," Burr said. "If you want a civil answer, try acting human, if it isn't too much of a strain."

Howell's heavy face turned purple. "You damn money-grubber! We know Simms was murdered because he was working on something. His wife hasn't any idea what it was, but now we know that Chinks are tied up in it in some way. Simms got the business in the same way as this Chink. It's clear you figured it like that and now you're in Chinatown trying to cop the fee he'd been working for. By God, if you get under my feet I'll break you."

"You'll be miles behind me if you follow the trail," Burr snapped.

He strode away in the opposite direction.

The following street was not as deserted. But Burr sensed that the Chinese were going about their business furtively. When he looked at them, their eyes shifted quickly. The only ones at ease were the white people who drifted into Chinese restaurants or peered into the windows of curio shops.

A Chinese girl of about ten was moving

slowly toward him, rattling coins in a collection can and chanting in a shrill voice: "Chinese relief. Please help the Chinese people."

A small man, dressed entirely in white, dropped a quarter into the can. He whispered something to her and she smiled up at him. She was extremely pretty. Burr fumbled in his pocket for change as she spied him and started in his direction.

She never reached him. As she passed close to the doorway of a house, she pitched forward on her face. The hatchet had come so quickly out of the vestibule that Burr hadn't seen it in midair. But he saw it now, buried in the girl's skull. Blood gushed from the hideous wound, flowing over the sidewalk.

The collection can had fallen from her hand and rolled into the gutter. Across the street a white woman screamed.

Burr was already moving toward the vestibule from which the hatchet had been thrown. The door leading into the hall was closed. Gun gripped in his right hand, he turned the knob with his left and kicked the door open.

A narrow, smelly hall stretched in front of him. Daylight streamed in from a partly open door in back of the hall which led to the backyard. And through the back doorway a yellow face momentarily appeared. Then a hand shoved out below the face and a gun roared.

THE bullet came nowhere near Burr. He snapped a quick shot at the face, but not before the door had slammed. His slug smashed through the door panel.

Burr started forward in pursuit, then stopped as a warning click in his mind told him of a possible trap. He continued toward the rear of the hall again, going more carefully now, until he reached the back of the staircase. A man was standing there, a hatchet raised above his head.

Burr shot from his hip. He pumped three

bullets in a row to make sure, then leaped toward the back door. There was nobody in the littered backyard which was enclosed by a high board fence.

His eyes stopped at a sugar barrel which stood against the fence. He clambered up on it, saw a pair of broad shoulders dropping over the fence of the next yard. Quickly he shot at the shoulders. A man screamed in agony; the shoulders dropped from sight.

Burr jumped into the next yard, pulled himself up on the opposite fence. The third yard was empty. The wounded man couldn't have kept climbing fences; he hadn't the time and his bullet-torn shoulder wouldn't let him. He must have run into the back door of the third house.

Although wounded, the Chinese was armed and could pick Burr off in these dimly lit halls. Burr went through all the halls of the house and finally reached the roof without coming across anybody. When he had fired his gun in the backyard, no heads had poked out of windows as they would have in any white community. And this house, in which nearly a hundred people lived, seemed a house of the dead. No sound, no audible hint of life, reached him. And yet he was conscious of human beings huddling in terror in their apartments. In one of them was the killer.

Looking down from the roof, he saw the street crowded with cops. They'd been only a block away when the girl had been murdered. Burr went to the back of the roof and saw other cops and plainclothesmen scampering about in the backyards. He attracted their attention and necks craned up toward him.

"I got one of them in the shoulder," he called down. "He's in this house or an adjoining one. He's Chinese, a big fellow."

"We'll block off the street," a detective shouted back.

Burr realized that he couldn't do any

more. The rest was up to organized police routine. He went down to the street.

The body of the pretty little Chinese girl lay where it had fallen, covered now with a shawl. Burr's facial muscles tightened.

Sergeant Howell was patiently listening to the little man in white linen who had dropped a coin into the girl's collection can just before the murderer had struck.

"THERE'S the man I was telling you about," the little man said, nodding toward Burr. "She was going toward him when she fell with that horrible hatchet in her skull. He rushed into the hall and then I heard shots."

"Burr," Howell growled. "I thought so when I heard that the beggar who killed this girl was dead in the hall with a couple of slugs in him."

"Ethan Burr?" the little man said. "The one they call the Practitioner of Death?" He thrust out his hand. "Permit me to congratulate you. I'm S. Hartley Kern, the attorney. You may have heard of me."

Burr said to Howell: "I winged the second one. Your men are combing the block for him now."

"These damn Chinks and their damn hatchets!" Howell raged. "And now they go slaughtering little girls!"

"The hatchet man was white," said Burr dryly. "The other one was Chinese, but he carried a gun."

Howell gulped. "White? Did you get a good look at him?"

"Good enough. Did you?"

"I was questioning witnesses," Howell said. "Come on."

Howell and Burr went into the hall. A couple of detectives were standing over the man Burr had killed. They had turned him over on his back. A brutal, unshaven white face looked up at them.

"Let's hear your version, Burr," How-

ell said. His attitude was truculent.

"I'm sure they knew I was coming down the street," Burr told him. "They killed the girl in front of my eyes because they knew I'd go chasing into the hall after them. The white man hid behind this staircase with another hatchet ready to lay my head open when I rushed past. The Chinese was stationed at the door to draw me on. They weren't eager to trade shots with me, and a hatchet can be more certain at close quarters.

"I suspected the trap when the Chinese let me see him and when he shot so quickly that there wasn't any possibility of hitting me. He didn't have to take the chance of aiming more carefully because he figured this lad would be sure to get me. He would have, too, if the whole thing hadn't struck me as having been a perfect set-up for a trap."

Howell's eyes bulged a little. "You mean to say they killed that girl just to draw you into a trap?"

"I doubt it," Burr said. "They wanted to kill the girl anyway. If their scheme had worked, they would have killed two birds with one gesture."

"But why?" Howell asked. "What could anybody have against a little girl like that?"

Burr packed tobacco into his pipe and lit it. "I don't know," he said slowly, watching the smoke float in the sunlight which streamed in through the open back door. "But I intend to find out."

CHAPTER THREE

Garroted!

POLICE kept pouring into the district. For a while Burr followed them around as they searched for the wounded man and questioned the inhabitants of the airless hovels.

The Chinese simply stared at their questioners with the bewildered, hopeless expression Burr had seen on the faces

of Chinese peasants after a flood or famine or the passing of the Japanese war machine. They shook their heads and repeated dully in English, or through interpreters, that they had seen no wounded man, that they did not know why anybody should want to kill a Chinese young man and little girl and a white detective.

Some of them must have been lying. All of them were scared.

A detective plucked Burr's sleeve. "Captain Rowland wants to see you downstairs."

The chief of the Homicide Bureau was a big man with a florid face from which jowls sagged like empty bags. He was savagely chewing on a cigar as he stood on the sidewalk listening to Sergeant Howell.

"Here's Burr," Captain Rowland said. He poked a pudgy finger into Burr's chest. "Look here, Howell tells me that the Chinaman and the one you plugged laid a trap for you. There's only one reason why they'd want you out of the way and that's because they thought you were onto something hot. What is it?"

"They flattered me. I'm as much in the dark as you are."

Rowland thrust out his jaw. "Want me to believe that? You're playing a lone hand, as usual, so that you can cop a fee. And what brought you into Chinatown?"

"George Simms was a friend of mine," Burr said.

"Huh!" Rowland hooted. "How'd you know Chinamen were involved?"

"From a talk with him yesterday. He didn't say another thing about the case."

"You're lying, Burr!"

Burr shrugged. Not lying as much as Rowland believed. He had simply failed to mention that he was after a reward.

"Here's what I know," he said. "You're wasting your time looking for the wounded Chinese. It's plain that he got away. Even if you caught him, he wouldn't talk.

There's nothing you can do to make a Chinese talk when he doesn't want to. And he's not important anyway. He's only small fry. It's the head of the outfit you want to get after."

"Outfit?" Captain Rowland said. "What outfit?"

"I don't know. But obviously there's some sort of an organization. The deaths of Simms and the Chinese lad and the girl are related. We know why Simms was killed—because he was getting too close to something."

"And I suppose the little girl was a member of the rival gang?" Rowland sneered.

"She has to fit in somewhere," Burr said quietly. He had an idea, but he wasn't telling Rowland until he was sure. "Now go ahead and solve your own case."

He turned on his heels and strode away. Twilight seeped softly down into the narrow street.

"MR. BURR," a voice called and a hand gripped his arm.

He turned to look into the lovely face of Zelda Simms.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I read in the afternoon paper how that sack containing the poor Chinese boy was dropped almost on you. And now I heard how a little girl was also murdered and you were almost killed." Her hand tightened on his arm. "I know that you're doing this for my sister-in-law and my niece and myself. Please drop it. We don't want the money if it means endangering your life."

He said, "Look, sister, you said you'd heard about me. You must have heard that I don't care for anything but money. Danger is my business, and I'm after my half of the fee. The other half will be turned over to your sister-in-law. She's legally entitled to it."

"Oh." She shrank away from him.

She had come here to plead with him to drop the case, but his hard, mercenary manner filled her with contempt. He could see it in the firm set of her mouth. He felt almost sorry he had taken this easy way to get her to return home.

"I'm sorry I bothered you," she said stiffly. "I shall demand an accounting of every cent to be divided evenly between you and my sister-in-law."

"Sure," Burr said. "Now be a good girl and run home."

He watched her tall, attractive form moving down the street. Later he would have to find some way of getting back into her good graces. He realized, suddenly, that he felt it very important that she think well of him.

Burr climbed up two flights of narrow stairs to see Sam Ming's office. The outer office was furnished in the most modern and efficient manner. None of the dozen or so Chinese employees who had been in the office earlier were there. It was long past working hours. The only occupant was Lin Fu, whose roly-poly body was hunched over a Chinese newspaper.

He bounced up to his feet at Burr's entrance. "Unfortunate events are occurring in our wretched community," Lin Fu said. "I assume you wish to see my honored employer. He is in his office contemplating the tragedy of our people."

"I suppose you got that line of lingo out of a book," Burr observed admiringly.

"Please?" Lin Fu frowned.

"Skip it," Burr said, going to a door on the far side of the room.

He pushed open the door. There was no light in the office. In the dimness of what remaining light came in through the windows he saw Sam Ming slumped over on his desk.

Burr jumped forward, lifted the head of the Chinese. Sam Ming was dead. A thin circle of indented skin ran completely around his neck where a silken noose had been drawn tight.

"Lin Fu!" Burr called, his voice hard.

The fat secretary appeared in the doorway. A cry gurgled in his throat. He waddled to the desk in the closest thing he would ever come to a run.

"Slain!" Lin Fu exclaimed. "Garroted!"

"Yeah," Burr said. "Who was in here since you last saw him alive?"

"Nobody. About an hour ago Sam Ming expressed a wish to be alone. I dismissed the employees for the day, then picked up the paper and read."

BURR went to the window. "No fire-escape on this side of the building," he mused. "A man could climb down from the floor above, but not with all those cops in the street. The only entrance to this room was through the outer office in which you say you were sitting all the time."

Lin Fu blanched. "My dear sir, surely you do not suspect that I—" He broke off. "Now I recall. For the space of sixty seconds—surely no more—I stepped into the washroom."

Burr said, "Sam Ming must have seen his murderer come through the door. He would have made an outcry, put up some sort of struggle. On the contrary, he gave the murderer a chance to step behind him while he sat at the desk and slip the noose over his head. That means he knew and trusted the murderer."

Lin Fu swallowed hard. "Willingly would I have laid down my life for him." His eyes, sunk in layers of fat, swept about the room. "Perhaps the slayer is still in this room. I returned too soon to allow him an opportunity to escape."

There was a closet in the room. Burr pulled out his gun and went to it. "Pray that he's here," he told Lin Fu, "or you'll have to make up another yarn."

He opened the door. As he had expected, nobody was in the closet.

Then Lin Fu screamed. Burr spun

around and glimpsed a dark form bolting out from behind a row of letter files. The shape smashed into Lin Fu, knocking him down, and Burr had to hold his fire for fear of hitting the fat Chinese. A moment later the shape was through the door.

Burr stepped around Lin Fu. In the outer office he saw a slim Chinese scampering between the desks toward the hall door.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" Burr ordered.

The man kept running. Burr had enough time to put a bullet precisely where he wanted it. Just as the Chinese reached the door Burr squeezed the trigger. The man's leg gave way under him, but he continued to throw his body forward, groping up for the doorknob.

Burr ran over to him and dug his fingers in his crop of thick black hair.

"Relax," he said. "You won't get far with a .44 slug in your leg." He turned the man over on his back. Malevolent black eyes glared up at him.

"Lai Soong!" Lin Fu exclaimed.

"You know him?"

Lin Fu was wringing his hands like a frantic woman. "He was one of our most trusted employees." He stood over Lai Soong and hurled a stream of Cantonese invectives at him.

"Why did you kill Sam Ming?" Burr asked.

Lai Soong closed his eyes and pressed his lips firmly together. Burr knew that nothing could make him talk. He stood up.

"Now what's it all about?" he asked Lin Fu. "You know as well as I that this fellow didn't kill Sam Ming on his own hook. He's got somebody over him. Do you want the real killer of your boss punished?"

Lin Fu tugged at one fleshy cheek. "With the honored Sam Ming gone to join his ancestors, I am in command. Yet the responsibility is too great."

"Do you want these killings to go on?"

Burr repeated. His tones were harsh.

Lin Fu took a deep breath and straightened up. "Yes, I will assume the responsibility. Perhaps you can succeed where George Simms failed. Apprehend the murderers, Ethan Burr, and you will be paid well."

"Five thousand dollars."

"It is high, but we can afford it."

"Now give me the low-down," Burr said.

Lin Fu shook his head. "That I cannot do. First, because I do not know the identity of these creatures of infinite evil. Second, because publicity will nullify our laudable work. I must request, as part of our bargain, that you withhold from the newspapers, and even the police, any knowledge you may gather concerning your venture."

Burr studied Lin Fu keenly. "I think I'm pretty close to knowing what it's all about. From your point of view I guess you're right."

Feet padded in the hall outside. The door flew open and Sergeant Howell and

a couple of plainclothesmen rushed in.

"One of my men said he heard a shot coming from—" Howell broke off and gaped down at Lai Soong who lay flat on his back, his eyes still closed, no sign on his face of the pain he must be suffering from his wound. "What's the matter with him?"

"One of my bullets is in his leg," Burr said. "He just murdered Sam Ming. I saved him for you even though he won't talk."

"My God!" Howell cried. He strode toward Sam Ming's office.

CHAPTER FOUR

Invitation to Hell

AN HOUR later Ethan Burr, after having eaten an elaborate Chinese dinner, left the restaurant drawing languidly on his pipe. A man clad entirely in white hurried across the street toward him.

"You remember me, Mr. Burr? S. Hartley Kern. I was an eyewitness to the



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brutal murder of the little Chinese girl."

"Well?" Burr said.

S. Hartley Kern bit off the end of a slender cigar. "I was deeply shocked by the murder, Mr. Burr. For hours I have watched the police milling about without any signs of coming nearer a solution. I know your reputation, and I have supreme confidence in your ability. While I am not a rich man, I am willing to pay to have the murder of that poor girl solved. Some of my best friends are Chinese. I admire not only their food and their intelligence, but also—"

"Are you trying to hire me?" Burr broke in.

"Exactly. I will pay you two thousand dollars if you capture those responsible for the death of the girl. I realize that they are also responsible for other murders, but I am not concerned with that. Seeing that girl so brutally—"

"It's a deal," Burr interrupted again.

He pulled a notebook and pencil from his pocket and drew up a contract. "This will require two witnesses," he told Kern. "I think we'll find them in here."

He led Kern into the restaurant he had just left. The Chinese proprietor who stood behind the cash register, and one of the waiters, solemnly read the contract and affixed their names. Burr watched them closely, but their faces told him nothing.

That, Burr told himself as he stuck the contract in his wallet, made his third client on the same case—if he included George Simms' family; and it was for them he was really working.

"I'll be around for your money tomorrow, Mr. Kern," he said. "I'm prepared to make arrests within an hour. There might be some casualties. Our contract, you notice, specified that the leader of the culprits be captured, dead or alive."

Everybody in the restaurant heard him. He wanted to be heard.

S. Hartley Kern smiled benignly.

"Knowing your reputation, I hardly think there will be anything but corpses."

Outside the restaurant a Chinese boy of seven or eight was waiting for Burr. He thrust a sheet of paper into Burr's hand and scampered away.

The note was written in small capitals with a brush. It read:

This message will be your first intimation that Zelda Simms never reached her home. We are prepared to enter into an agreement with you in return for her release. If we can come to terms, she will be handed over to you unharmed. If you ignore this note, Zelda Simms will be made extremely uncomfortable. Come alone to 17 Elm Street.

There was no signature. None was necessary.

"A message concerning the case?" S. Hartley Kern breathed at Burr's side.

Burr crumpled the note and shoved it into his pocket. "It's personal," he murmured. "Very personal."

He walked over to a cigar store down the block and glanced through the city directory. Then he stepped into the phone booth. Mrs. Simms, her voice thin and weary, answered.

No, Zelda Simms was not at home. She had left the house several hours ago, and although she had said she would be home for supper, she had not yet returned. Mrs. Simms was obviously worried.

BURR'S eyes were chips of gray-blue ice as he dialed police headquarters. He asked for Lieutenant Wade Kirk of Homicide.

"Burr?" Kirk's voice presently came excitedly over the wire. "Say, you're having quite a time for yourself in Chinatown. Sorry it's out of my district."

"So am I. Listen, there are plenty of cops outside in the street, including Captain Rowland, but I don't want to be seen talking to any of them. Can you relay a message to Rowland?"

"Let's have it."

Burr read the contents of the note he had just received.

Kirk laughed derisively. "That's the most childish kind of trap I've ever heard of."

"Sure. But maybe Zelda Simms is really at that address."

"They're not that dumb."

"Probably not," Burr agreed. "But why hand me the message? And why abduct Zelda Simms if the killers don't intend to use her as bait? There's a chance that a quick raid on 17 Elm Street might net something."

"Okay," Kirk said. "Good hunting."

Burr remained in the booth making social calls to acquaintances in order to kill time. He had an idea that he was being watched. Ten minutes passed. Then through the store window, he saw sudden activity in the street, and he left the phone booth.

All the police who had flocked into Chinatown converged simultaneously on 17 Elm Street. The note had given, simply, an address. Actually it was a four-story tenement building with a fish store in the basement. The raid was so sudden and thorough that hardly a fly could have escaped.

After twenty minutes the police were convinced that Zelda Simms was not in the building. They had searched every square inch, had lined up scores of terrified Chinese.

Burr leaned against a lamp-post, sucking abstractedly on a dead pipe. There were weary lines about his eyes and mouth. The scar on his cheek seemed to be throbbing with subdued fury. He did not stir as Captain Rowland strode up to him.

"Let's see that note you said you received," Rowland demanded savagely.

Burr handed it to him. The captain read quickly and scowled.

"Since when do you go to the police with information?" Rowland barked. "I

have a notion you knew it was a gag."

"There's a girl with whose life I don't want to take any chances," Burr replied quietly.

"And you took a phoney note like this seriously? Don't tell me that you've gone soft in the head."

"The note didn't say the girl would be here," Burr answered. "It said that I should come here. I didn't because I thought there might be more possibility of getting her back alive through a sudden raid. I'm afraid I was wrong."

"I'll say you were," Rowland growled.

The police drifted away. Burr stayed there, leaning against the lamp-post, puffing stolidly on his pipe. Perhaps Zelda Simms had been killed before the note had been sent, or perhaps she had been killed after the raid. Any minute her lovely body might be found in a gunny sack—if nothing worse than that had been done to her.

HOURS passed. The police were slowly leaving the neighborhood. Stores were closing for the night. Lights blinked out in the windows. And still Ethan Burr remained there like a graven figure. Once he ran out of tobacco and went to the cigar store for a fresh package and returned to the lamp-post.

Then Burr saw the Chinese boy who had handed him the message turn the corner and come running toward him. The boy thrust another slip of paper at Burr and hurried off.

The second note read:

As we had expected you to communicate with the police and so were prepared, we are not as angry as we might otherwise have been. Zelda Simms remains unharmed—until ten minutes after you have received this message. It will take you half this time to reach 256 Market Place. Enter the curio shop. If you do not go there directly, or if you stop to make a phone call or exchange a single word with anybody, the place will be empty when you arrive, and you will never again see Zelda Simms—alive.

Burr nodded glumly. This was what he had been waiting for. He started to walk casually toward Market Place. It might not be a trap. There was a good chance that the writer of the notes really wanted to deal with him. There was no doubt in Burr's mind that the terms would be impossible for him to meet, but of the most immediate importance was for him to reach Zelda Simms.

The window of the curio shop at 256 Market Place was filled with the usual teakwood Gods of Happiness and Buddhas and back scratchers and photos of Chinese movie stars. Reed blinds in back of the window and the door prevented him from seeing into the store. The place seemed dark.

He tried the door with his left hand. It opened. A spring swung the door shut behind him; he heard the click of a snap-lock. His gun dropped into his right hand.

The large store, filled with Chinese curios and bric-a-brac, was empty. A bulb dangling over the counter seemed to have hardly the power of a candle. Burr stood motionless, tense, his eyes roving. His gun jerked up as, near one row of shelves, he saw a shadow which was the size and shape of a man.

Then he laughed soundlessly to himself and moved over to the thing. It looked like a fossil of what might have been a dragon. From each side of its spine jutted six curved appendages. A heavy chain hanging from the ceiling held it upright. Obviously it was no real fossil, but cleverly constructed of steel.

Burr hadn't taken more than a couple of seconds to look at it. He turned away from it, looking for a door to the rear of the store. He found it next to the end of the counter and took a single step toward it.

Then he heard a scraping sound behind him and started to swing around. Something long and hard hit his side. The chain

rattled and, before he could make a move, twelve steel, skeleton-like arms wound themselves about him. He lurched forward, twisting, but almost at once he knew that he was hopelessly caught.

The dragon had swung against him and its steel arms had imprisoned him in a relentless, crushing embrace.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Lair of the Dragon

FEET scraped behind Ethan Burr. Glancing down, he saw a yellow hand reaching from behind the dragon. He squirmed, tried to swing his gun toward the hand. A sharp blow struck his wrist, numbing his arm all the way up to the shoulder. Then the hand snatched the gun away from him. A harsh voice laughed in his ear.

The laugh was echoed by another in the rear of the store. Then there were several long minutes of silence. Burr ceased his struggle to free himself from the gripping arms of the dragon. He knew when he was licked; it was futile to waste energy.

A scream for help might be heard in the street, but it would mean instant death. And it was doubtful if much attention would be paid to a scream. He waited. There was nothing else that he could do.

Presently the door near the end of the counter opened and a small man in white linens stepped into the front section of the shop.

Burr's thin lips curled. "S. Hartley Kern! I thought it might be you. You were entirely too solicitous about the death of that little Chinese girl. You would have known that your interest would endanger your life, and I tabbed you as the kind of person who wouldn't take any needless risk for a principle."

S. Hartley Kern smiled and said: "I suppose you realize that I could have had



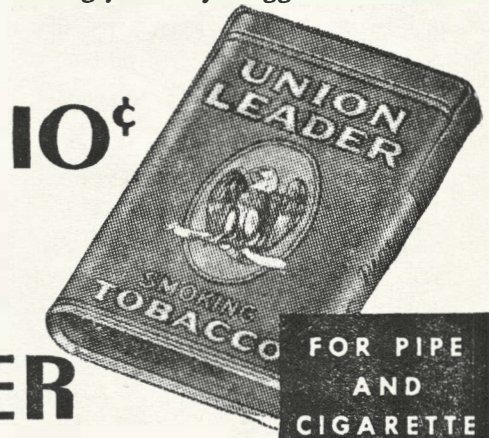
Just one thing comes between 'em!

So often you see Dad and Son helping themselves from the same big red tin of Union Leader. Dad tamping it into his pipe. Son rolling it into crisp, fresh cigarettes.

Dad's tried 'em all—but for sheer, down-right mellowness and soul-satisfying flavor, he always comes back to Union Leader's hill-grown Kentucky Burley! Son, though he's new to smoking, likes the bland mildness and freedom from bite that are due to Union Leader's long-aging and special processing.

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you killed a few minutes ago. You are completely at my mercy. Yet I do not mock the dreaded Practitioner of Death over his plight. I salute you for your courage. I admire you. It required a great deal of nerve for you to come here alone into the very jaws of death."

"Wouldn't it be funny if I collected two thousand dollars from your estate for killing you?" Burr said. "I believe I could, legally, by virtue of our written contract."

"Two thousand dollars!" S. Hartley Kern snorted contemptuously. "And that's how you earned your reputation for being in love with fat fees! How would you like to earn five thousand a week, every week, with a substantial bonus at the end of each month?"

"What you're trying to say is that you want to hire me as a professional murderer?"

The little man shrugged. "Why should that disturb you? You have killed many men for money. Here is your chance to get into the real money you seem to want so badly."

"And if I don't accept?"

S. Hartley Kern sighed. "Isn't that a rather unnecessary question?"

Burr straightened up in the grip of the steel arms. His eyes remained emotionless. He said nothing.

"I see you need additional inducement," Kern said.

He clapped his hands. A Chinese stepped into view from behind the dragon. The door in the rear of the shop flew inward and another Chinese came through. Then Burr heard the girl whimper.

Seconds later Zelda Simms appeared in the doorway. Thin wisps of her blouse trailed from her hips; evidently it had been ripped from her when she had put up a fight during her abduction. Her bare shoulders were hunched forward, her arms crossed over her breasts which were covered by a skimpy brassiere. Her tall form was trembling violently, and from

her lips whimpers trickled piteously.

Then she saw Burr and she stopped dead. The whimpers turned to moans.

A VOICE behind her ordered: "Come on, keep moving." A foot lashed out through the doorway and she plunged heavily forward. Before she hit the floor, invisible hands seemed to twist her around and hurled her down. Her mouth was open wide, but no sounds came from it. She rolled on the floor, tearing at her throat.

Burr pounded at the steel arms, cursing harshly. A fourth man, white and gaunt, came into the room. In his hand he held a long silk cord. And then Burr saw that the other end of the cord was tied in a noose about Zelda Simm's neck, which was drawn tight when she had fallen.

The white man left enough slack so that her fingers could tear the noose loose. Then he kicked her again. Coughing and gasping for breath, she stumbled to her feet and stood shivering.

Like a beaten dog on a leash, Burr thought with cold fury. He noticed bruises on her white skin where she had been kicked and beaten.

S. Hartley Kern said, "We have been comparatively merciful to her. I have more or less held my men off. You may have heard that Chinese are masters at refined torture. They would enjoy practicing their art on her."

"Will you release her if I accept your proposition?" Burr demanded.

Kern smiled smugly. "I have gone to a great deal of trouble to get you and the girl here. Possibly, if you accept my offer, the prospect of that much money every week will prevent you from betraying me. Perhaps you plan to accept only long enough to obtain your release. I have too much at stake to take a chance. The girl will be removed to a place which you will never be able to discover. If you betray me or if anything happens to me, the girl will die an extremely un-

pleasant death. I will give you proper assurances that while you live up to your bargain she will receive every comfort. Undoubtedly she must mean a great deal to you or you would not have run so much risk for her."

"Don't!" Zelda Simms wailed. "I'd rather die at once."

"Not at once, my dear," Kern said softly. "My men kill slowly—ever so slowly. And as for Burr—"

He made a motion to one of the Chinese. The man stepped behind Burr and there was the grinding sound of chains turning on a windlass. The twelve arms of the dragon tightened still further, constricting his ribs. He could breathe only with difficulty.

"Let's get this straight," Burr gasped.

Kern waved a hand and the twelve arms relaxed somewhat. Burr drew air into his lungs.

"I know that your racket is concerned with the raising of relief to war-torn China," he said. "That's why the little girl who was going around with a collection can was murdered—as a warning to the organization which had sent her out. Sam Ming was head of the group which was collecting these funds. Whites as well as Chinese are contributing lavishly. You got together a gang of killers, including at least one of Sam Ming's employees, Lai Soong, whom you no doubt bribed, and set about trying to take control of the organization through terrifying those in charge."

BURR'S eyes were hard. "I suppose you began by sending threats. When they were ignored, you went into action. Perhaps you killed one or two whom the police did not hear about. You were in a pretty good position because Sam Ming was anxious that the public did not hear of the bloodshed over the control of the relief organization. It would be too demoralizing. People would not be sure

which was the legitimate organization, and eventually would begin to doubt if any was. Many of the contributions would be withheld.

"You didn't care, because there would still be plenty coming in. But Sam Ming cared. He was devoting himself to sending help to his people. Instead of going to the police, he hired George Simms. You got rid of him. One of your men saw me entering Sam Ming's office. You suspected that Sam Ming had hired me to take George Simm's place, and I flatter myself that that made you nervous. You arranged a trap for me in the hall of a house, at the same time killing that girl. When you failed to get me, you had Lai Soong kill Sam Ming, thinking that would take the heart out of the leadership of the group. Maybe you've succeeded. For all I know, Lin Fu might also be working for you."

S. Hartley Kern chortled. "A man has to be good for me to want to hire him and pay him a fortune. You're good, Burr—not only with a gun but with your head as well. After we have complete control of the China relief organization here, we will branch out into the real gravy in New York and San Francisco. There's no reason why we shouldn't succeed. Haven't many similar organizations been taken over by the rackets? Oh, we'll send some money to China, but a large part of it will go into our own pockets. Yours and mine, Burr. With a man like you in with us, we can't be stopped."

Ethan Burr's mind was racing wildly. He had been in desperate predicaments before, but never in one as apparently hopeless as this. If he accepted Kern's offer, Zelda Simm's would be taken away before he was released and Kern would make sure that he did not find her. In addition, he would at once be given a task to perform, probably to kill somebody, and if he did not carry it out, Zelda's fate would be too frightful to think about.

There were long moments of silence. Zelda Simms was looking at Burr with a dull, haunted expression. She stood huddled as if against a storm, her fingers digging into the flesh of her upper arm. The noose was tight about her throat, but it allowed her to breathe. The Chinese who had taken hold of the other end of the cord jerked it every now and then, straightening her up, and his eyes were smouldering embers as they moved over her.

"Well?" Kern snapped impatiently. "Take it or leave it, Burr."

Ethan Burr moved; only his arms, it is true, which were free from the elbows down. But that was enough to permit him to reach the Chinese who had been turning the windlass which constricted the arms of the dragon.

He got his hand on the Chinese's shoulder and yanked him close. He had seen the bulge in the left jacket pocket where the yellow man had put his gun. His free hand dipped for the weapon.

Only a second or two had passed before he felt the hard, comforting stock of his .44 against his palm. The yellow man was shrieking, squirming to break his grip, and his hand held a knife he'd produced from under his gown. Before Burr's eyes flashed a picture of the second Chinese, winding the windlass taut with his left hand, his right jerking at the string around Zelda's neck.

THEN Burr had his gun in his hand. The Chinese slashed with his knife at the same time that Burr's gun came up and crashed against his head. Burr felt the blade glance off his shoulderbone, saw the yellow man sink.

Meanwhile the other Chinese was pulling a gun from somewhere in his clothes. And Burr saw that Kern had his gun out and the white man also had a gun, and he knew that he couldn't get all three of them.

Somewhere glass smashed, but he paid no attention to it. Standing in the grip of the dragon's arms, Burr triggered his gun. Kern went down first, and next the white killer. Kern hadn't had a chance to shoot; the white man had sent one slug into the hideous skeleton head of the dragon.

Then he swung his gun around toward the second Chinese. He found him writhing on the floor, although he knew that he couldn't have shot him. A gun roared, and the wounded man lay still.

Burr looked up with astonished eyes. Lin Fu was waddling into the store. Behind him the glass door was smashed. A contented smile formed a wreath on his fat face. In one pudgy hand he held an enormous pistol.

Abruptly the smile vanished and, with a little cry, Lin Fu heaved his roly-poly body forward in what vaguely resembled a leap. He lowered himself to the floor, and Burr, following him with his eyes, saw him kneel beside Zelda Simms who was once again tearing at the noose about her throat. The man who had held the noose had pulled it tight just before he had gone for his gun.

Lin Fu knocked Zelda's frantic hands out of the way and set to work with his own plump fingers. In almost no time he was pulling the noose over her head. Then he helped her up to her feet.

"There is a compensation for everything," Lin Fu observed. "If that despicable individual had not tightened the noose and pulled you off your feet, you might have been pierced by one of the flying bullets."

"Never mind philosophizing now," Burr said. "Get me out of this hellish contraption."

Lin Fu waddled over to the windlass and turned the chains. As the arms loosened their grip, he explained: "As a humble creature with tremendous responsibility since the lamented death of

my honored employer, Sam Ming, I considered it my duty to keep an observing eye on your activities. For the space of hours I watched you lean against a lamp-post with infinite patience. I followed you to this miserable hovel. The door shut behind you, and I was forced to listen from without. I overheard the boasting of yonder lowest of insects. Perhaps I should have broken in at once, but I had to hear all; for what is the life of one or two compared to the good we can do my unhappy people by sending them what little relief we can afford?"

"You came in just about in time," Burr said, stretching his cramped muscles. "Thanks."

Zelda Simms was rubbing her throat and coughing. When she felt Burr's touch on her arm, she looked up and smiled. Then, without warning, she fainted.

Burr caught her in his arms.

"You will turn over my fee of five thousand to the widow of George Simms," he told Lin Fu. "As a favor to me, you will say that the fee was ten thousand and that the five thousand was her husband's share. You will do this without arousing suspicion?"

Lin Fu bowed his head. "I understand." His eyes widened. "You are content to be satisfied to go without compensation after the magnificent work you have done?"

A ghost of a smile flickered on Burr's lips. He thought of the contract for two thousand dollars, signed by S. Hartley Kern, which was in his pocket. If his lawyer succeeded in collecting the sum, it would be a grand joke. The thought made him chuckle.

Zelda Simms stirred in his arms. He threw a shawl over her and held her close to him as he carried her out to the street. He was still smiling.

THE END

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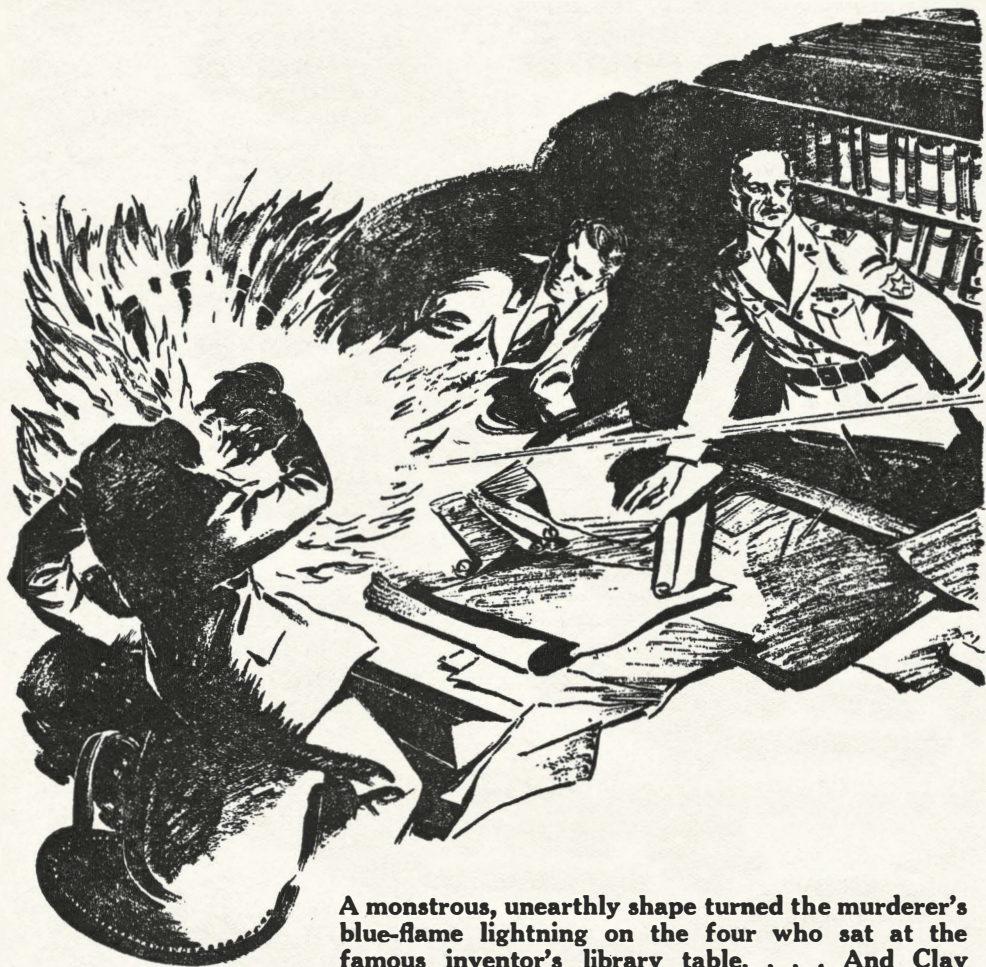
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WORKSHOP OF THE LIGHTNING-MAKER



A monstrous, unearthly shape turned the murderer's blue-flame lightning on the four who sat at the famous inventor's library table. . . . And Clay Breton, the free-lance detective, had to redeem his reputation at reading clues—for the cook had not burned the meat course. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

The Lightning Strikes

DANIEL T. HOLDEN, of Holden Chemicals, Inc., smiled briefly across the library table at the four men seated opposite him. But that movement of his thin lips could not hide the lines of worry in his lean, ascetic features, or the restless light of fear in his tired gray eyes. His glance shifted to the balcony at the end of the room. Behind the

balcony the casement windows, black oblongs only partially hiding the wild night outside, stared back uncompromisingly, even threateningly. His glance returned to his guests.

Lieutenant Carhart, the naval officer, Major Dietart of the army, and the two civilian representatives of the War Department, waited expectantly and uneasily. Their nervousness was born, perhaps, of the howling wind that drove black cloud scuds across the face of a sickly moon and

*A gripping, mystifying novelette of murderers who fell heir to
the mighty tools of science*

By R. S. LERCH



One of the men below began to
scream horrible. . . . The scream
died almost in its inception.

caused the giant elms in the grounds surrounding the big house to sway and groan ; or, more likely, their unease was the result of Holden's suppressed fears, subconsciously communicated to them.

Holden drew a slow breath. He spoke softly, as though fearful that some unseen presence, out in the night, might hear his words.

"Gentlemen, I've requested your presence that I might give you a demonstration—and make you a proposition. It is regrettable that it is such a wicked night out, for it is several miles to our laboratories. But I'm afraid this matter cannot wait. Rumors have spread, and there are agents of at least three foreign countries—"

He checked himself as a silvery tinkle sounded from beside the fireplace. On the mantel edge a tiny oval glowed with red light. A frown gathered on Holden's forehead, and the watching men saw a grayish tinge creep over his features and an intuitive foreboding spring full-grown into his eyes. He arose slowly.

"Gentlemen, the private phone in my study is ringing. If you will excuse me for a few moments . . ."

He walked out of the room as though every step was taken unwillingly, almost hypnotically.

TWO of the four about the table watched him until the closing door hid him from sight. Then Lieutenant Carhart turned to the army officer.

"Major, that man believes he is in deadly peril, is perhaps about to hear tragic news. Yet something stronger than his will makes him go."

Major Dietart shrugged his shoulders. "Let's hope you're wrong—that nothing happens to prevent this demonstration. As he said, there have been rumors, and our Intelligence Department—"

"What's that?" broke in one of the civilians.

A faint, almost imperceptible sound had accompanied a puff of wind from above and behind them. Their glances swung to the balcony And then the lights went out.

The naval officer whispered, "There's movement up there—someone—something"

One of the four suggested, "Holden?"

Another replied, "No, he's upstairs answering the phone."

Their glances shifted. The little red medallion in the center of the fireplace mantel had winked out. Their attention swung back to the balcony, at another vague sound above them.

One of the civilians gasped, "My God!" The major cursed and the naval lieutenant's chair scraped back as his breath was sucked in with swift sibilance.

For at that moment the clouds had drifted away from the high moon, and the window behind the balcony threw oblongs of pale light over those seated at the table below. Outlined by the glow coming through the center window, towering close to the balcony railing, was a black and fearsome form.

It was the form of a man, yet like no man who had ever walked the earth—a giant, nearly seven feet tall, clothed in what looked like a gray, flowing robe. The head, rising like a wedge from the shoulders extended fully two feet above those shoulders. And where there should have been eyes, there were huge squares that glinted evilly when the head moved so the moonlight touched them. The back, too, was misshapen. Three great, cylindrical bunches, like giant cords of muscle, rose to shoulder height.

Then one of the thing's arms, incredibly long and thin, was raised, pointing down at those below. As it pointed, a second form moved up beside the first. By contrast, this being was below normal height and grotesquely hunched. His head was round, and there were no ridges along his back.

The silence that descended upon the room was like the fateful pause between the command of execution and the crack of a firing squad's rifles. Only the short, sharp breathing of one of the men at the table broke the silence.

A voice, terrible in its sepulchral intonations, spoke from the balcony. "It

will be unnecessary for you to leave this room to witness the demonstration. I will present the only proposition you shall receive. This is it."

Before any answer could be made there was a sharp hissing sound, a tiny spark, and a shaft of blue light with a blinding white core leaped from the extended finger of the monster above. One of the men below began to scream horribly. . . . The scream died almost in its inception.

DANIEL T. HOLDEN, after he left the room, ascended the staircase to his second floor study, one slow step at a time. It was almost as though some premonition of disaster tried to hold him back. The urgency of learning what this message over his private line was, pulled with only slightly greater force.

He entered the little study. The phone was ringing in a series of short spurts now, and each spurt seemed to stab him with physical pain. He moved faster, to stop that ringing. Half collapsing into his swivel chair behind the desk, he hesitated a second, then picked up the instrument.

"Yes?" It was little more than a whisper of sound.

The voice over the wire was a low monotone without shading. The words were given added menace by the very lack of expression in the dead voice.

"Daniel Holden, your daughter has eluded my watchman and has gone for help. Whether it was at your instigation or of her own accord makes no difference. When she returns, if she brings assistance, you will immediately refuse to accept it. Very shortly you will be contacted regarding my final demands. Until that time, cease all negotiations, seek no help or advice, and give no information. Lest you doubt my ability to perform, it is necessary that you receive an object lesson. *Return—to—your—guests.*"

Only in the last four words was the measured cadence of the speech changed.

Where the first part was uniformly deliberate, the last four words were spoken separately and distinctly, with a definite pause between each of them, as if each word in itself was a complete command.

"Who is this?" Unconsciously, Daniel Holden spaced his words like those of the unknown at the other end of the wire.

There was no reply, only a perceptible pause. A soft "click" came to Holden, and the phone was dead.

He replaced the instrument in its cradle. For several long seconds he stared at it, without movement or change of expression. Then he straightened with a jerk. A thin thread of sound, almost undetectable in the big house, rasped his raw nerves. It stopped as suddenly as it had started, and only then did Holden recognize it as a human voice raised to falsetto heights in an agonized scream. Those four last words, "Return to your guests," came back to him with startling clarity.

Then, knowing instinctively that tragedy had already struck, he forced himself out of his trance of terror. Yanking open a desk drawer and securing a little automatic pistol, he left the room hurriedly, but with careful and stealthy strides. At the top of the stairs he halted, listening intently. No sound of any kind could be heard within the house. The wind, howling around the outside walls and shrieking impotently at the eaves, drowned whatever other noises there might have been in the closed library.

Holden started his descent of the stairs with grim purposefulness. His features were now set in lines of determination. Physical fear had been forced out of his thoughts. Keyed to expect anything, to meet any horror, and to fight with the desperate courage of a man already doomed, he moved swiftly.

Within a dozen steps of the bottom he halted suddenly, crouched, so tense that his muscles ached. The sound of a key turning the latch of the front door, in the

vestibule beyond the hall below, had come up to him. The door opened and closed and he could hear someone entering.

He shrank against the wall at his left, thumbing down the safety of the automatic. The door between the hall and the vestibule swung back and a form appeared in the opening. He raised and trained the automatic, carefully taking up the slack in the trigger.

CHAPTER TWO

Burned Meat

CLAY BRETON remained motionless behind his desk, his square-built torso overflowing the deep wide chair he sat in. His left arm extended beneath the edge of the desk, concealing the empty sleeve; the arm had been amputated four inches below the elbow. His square features and expressionless blue eyes rested on his visitor.

The girl's fingers kept snapping and unsnapping the catch of her purse, while she stared down at it. Finally she seemed to have reached a decision. She looked up, straight into the blue eyes regarding her. Those eyes seemed to give her strength, for little of the nervousness evidenced in her restless fingers appeared in her clear young voice.

"Mr. Breton, I've come to you about father. I'm Gail Holden, and father is the president and founder of Holden Chemicals, Incorporated."

She paused, as a quickening interest appeared in the steady blue eyes across the desk. But Breton made no comment.

Finally she continued. "He does not know I've come, and I don't know if what I have to say can interest you, for I've nothing tangible to present. It's more a feeling, an opinion formed by watching father, than anything else. Yet I feel—I *know*—he's in danger. I think he knows it, too, but he won't admit anything. It's come over him during the last week, ever

since they've finished with those experiments at the laboratories."

"Gas?"

The girl appeared startled as the single word came from the man she had begun to think must be a sphinx, so silent and motionless had he been. She nodded her head quickly.

"How—how did you know? It was supposed to be a secret," she half whispered.

"I hear many things," Breton returned quietly. "Go on."

"I spoke of my suspicions to Mr. Bannister, and to Keith and Tanner, too. But they only laughed at me. They said it was overwork that made my father so nervous."

"They are with the company?"

"Yes. They are father's partners. Or, rather, they are the largest stockholders, aside from dad, and they are pretty active in the company. Coming to see you was my own idea and I've mentioned it to no one. But I couldn't quite make up my mind to come—not until tonight."

Again she paused. Breton continued to wait silently.

"Then, while dad had company in the library, I slipped out the back way."

"What company?"

She shook her head. "I didn't catch their names, but I heard one called 'Major' and another 'Lieutenant'."

"Americans?"

"Yes, I'm sure they were. Anyway, in spite of the bad weather, I decided against using my car, since I could not leave quietly with it. Before I left the house, I called for a taxi to meet me a block away. Maybe it was the wild night, or just my imagination, but I sensed danger when I got outside. Then I saw the man, a little man with a scarred, rat-like face. He'd apparently been watching the house from the garage. When he saw me he started toward me. I ran back, but didn't quite reach the door before he caught me.

Scarcely knowing what I did, I snatched up an empty milk bottle on the stoop and swung it. It caught him on the head and he went down. I ran again, and this time another man, a short, heavy man, a man like a—toad, followed me. But I out-distanced him."

"Did the little man you knocked unconscious have one ear missing?"

GAIL HOLDEN looked at him in astonishment. She nodded vigorously. "Yes that was it."

"Sneeve, a born sneak. And his partner was Toad Divini, for hire to anyone who wants dirty work done, the dirtier the better. That all?"

The girl shook her head. "Not quite. While I ran I looked back at the house and over the grounds. Out under the trees I saw a monstrous tall shape stalking toward the house. Maybe it was the poor light and the wind, but he seemed to be wearing a sort of robe that whipped around him, and his head was a huge, wedge-shaped thing. He looked like an apparition from some other world. And then, crouched near a window of the library was another man. I remember him better, because for an instant the full light from the room shone on his face as someone pulled back the drapes to look out. He was an Oriental, a Japanese or Chinese, I'm sure of that. And that's about all. I found the taxi waiting for me, and came directly here. And now, won't you come back with me? Won't you try to make father see that he needs your help, that he—"

"I will," Breton snapped, and arose.

The girl almost failed to suppress her gasp of surprise. Huge as his torso was, and broad as his shoulders were, Clay Breton was little more than five feet tall. He was not deformed, except for his amputated forearm, but merely a short man whose work in hardrock as a youth had developed his muscles almost to the point

of abnormality. He stepped from the office into his adjoining apartment for a moment, shrugging out of his office coat with a quick movement.

With the coat off, his shortened left arm was exposed. Over the stump was fitted a broad cuff that ended in a curious metal cup with a steel ball protruding from the center of its convex surface. From a cabinet beside his bed, Clay Breton selected a two-foot leather case. Six curved, heavy spring clips protruded from the open end of this. He hooked the leather case to a specially prepared eye just below the right arm-hole of his vest. When his coat was on, the entire case was concealed.

Returning to the office, he led Gail Holden to the private elevator that appeared when he swung back a wall panel behind his desk. They descended ten stories to the basement garage, and got into his long-hooded coupe.

Approaching the Holden ground, Clay slowed the coupe while his narrowed glance swept the storm-tossed parkland. Nothing moved there now, nor was there evidence of any eavesdropper. He swung into the driveway and parked the car close to the front entrance.

Gail led the way inside. As she stepped into the hall a smothered exclamation drew her attention to the staircase. Half-way to the second floor her father was just pocketing an automatic that had been covering her. Clay Breton entered behind her, and Dan Holden descended the stairs quickly, his features hardening into thin angularity.

"You're the detective, Clay Breton," he challenged.

Breton made no comment.

"I recognize you from newspaper pictures accompanying accounts of your exploits," Holden continued, his high voice rising in pitch. "Well, you've come to the wrong place. I have no need of your services. If, as Gail seems to think, I am in danger, I can face it without help."

HE STOPPED. Breton didn't seem even to be listening. Holden's voice went up another notch. "I just learned that my daughter had gone for help and—and—I'll have none of it." His last words were almost a scream.

Breton's roving glance came back to the old man. "Who told you to refuse my services," he asked in his flat voice.

This time Holden shook his head slowly. He was beginning to crack.

"I—I wish I knew," he said brokenly.

Breton suddenly asked, "Did your cook burn the dinner?"

"Why, no," said Holden, bewilderedly. The girl stared at Breton. She noticed his nostrils were slightly flared. She sniffed the air.

"I get it too, just barely. Burned meat," she whispered.

"Where are your guests?" The question was rapped out almost savagely.

Holden stared at the detective. As the purport of Breton's question registered, his eyes widened and his cheeks went ashen. It was as if, looking beyond the detective, he saw something that was not perceptible to the others.

"Good Lord!" he whispered. "I thought I heard a scream—while I was upstairs."

Suddenly he whirled and went swiftly to the library door. Breton's arm shot out to prevent Gail Holden from following her father. She thought she'd struck a bar of iron when she ran into that arm.

"Wait in the other room, miss, until I take a look." There was undeniable command in the softly spoken words.

He was at Holden's shoulder as the older man opened the door. The lights in the room were on once more. The first impression was of a strengthening of the odor he had detected in the hallway, the second was of a cloud of blue smoke that seemed to hover halfway up toward the high ceiling, and the third was the sudden collapse of Daniel Holden. As the old man sagged against the door frame, Clay

Breton saw what had caused the collapse, and his own intestines seemed to writhe into frozen knots.

The four men who had been Holden's guests still sat around the table. Their arms were stretched out over the table top And the cauterized stumps of their necks gazed into their own faces, held in their own hands on the table before them!

CHAPTER THREE

Death Calls Again

CLAY BRETON stared hard for a long moment, then a low moan caused him to swing around. Gray-haired Daniel Holden had slumped into a chair near the door and was staring with lack-luster eyes at the grúesome sight before him. Breton picked him up and the man made no resistance, uttered no other sound. His mind seemed to have ceased to function. Kicking the door shut behind him, Breton stepped across the hall to a reception room and placed the old man on a couch. Gail Holden was at his side immediately.

"It's just shock," he told the agitated girl. "But you'd better call a doctor. And keep out of the library," he added with hard emphasis.

She was already on her way to the hall phone. He returned to the scene of the tragedy for a more minute examination.

There was little blood, for the arteries appeared to have been seared shut almost immediately. The skulls were discolored by heat and it was apparent that, after death, the bodies had been deliberately placed in the fantastic positions in which they now appeared, the skulls having been snapped from their calcined spinal columns. No other parts of the bodies seemed to have been subjected to mutilation.

One fact puzzled Breton for a time. It was that none of the four victims apparently had put up any resistance, for there

was no disarrangement of clothing, or of the small Oriental rugs dotting the floor. The fact suggested that death had struck with paralyzing suddenness, from a distance, possibly in the dark.

He looked around the room. The electric light switch was by the door. He caught sight of the narrow stairs along the right wall, leading to the balcony. He ascended them and examined the casement windows at the back of the balcony, swung one of them open and looked out on the roof covering the driveway at the side entrance. A ladder lay on the ground below.

Nodding slightly to himself, he turned around. On a table was a spotlight with vari-colored lenses which could be played on the fire. Beside it were two switches. One was closed. He opened it, and the lights in the room went out. Turning them on again, he went to the balcony railing. At three spots the varnish had risen in scorched bubbles.

"Death struck from up here," he murmured to himself.

He descended to the main room. As he turned to leave he suddenly whirled half around, his hand darting beneath the right lapel of his coat.

The action had been instinctive. He had detected movement, a quick flash of reddish light, and there was the musical tinkle of a little bell. Then he saw the ruby medallion flicker at the edge of the mantel above the fireplace. He swung back to the door and entered the hall.

"What's that little light above the fireplace?" he asked Gail, who was seated beside her father, rubbing one of his blue-veined hands and murmuring softly to him.

She looked up, a little startled at his sudden and noiseless appearance.

"Why," she said quickly, "it's a signal that dad's private phone in his upstairs study is ringing. Was there a little bell ringing too?"

Breton nodded. She arose immediately. "Then I'd better go up." She started to leave the room.

Breton's blue eyes narrowed imperceptibly. "Wait," he cried suddenly. "Your father said he had been advised of your visit to me. It must have been over that phone, and he was just returning from the call when we entered. It may be the same party who called before. You'd better let me answer."

She stared wide-eyed at him for a moment, then agreed. "I'll show you," she said, and led the way up the stairs.

THE same toneless voice that had spoken to Holden came over the wire when Breton's short, "Well?" acknowledged that he was ready to listen.

"This is not Daniel Holden. I take it, then, that I am speaking to the investigator, Clay Breton, summoned by his daughter?"

Breton repeated, "Well," in a voice as toneless as that at the other end.

"It is regrettable for him, and for you, that he did not follow orders and refuse your assistance. You have witnessed the results of one of my demonstrations. There will be others. Unless you immediately dissociate yourself with what is none of your affair, you will be one of the subjects. Nor will the demonstration on you be as sudden and comparatively painless as the death visited upon the unfortunate victims in Daniel Holden's library."

A sharp click announced disconnection at the other end.

Throughout the warning Clay Breton had sat with closed eyes, concentrating every atom of his attention on that voice. Though in the most careful monotone, there were still inflections that had reached his sensitive ears. When the conversation was finished he opened his eyes and there was a very faint glow of amusement in them.

"Was it—that man?" Gail whispered as he looked up.

She was leaning on the desk, and there was a suggestion of fear in her eyes.

Breton's stern mouth relaxed in the semblance of a smile. "It was—warning me to drop the case."

"But—but—" she faltered, fearing to put her question into words.

Breton answered it immediately. "Naturally, I don't drop investigations, once I've started them—and certainly not one as absorbing as this. Our friend Sneev has been snooping again, apparently. Reported to his master that I'd come. This call means, of course, that the fiend with the one-tone voice is worried."

A faint touch of relief, and of something that was a trifle more than admiration, came into the girl's eyes. "Thank you," she whispered.

The door bell rang. "It's the doctor. I'll have to answer it," she said immediately. "Father let the servants go for the night, after his—his guests arrived."

As she hurried from the room, Breton relapsed into rapt thought for several moments. At length he arose. The doctor had made a swift examination of his patient and was in the hall with Gail when Breton arrived. He was telling Gail that Holden needed quiet and rest, and that he thought it advisable to remove him to a private hospital.

"And you go along, too, Miss Holden," Breton said quietly. "I'll report to headquarters and take care of that end for you. It'll keep them from questioning you tonight, though they'll want to see you later."

She thanked him and the doctor went to the phone to order the ambulance.

IT WAS nearly midnight before Breton returned to his office, but he did not go immediately to his sleeping quarters behind it. He took from his safe his most confidential file. It contained case histories

and names of some seventy-five espionage agents. Many of them had been given him by his brother, whose secret work for the federal government covered counter-espionage. For over an hour he worked on the file. When he was through he had copied a list of five names and addresses. Then he went to bed.

The following morning he bought a newspaper, but did not glance at it until he had taken a table in a secluded corner of the apartment building's restaurant and had ordered his breakfast. Then he opened it. Screaming headlines told of the tragedy at the Holden home, stated that the police were working on clues left by the killers and expected to make early arrests. It also stated that federal men were on their way from Washington. Then Breton's glance sharpened and it raced along headlines scarcely less spectacular than those covering the Holden case. They told of four more mysterious deaths, deaths by some lethal machine that completely obliterated some portion of the victim's anatomy.

Breton took out the list he had prepared the night before and crossed off three names. The first was that of Anton la Voir. The second was that of his wife. After these names was an address and the notation, "French agents." The third name was that of Atkins Castleton, and following it was noted, "British free-lance." The fourth name of the strangely dead was not on Breton's list. It was that of Arnold L. Keith, vice president of Holden Chemicals, Inc.

Breton now examined his abbreviated list. It contained only two more names: August Schmidt and Oyama Nagoki. He put a slight check after the first name and returned the list to his pocket as the waitress brought his food.

Schmidt, apparently a bachelor, lived in a cottage on the north side. As Breton's coupe drew up to the curb opposite the cottage he noted the parked squad car be-

fore the house. His blue eyes became icy and his heavy jaw seemed to thrust itself forward until it looked like a carved block of granite.

"Too late again," he murmured.

The sergeant in the doorway touched his cap automatically at his appearance.

"Front room, Mr. Breton. Had a hunch those headlines would bring you out. I'm supposed to keep everyone out, but you're not everyone and you're always an exception. It's another one of those damned killings. The town and the whole force are tearing their hair."

Breton nodded and passed into the hallway. From a rear room he could hear a half hysterical woman endeavoring to answer questions. In the front room the M. E. was just completing his examination of what had once been a husky, deep-chested man of about forty. Now all that was left of his chest was a great hole with ragged particles of charred flesh clinging to the edges.

"Killed this morning while he was waiting in here for his housekeeper to cook his breakfast," said the sergeant, who had followed Breton in. "No one saw what happened, and all she heard was a murmur of voices and then what she describes as a sort of 'hissing' noise accompanied by a hoarse cry that stopped almost immediately. She thinks she heard a car drive away as she came running in here. She found Schmidt lying just like you see him now, except that his shirt was smoldering around the edges of the hole."

Breton left almost immediately.

"That leaves only Oyama Nagoki," he murmured, as he stepped on the starter. "And if my hunch is correct that Jap free-lance and his associates are immune." He thought a moment longer and added, "And my second hunch is that Daniel T. Holden will hold the key to this, will probably know the man I want, whether he realizes it or not."

His car shot away from the curb.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Killer's Man

THE doctor who had been called to the Holden home the night before met Clay Breton at the entrance to the private hospital. The place looked like a sumptuous home.

"Following a strong sedative, Mr. Holden spent a rather restful night," the doctor reported. "But I would not stay too long, or excite him over much. I think he does not know of the other murders. It is better not to tell him of them just yet."

Breton asked, "Anyone with him?"

"His daughter, Gail, and his two associates, White Tanner and Theodore Bannister. They, likewise, have been cautioned not to excite him. I'll have to let officers, who are waiting now, speak to him soon, but Miss Gail made me promise to let you talk to him first. Third door to the right, Mr. Breton."

Breton nodded and entered the room quietly. Gail immediately arose from beside the bed. Except for the nervous movements of his fingers on the coverlet, Holden appeared quite rested. Breton smiled down at the stricken man, and that smile changed his whole countenance. Grimness, his rock-like hardness and implacability, were gone. Warmth, assurance, comfort radiated from his face. Holden automatically reacted to the change at once, even smiled faintly.

"Just stopping a moment, Mr. Holden. I merely wanted to ask one question—if you've thought of any possible clue you did not recount last night. It might be helpful, though the way matters have progressed it may not be necessary. You're not to worry, you know. I'll clear up the whole thing before you leave this bed. I can promise that."

The gray-haired man moved his head a little. "I've been talking to my partners.

They have ideas which might help, if Gail will—”

She immediately introduced Clay Breton to the two men. White S. Tanner, the treasurer of the company, was a man of Holden's age, tall and spare, with features almost as rugged as Breton's own. His eyes were a cold, calculating gray, and his words when he spoke were clipped as short as his gray mustache. Theodore Bannister, the corporation's secretary, was a little wisp of a man with bird-like movements and bright, restless, black eyes. He acknowledged the introduction with a quick bob of his head and a high-pitched, "Very glad Miss Gale had the good sense to engage you. Wish she'd done it sooner."

Breton took a chair and faced the two. "And now for the ideas that Mr. Holden mentioned," he suggested calmly.

Tanner straightened his cadaverous frame a little, and took the lead. "Nearly a month ago I discharged our chief chemist, Peter Darval. He was a fine research chemist and was the one whose experiments pointed the way to our present product, but he couldn't keep his mouth shut when he'd been drinking—and he drank too much. With something of such monumental possibilities about to be worked out, he was a dangerous man to keep. He was a dark, secretive, and I'm afraid, a thoroughly vindictive man. He swore we'd regret letting him out, though we paid him six months' salary and a bonus."

Breton nodded and turned to Bannister. The little man returned the nod and continued in his piping voice. "There's that possibility, of course, though I do not think Darval was vicious enough to have perpetrated these murders. Miss Gale mentioned seeing someone she took to be an Oriental looking in the window last night. It occurs to me that some Far Eastern nation, wishing to insure possession of the rights of our product by removing possible competitors, is behind

these killings. Possibly they've employed Darval, though that's pure guesswork."

Breton signified he understood, but asked, "How about—" and then he hesitated, glancing quickly at Holden. The president's mouth had become grim.

"Bannister told me—about Keith," Holden said. "Breton, you've got to—" He checked himself as his voice began to rise. Gail put a cool hand over his mouth.

Breton turned to Bannister. "How about Keith?"

The little man said immediately, "Like us, he was a hundred percent American, though more vociferous about it. The Orientals would see in him an even greater menace to their plans than they would in other foreign agents."

Breton arose. "But—but, what have you—accomplished?" Bannister asked, at the abrupt termination of the interview.

The squat detective thought a moment, then replied, "I've several leads now. I've some facts in my files I'll have to check over. And I'll have to find the men who tried to prevent Miss Holden coming to me. I know those men, or rather know of them. I'll find them—and when I do they'll talk."

CLAY BRETON entered his office, walked quickly to his stack of files and removed a folder.

"If you're lookin' up me, I c'n give you th' dope, first hand."

He whirled, dropping the folder on his desk. In the doorway to his apartment stood the gross figure of Toad Divini, his thick lips stretched wide in a repulsive grin, his warty, saddle-colored, fat face aglow with oily satisfaction. One heavy hand held a .45 automatic, low and steady, its muzzle centered on Breton's broad chest.

"Get that right hand up—quick. Th' other don't matter," came the order in a hoarse croak.

Breton's right hand was raised above his head. His left arm did not move; it remained as it habitually was, with the stump concealed beneath the right lapel of his coat. There was no change in his features other than a steely tint appearing in his blue eyes. He took three steps toward Divini.

"That's far enough, punk," Divini growled.

Breton halted, waiting, his face expressing nothing, his muscles beneath his clothing tense, poised, waiting the command of his brain to snap into action. The grin returned to Divini's wide mouth.

"Yuh interested in my work, eh, heel? Nice, what you might call an artistic job I did with them stiffs in th' library last night. Huh? Well, I'm goin' to do an even funnier job on you, a job this lousy burg'll talk about f'r th' next year. Turn around, and keep that right hand in plain sight. We're goin' for a little ride."

Breton turned slowly—and then he turned back—but the second movement was so flashingly swift that his body seemed only an indistinct blur. There was an audible "click" beneath his coat and the abbreviated left arm whipped around. Attached firmly by the steel clips to the ball joint of the collar around the stump was a two-foot thin steel blade. It winked, clicked against steel, and the automatic that had been in Divini's hand spun to the floor before the killer could take up the slack in the trigger.

Again the blade flicked forward. It was not flashing white when it came back; it was crimson. Divini cursed, and his right hand slapped at his shoulder and stayed there. He started to dive for the gun and the blade leaped to meet him. A bloody score appeared along the cheek and across the protuberant nose. Divini drew back with a yell.

And then Breton whirled. But the sound had come too late. He saw the little Sneeve with the sap in his hand. Breton

ducked instinctively, but the leather-covered lead struck his temple a glancing blow. He bent at the knees and his left arm whipped upward, more by instinct than by calculated design. Sneeve screamed as ten inches of steel slid along his upper arm. The blade came out and Sneeve whirled and ran for the door.

Breton turned toward Divini. This movement, too, was instinctive. The room was whirling. He took a step toward a blurred shape at his left. The door slammed, and running feet came to him dimly from beyond it. Then their sound died as unconsciousness supervened. He did not feel the jar when his big body hit the floor.

A PERSISTENT buzzing sounded in his ear. It did not go away. He lay still, with his eyes closed, thinking about it, wondering what it was, while consciousness was returning with increasing speed. He remembered now what had happened. The buzzing became louder, became a strident, compelling ringing. Then he realized it was the phone on the desk above him.

Slowly he got to his knees, fighting the pounding, throbbing hammer working on the side of his head. From his knees he reached and dragged his chair forward, and climbed upward, slid into it, and lifted the receiver to his ear. With the first words, his head cleared completely. The words were in the same colorless monotone he had heard before.

"I have just learned that my aides failed to bring you to me."

The voice halted. Breton glanced at the little clock on the desk. He had been unconscious nearly an hour. He did not reply.

The voice went on: "Perhaps you can be induced to come of your own accord. There is a very delectable piece of femininity beside me who wishes to talk to you. It was not difficult to induce her, and

others, to come—after the policeman on guard at the hospital was rendered sufficiently unconscious. Perhaps where force has failed, feminine wiles will succeed. What do you think?"

Breton's great muscles were bulging with the tension he suddenly and involuntarily put upon them. There was a second of silence, and then an agitated voice he knew only too well cried into the phone: "Don't come—don't come—it's a trap for you. They've got me and father and—"

The sound of a blow cut off the frantic voice. Then the cold, masculine voice asked, "Well?"

Breton said immediately, "I'll come. Where to?"

The other laughed. "I thought you would. You will notify no one. You will walk alone, and see to it that no one follows you, either on foot or in a car. Walk north from your apartment building along the River Road. A blue sedan will pull up ahead of you, and the rear door will be opened. You will enter. In case these instructions are not followed to the letter you will not see the sedan, nor will anyone ever again see Daniel T. Holden or his daughter, your fair client. Is that clear?"

"It is. When do I start?"

"At once."

Breton slowly cradled the phone.

CHAPTER FIVE

Laboratory of Sudden Death

CLAY BRETON walked nearly a mile before a blue sedan passed and drew to the curb just ahead of him. The rear door swung open and he stepped inside unhesitatingly. The door slammed shut without his touching it, and the car moved forward with rapidly accelerating speed.

Breton noticed that a glass partition separated the rear part of the car from the driver's seat. He glanced into the

rear vision mirror and caught the grinning, weasel face of Sneeve.

Then Breton's glance shifted to the driver's companion and he received something of a shock. The man's face was almost as dark as a Negro's, but there was nothing negroid about the high cheek bones, the long jaw line, the thin lips, the narrow beak of a nose and the high forehead beneath which black, malevolent eyes challenged his own glance with a stabbing light that approached madness. Instinctively, Clay Breton knew he was looking at the bitter, half-insane research chemist, Peter Darval.

Then something seemed to go wrong with his vision. Those figures in the front seat were becoming misty, uncertain, unreal, fading out entirely. As they disappeared and darkness swirled around him like an inky cloud, Breton realized that the enclosed compartment into which he had stepped was likewise a gas-chamber.

How long he remained unconscious this time he never knew. He felt cool, sweet, clean air fan his cheeks, and only half-consciously realized that he was being carried some place. Light appeared before his eyes, then it dimmed. The clean air gave way to a dank, musty odor.

Somewhere someone was sobbing softly. The sound stabbed at him. His ears, trained to catch and recognize the faintest inflections of a human voice, told him Gail Holden was near.

He found himself looking up at a carbon globe that burned with a weak yellow light. He tried to move, and discovered his arms were bound at the elbows with heavy ropes. His captors were taking no chances. They had used a three-quarter inch hemp rope. Too, he missed the familiar feel of his little rapier. They had taken that, of course.

Slowly, pressing the floor with the heel of his hand, he managed to force himself up into a sitting position, with his back against a brick wall. His first realization

was that he had been taken to a basement in some deserted building. Then he saw the man seated before the board partition across from him. Breton's blue eyes looked unwinkingly into slightly oblique ones behind colored glasses.

"Hello, Oyama Nagoki. Nice company you keep," he murmured.

The Jap continued to regard him unwinkingly, and without any sign of recognition. But directly behind him, from the board partition, came the familiar monotone.

"Now that you are here, Mr. Breton, the demonstration for my friend Nagoki will proceed, though at my invitation he's already witnessed the occurrence at Holden's. But he must be thoroughly satisfied, so there will be several demonstrations this time. You will furnish the final and, I might say, the most interesting one."

BRETON had discovered the little hole bored in the wood just to the right of and a trifle above the seated Nagoki's head. He watched it, measured its height from the floor as the voice came through it, and a slow smile crossed his face.

Gail Holden and her father, seated on chairs placed side by side, were thoroughly roped. There was a peculiar expression on the girl's face as she watched Breton.

Daniel Holden was staring straight ahead, hypnotically, at a thick iron plate covered with what seemed to be an inch-thick sheet of asbestos. Before Holden was a small table with a typewritten document and a fountain pen on it. Breton noticed that the old man's right arm was unfettered from the elbow down.

Again the voice spoke through the hole in the partition. "For the last time—sign that contract."

Holden stared stiffly ahead.

"Bring in the first one." This command was in a slightly higher, angrier voice.

A door to the right of the room was opened, and Toad Divini entered with a bound prisoner.

The man with him was tall, rugged-featured, with cold and calculating gray eyes.

Holden glanced sideways, and came out of his trance. "Tanner—you—"

Tanner stared down at him, and there were unplumbed depths of loathing in the glance. His glaze shifted to the iron plate, with its shield of asbestos, then back to the stricken Holden.

"You're letting them go through with this, Holden?" His voice was not strong, but it was steady, and there was curiosity as well as condemnation in it.

Holden jerked erect. His reply was a yell. "My God! No!" And he picked up the pen and hastily scrawled his name above two witness-signatures already affixed.

"There, you fiend, whoever you are. Let me out of here—let us all out of here!" he cried.

There was a cackling laugh from behind the partition.

"So sorry—the demonstrations for my friend Nagoki must be made. You have delayed too long. You all either guess, or know, far too much to allow you to go free. Especially the celebrated investigator. There will be many to thank me for removing him. Incidentally, my plans have changed a little. He will be the next victim, after Tanner. Safe as my reason tells me I am, I shall never feel completely at ease until I see his entrails curling as they fry around the edges of the flame-bored hole in his abdomen. Proceed, Divini."

ALL eyes in the room were fastened hypnotically on the lanky Tanner. Blood had appeared on his spade-shaped chin, from a wound his teeth had cut through the flesh of his lip. None noticed the slight twitchings of Breton's left arm.

"Get it over with—quick," came the now high-pitched demand from behind the partition.

Divini had backed Tanner against the asbestos shield. The lanky man's eyes were sick now, and he closed them. By that involuntary action he shut from sight the death that then appeared.

Tall, covered with a robe that was a thin asbestos covering, with three pressure tanks suspended in a harness on his back, and connected by a hose with a hollow rod that ended in a fine nozzle where a tiny pilot light burned, the man who stepped into the room looked like some monster out of a demented man's nightmare. His head and face were covered by an immense wedge-shaped hood with two squares of colored glass for observation.

All eyes were turned on him. The rod he carried raised, pointing at the stiffened and blanched Tanner. . . . It was all over before the observers' eyes could shift.

The apparition's thumb pressed a little lever behind the nozzle. A shaft of blinding light with a sharply defined heat cone that reached forward like a pointing finger, shot from the nozzle. The nozzle moved up and down twice, and the light was extinguished. A haze of smoke filled the room, and the odor of burned flesh and clothing was a sickening stench. But where the tall, lean Tanner had stood was nothing but a little mound of smoldering, powdery charcoal.

"Next!" The cry from behind the partition was a falsetto shrill with a touch of madness and exultation in it.

Toad Divini, grinning, but slightly pale beneath the surface of his knobby, fat face, stalked forward. Sneeve appeared, and they gripped and heaved Breton to his feet, hustling him across the room and backing him against the asbestos sheet.

Neither of the two noticed the now frantic twitching of his truncated arm, or if they did notice they attributed it to an ineffectual struggle against the heavy

ropes that bound those huge muscles. And then the razor edge of the cup that fitted the stump of that arm finished its work, cut through the cloth of shirt and coat, and through the hempen ropes. As the nozzle came up, more slowly this time, the ropes fell away and the heavy body exploded into cyclonic action.

Two great arms whipped around Sneeve and Divini, hurling them straight into the blinding finger of fire, while Clay Breton dove to the floor at one side. He seemed scarcely to have touched it when he was up and in at the big torch-wielder. The deformed arm chopped in a flashing semicircle, and the metal ball on the cupped end caught the grotesque figure above the square eye plates. There was a sickening crackle of shattered bone. The torch went out as it dropped from nerveless fingers.

From behind the wooden partition came a high, frenzied cry of anger and fear. And then the nozzle was gripped in the huge right hand of Clay Breton and aimed at the little hole.

His thumb pressed the lever. Flame leaped forward, played up and down, and died. Where there had been a partition, there was now a great oval hole with blackened and smoldering edges. Behind that partition, and at the foot of the stone foundation wall, lay a smoldering huddle of rags—and a head untouched by the flames.

Clattering feet on the stairs somewhere behind them died away. The chair that had been occupied by the Oriental was empty.

* * *

Holden's stricken gaze switched from the gruesome object between the stone wall and the wooden partition to the granite-featured Clay Breton. Breton reached over and tore up the paper Holden had signed.

"Theodore Bannister!" the old man gasped. "The secretary of our company

for twelve years, with Peter Darval handling the torch for him! Did you know?"

Breton nodded. "I suspected him when I heard him speak in the hospital this morning. Before that I knew it had to be someone closely connected with you, someone who knew the layout of your library very well, who knew the number of your private phone, and who recognized your voice without asking your name, and knew that my voice was that of a stranger. And I was sure, when I found Divini and Sneeve waiting in my apartment to capture me. Only you, Bannister, Tanner and Gail were in the hospital room and heard me say I was going to my apartment.

"But let's get out of here. We'll use the blue sedan that brought me—after I smash out the rear windows."

BACK in the little study of Daniel Holden, Clay Breton looked up from quizzical examination of the iced drink he held.

"Now you answer some of my questions, Mr. Holden. The gas they used was something like acetylene?"

Holden nodded. "It was a combination of three gasses—oxygen, acetylene, and the new gas, which contains some of the properties of both methane and hydrogen. An oxy-acetylene flame, under pressure, will reach about four thousand degrees Centigrade. With the addition of this new gas in proportions of three to one, the core of the flame will reach nearly seven thousand degrees. And, with a new type of nozzle and pressure system invented by our engineers, that core can be projected a hundred yards or more. In wartime, operated from tanks or low-flying planes—" He shuddered slightly as memory brought pictures to him of the destruction already accomplished.

"But father never intended to have it used in war," Gail Holden broke in.

Breton said, "That paper you signed was a contract to furnish this gas and the equipment to the order of that free-lance Jap adventurer?"

"Yes, and for an entirely nominal sum. I'd received warnings not to negotiate with any world power for the sale of the gas and equipment. Now I realize that Bannister feared I'd turn it over to our own government. The sum mentioned in the contract I signed was probably only a very small percentage of what was to be paid. The balance of course would go to Bannister under a separate, private agreement."

Breton said, "I'd figured something like that. And the immense wealth almost in his grasp drove Bannister a little mad. Incidentally, Nagoki would probably have resold the contract at five times its stated sum and have given Bannister but a fraction of what he promised. Nagoki works for no one but himself. However, you tried to prevent complications by summoning experts from Washington?"

"In a way, yes. It was never my intention to use it for an offensive war. It has great commercial possibilities and it was for that I wanted to manufacture it."

Breton nodded and stood up. Gail Holden arose slowly, followed him and her father downstairs to the door.

After Breton had shaken her father's hand, she said, "You—must leave us—so soon—after doing so much?"

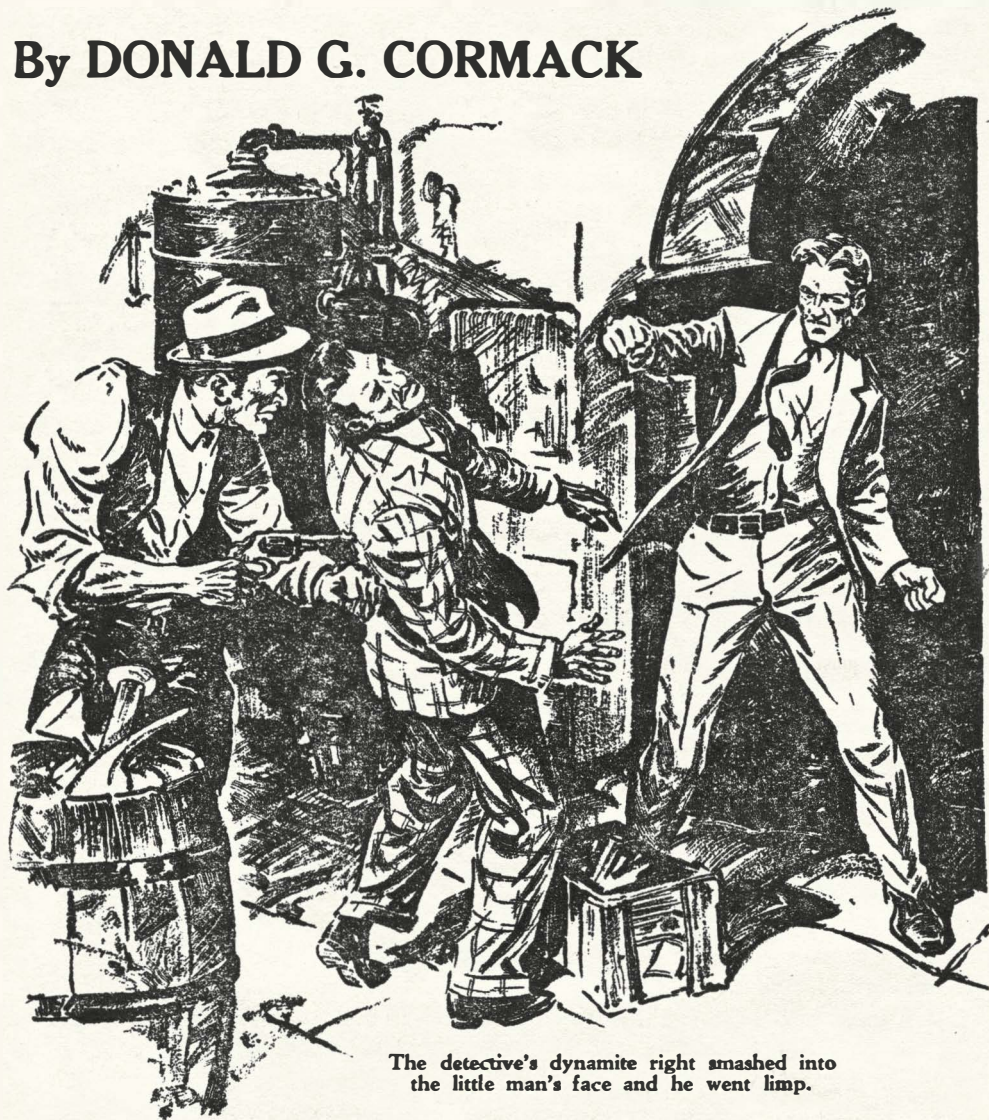
Her expressive eyes told far more than any words of hers ever would.

One of Breton's rare smiles lit up his face. "I'm sorry, but I must. It is really imperative."

And as he turned away the smile disappeared. He was glad Gail Holden did not know how imperative it was that he leave. A man in his profession, in his particularly bizarre and dangerous branch of that profession, had no right to expect anyone to share his lot.

• SLAVES OF THE

By DONALD G. CORMACK



The detective's dynamite right smashed into the little man's face and he went limp.

CHAPTER ONE

Missing Girls

THE insistent ringing of his doorbell brought Robert Stone out of a deep sleep. He found himself leaning on one elbow, muttering to himself and reaching for the alarm clock, before he realized what had awakened him. He glanced at the bedside clock; it was a quarter of five in the morning.

The first faint traces of dawn were fingering his window, he noticed. Then he was out of bed and slipping on a dressing gown. Years of experience as a private investigator had trained Stone to be surprised at nothing that happened to him. Now, he plodded sleepily downstairs, yawning, his thoughts as calm as though he were about to admit an expected noon-day visitor.

It was dark in the lower hall. Stone snapped on a small table lamp, shuffled

MURDER CLINIC •

A dramatic novelette of eerie Big City menace



over to the door and opened it. His first reaction was one of curiosity at the size of his visitor; the dim figure standing there seemed to be very small and slim. Then he saw that it was a girl, and, in the faint light, he could barely make out the red-gold of her hair and the deep blue of her eyes.

It didn't seem quite real, somehow—a

Deadly, wracking fear writhed in the eyes of the lovely red-head who begged for Stone's help against the fantastic Half-Moon Murder Cult—and then demanded that he forget all about it. . . . But how could she expect him to forget—while she awaited her call for the mysterious underworld journey from which none had ever returned alive?

beautiful, wraith-like girl ringing his bell at dawn. Then something in the girl's eyes made the private investigator glance down at her hand. There was certainly nothing unreal about the ugly snub-nosed automatic she aimed steadily at his belt.

"I've got to talk to you right away," she said in a cold, forced voice that was quiet but determined. "I'm desperate, mister, so please don't try any tricks—for your sake."

"Won't you come in?" Stone asked. He felt sort of foolish. He knew she'd come in if she wanted to; or do anything else that entered her pretty head, for that matter.

Robert Stone walked into the front room, his office, snapped on the lights and sank into the leather chair behind his desk. The girl had followed him in, and now she remained standing in the center of the room. The gun was leveled at his chest.

"Some people think they're licked before they begin to fight," the girl said in a tight voice.

"Won't you sit down?" Stone suggested, interrupting her. He could see that she was near hysteria, and that the gun might start blasting at any minute. But she ignored his question.

"The odds don't interest me when I'm up against it," the girl stated. "And I won't be licked without a fight. Dad's that way, too—or he used to be. That's why it's so strange—"

"Look," Stone said. "Couldn't you put that gun away? I'm the nervous type. It might go off accidentally."

"It might," the girl agreed, "but not accidentally." Her tone wasn't exactly pleasant. "Oh, you're not fooling me, Stone. I know how hard you are. You're supposed to be the toughest private detective in the city—when you want to be—and the smartest. I've heard all about it—that's why I picked you. And I know how hard it is to get you to handle a case;

it's a small miracle when you accept one. That's why I came to you with a .45 calibre plea to accept mine."

She had been fumbling in the pocket of her trim suit with her left hand. Now she threw a paper on the desk. "Please read that," she said, and she seemed to have forgotten that Mr. Colt's persuasive eye was staring directly into Stone's. For a second her voice was like that of a little girl begging a favor. "It's from my father. Please!"

The private investigator picked up the note. It read:

Betty, dear:

Alice Henderson's disappearance, everything that's happened to her, is all my fault. And she isn't the first—there are many others. But that's only the beginning. Terrible things are going to happen soon, things you never dreamed of, and now that I've started it, I'm frightened. I'm running out. Desperate.

Tell the police of my decision, if you think it best. And please forgive me, dear, if ever you can. What love I can offer isn't worthy of you.

Good-bye.

Dad.

"Dad never wrote that of his own free will!" The girl seemed to challenge Stone to deny it. The thought of her father's peril, and her loyalty to him, had re-aroused her fierce manner. "And what's more, I'm going to prove he didn't," she amended. "Now don't you think you've got a new case, Mr. Stone?"

THE detective was silent for a minute, looking at the determined expression in the girl's eyes. They were very beautiful eyes, too, bright with the determination to save her father's name.

"Yes," he said at last. "I can see that I've just accepted a new client." There was a faint smile about the corners of his strong mouth. He liked the nerve and spirit of this girl. "Now that I've finally been persuaded," he said with good-

humored irony, "suppose you sit down and tell me what this is all about. And let's declare a truce on weapons."

The girl's gun-hand had fallen to her side; her shoulders were drooping a little, as though her nerve was failing. Abruptly, she sank onto a couch and sat there, looking at Stone without a word, as though seeing him for the first time. Then a strange thing happened; her chin suddenly quivered and sobs began to shake her body. The automatic had fallen, unnoticed, to the floor.

Robert Stone knew enough to stay where he was, silently, until she was through. In a surprisingly short time she uncovered her face and started mopping futilely at the tears with a foolish little handkerchief. When she looked up at him, there was, for the first time, a small, sad smile on her lips.

"I'm an—an awful weakling," she said, between the fading sobs. "And that—that gun wasn't—even loaded. But I couldn't carry—it through. Now I suppose—you'll throw me out—"

But Stone returned her smile and shook his head slowly. "When I accept a client," he told her, "it's for keeps. Always. Now suppose you start in from the beginning and tell me about it."

"I was out to a late dance tonight," Betty said, "and I didn't return until after three. The note was waiting for me when I got home; dad had already left. It's his handwriting, too; there's no mistaking that. But I couldn't go to the police because dad had accused himself of something criminal."

As she went on, her sentences became more coherent and her voice more composed. She seemed to know she'd found someone strong to lean upon. Her deep blue eyes, almost violet in the dim light, were imploring Stone to realize how she had all but lost her mind through shock and fear.

"Please try to understand, Mr. Stone,"

she begged. "My father must have been forced to write that note. He's a wealthy man; he might be the victim of any unscrupulous plan. But the police would only think the worst if I went to them with his written self-confession.

"I had read of you, though—how you'd help someone if things looked black for him, but wouldn't apply the strict letter of the law as long as you felt human justice was on his side. I knew, also, how difficult it was to get you to accept a case. That's why I got that gun and tried such a crazy scheme. I wouldn't have done it for myself."

The detective smiled faintly. "It worked," he said. Then he went on more soberly. "Betty, think carefully before you answer, then tell me who your father is, what his business is, and everything you've observed about his actions lately. And remember—if criminal people are involved, they will have to be prosecuted; no matter who they may turn out to be."

ROBERT STONE kept his question matter-of-fact in sound, but in his mind he was deeply disturbed. From certain close friends in the Homicide Bureau of the New York Police, Stone had access to information that was denied to others. Altogether too many girls had been vanishing lately. The police had noticed it and were asking why, but their questions were guarded and their apprehensions were kept among themselves. The thing looked very dangerous; a panic could, easily result—and so could discredit to the force.

It is certain that fifty or more girls don't disappear completely, without a trace, unless they are coöperating themselves, innocently or knowingly. And what had that note said? ". . . *Alice Henderson isn't the first—there are many others.*" That showed definite inside knowledge!

"Dad's name is Henry Waller," Betty

said, choosing her words with care. "He's owner of a wholesale drugs supply house, the biggest in the city. As for his actions lately, he's been in good health and in good spirits. Business has been going well. He gave no suggestion of worry or fear. Tonight's note came like a thunderclap."

"All right," Stone said. "And now, Alice Henderson. How did you meet her, what does she do, and all the rest."

"After I finished school, dad sent me to work for a year," Betty said slowly. "I went into professional dress modeling—that's where I met Alice Henderson. We became friends and I continued to see her after I gave up the work. Lately she's been out of a steady job, so I've been trying to find a connection for her. Three days ago I succeeded, but every time I called Alice, there was no answer. I thought perhaps she'd left town for a while, though it seemed strange she hadn't let me know. She's been in poor health lately. Then, when I read dad's note tonight—I was terribly afraid!"

"Tell me more about the poor health," Stone requested.

"Well, I noticed that she was nervous and unhappy. At first I thought it was because she was out of work; but then she mentioned that she was going to some clinic or doctor for treatment. She didn't mention where, and I didn't bother questioning her."

"All right, Betty," Stone said. "Now tell me if Alice seemed frightened of anything. Did any word of hers, any confession—no matter how trivial sounding or how foolish—give you the impression that she was aware that something was going to happen to her?"

"Well, there was something," the girl said slowly. "I promised never to repeat it, but under the circumstances—" She broke off abruptly and was silent.

"Yes?" Stone prompted after a moment. Then he glanced up and saw the

look in Betty's eyes, saw the way she was staring, round-eyed, at something out in the hall that was beyond his vision. His nerves and muscles tightened with the sense of danger's presence. "Betty!" he snapped. "What is it?" But the girl's dead-white face never changed.

The detective heaved himself to his feet, and at the same moment the girl screamed, long and shrilly.

He had taken two quick strides across the room when he heard the faint noises coming from the library door behind him. He spun around—but too late. Something heavy crashed on his skull and his knees cracked on the floor. He was conscious for a split second longer, long enough to hear Betty scream again, this time in pain, before he toppled forward, completely out.

CHAPTER TWO

The Menacing Shadows of Death

THE waterfront streets were black and empty in the hour before dawn. Alice Henderson could see that. But her mind didn't reason normally any more; three days in that living hell had driven her on the verge of madness, and terror would always be with her.

She was running now, hugging the deep shadows that nestled against the vast, deserted warehouses and loft buildings, her high heels tapping quickly on the pavement. Then everything was utterly silent as she stood rigidly, listening for sounds of pursuit. She had escaped! But would they find her, take her back to that hideous place of pain and death?

"Please, God," Alice Henderson whispered to herself, "don't let them catch me! Don't let them make me go back! I don't want to die!"

Small sobs choked in her throat as she stood there in the night, sobs of both relief and terror. Her wide tear-filled eyes,

searching the blackness so desperately, were shining with a gleam of near-insanity. Then she was running again, avoiding the little islands of light that the street-lamps shed. The black shadows were her only friends.

Once she saw a policeman standing by his call box, sending in an all's well report to his station-house. She waited like a statue until he had completed his report and walked on, and still she continued waiting, until his footfalls sounded faint in the night. Then, like a living bit of the darkness itself, she was running again.

The girl knew she had to get to her apartment without being seen. There, she'd have time to think. Maybe it would be best to go to the police after all, since she was almost certain to die, anyway. Or perhaps she should run away, get out of the city and far away; there was just the faintest possibility that they wouldn't bother trailing her. She knew that, lately, her mind hadn't been functioning as clearly as it should. Oh, if fear would only leave her for a little while and give her time to think!

Half an hour later the girl was on the brownstone stoop of her apartment building. Far off in the distance she heard a church clock tolling out the hour with a slow, mournful sound. It was already five o'clock. In the east, she could see the sun sending cautious, tentative fingers of brilliance to explore the edge of night.

She pushed her way into the building and climbed to her top-floor walk-up. The door was open, as usual, and she went into the room and turned on the lights.

Alone now, actually home, the girl was conscious of a persistent sense of amazement. She really hadn't expected to make it, though she had refused to admit that to herself. Now, for long seconds, she stood stupidly in the center of the dimly lighted room, trying to adjust her slow mind to the new pattern of things. She had escaped! That was all that mattered!

And it was then that she heard the faint sounds that came from the small kitchen.

Terror had been too constant a thing for her to react to violently any more. She turned toward the dark doorway, wondering if her mind had finally broken completely, wondering if her hysterical nerves were imagining the things she feared.

But then the man stepped into the room, blocking her path, and she knew that it wasn't imagination. It was real. She tried to scream, but she couldn't. She just stood there, dully.

The man was a bulky, thick-necked creature, with a long scar that slanted up from one corner of his mouth, giving him a perpetual sardonic grin on one side of his face. The girl remembered him as one of those who had held her prisoner.

"Punishment never taught you anything; did it, Alice Henderson?" the thug said at last, his voice low and rasping. "You had to break out anyway. Didn't you think we'd come after you? You little fool! And what good would it have done you even if you had spilled everything you know to the police? You'd have signed your own death warrant!"

THE man had been advancing slowly toward her as he talked. Suddenly his knotted fist lashed out and she fell heavily to the floor. Her ears were ringing and the room was a blurred haze. She knew that the strange salty taste in her mouth must be blood running from her torn cheek. Tears were trickling down her face now, but she didn't know why she was crying. Pain was no new thing to her.

She tried to struggle back to her feet, but the man's knee came down hard on her stomach, pinning her to the floor. One of his broad, calloused hands was over her mouth while his other hand groped for something on the dressing table just above her head.

Alice Henderson saw the long blade of the nail file swinging down at her, then felt the burning stab of pain that pierced her chest, once . . . twice. . . Vaguely she wondered if the man was going to stab her again, and whether the choked screams that sounded so loud in her own ears could be only a muffled whisper in the room. But she never knew the answers to those questions, and it really didn't matter, anyway. Things stopped for Alice then. She was dead.

THE persistent ringing of a bell prodded Stone's mind with its raucous sound, urged him back to consciousness. He climbed unsteadily to his feet, fighting down the sick pain in his head, and fumbled for the telephone instinctively. Though his mind was still foggy, he noticed with surprise the clean new sun outside, bathing the street in early brilliance. At the same time he picked up the receiver and growled into it, his voice thick and husky.

"Bob!" The voice on the wire was that of Police Surgeon Kellan, a friend of Stone's. "Excuse this early call, fella, but it's vitally important. Listen—I can't talk much over the phone, so come down to headquarters for a conference, as soon as you can. All hell has broken loose in this town, Bob! I guess I can give you this much dope—" Kellan was silent for a moment. "A wave of mass poisonings has swept over the East Side—youngsters, old men and women, babies, everybody! It started last evening. We thought it was a local thing that could be stamped out quickly. It isn't! It's a wholesale, concerted flood of poisoning of all descriptions!"

Dr. Kellan's voice grew taut, fell lower in tone. "They started coming in last night, the poor devils, and now City Hospital is swamped—and the morgue is filling rapidly. We haven't got near enough ambulances to take care of the

thing, and every city physician is on emergency duty." Kellan's voice was filled with helpless bewilderment. "But, Stone, there's no motive in this thing, no logical selection of victims! As soon as we get the source of the poison we'll know more, and we're working on that angle now. But we need your help, so stop around soon. Gotta rush. 'Bye."

Robert Stone hung up the receiver slowly. His mind was just beginning to recover from the effects of that blow on the skull, and he shook his head savagely to clear his brain. He had to think! As Dr. Kellan had been talking, memory of what had happened had come to Stone as soon as he realized where he was. Betty Waller had been seized to prevent her telling what she knew! But what could he do? The city police were already swamped, and lots of other girls were missing besides Betty. That pretty little kid, badly frightened but fighting bravely, had only Stone to depend on. He could see her deep blue eyes looking at him now, imploringly.

And that new outbreak of madness that Dr. Kellan had reported. The whole crazy pattern that was beginning to unfold must have some obscure answer. No motive, no selection, Kellan had said. Certainly there was some reason behind it! And could mass murder by poison possibly be tied in with the wave of brutal kidnappings?

A strange, frightening conviction came over Stone then; it came to him in spite of himself. He sat for long moments in thought, then reached for the telephone directory. He riffled through the pages until he found Betty's number, then reached for the phone again.

"The Waller residence," a man's voice answered after a short wait. "Who is calling, please?" It was probably the Dutler.

"This is a police officer," Stone said. He knew he was stretching a point on that

one. "We have a report that Miss Waller is in some trouble and needs police assistance. Our information states that she failed to return home last night, and that her present whereabouts are unknown. Before we send a man up to question the household, we'd like any further information you can add: her presumed destination when she left the house, her escort, and so on."

Stone was betting on the fact that some servant in the house was in with those who had seized Betty. How else could they know that she'd left the house at after four in the morning, or where she intended to go? He hoped that his abrupt call would startle some admission of enlightening knowledge, or some damaging statement, from the servant. It was a slim hope, at best, but it was worth a try.

Now the man's voice came back to him, genuinely surprised and sincere. "Trouble?" he gasped. "Miss Elizabeth—the police? Oh, no, sir! There must be some mistake! Miss Elizabeth herself called a short time ago to say that she'd unexpectedly spent the night with friends. I beg your pardon, sir, but you are misinformed. I'm sure—" He broke off suddenly, but after a moment's silence his voice came back. "Miss Waller came in the house just this second," he said triumphantly. "I'll put her on right away."

THE detective looked at the phone as though it were playing tricks on him; but the next thing he heard was Betty's cool, smooth voice inquiring who it was. She recognized him immediately and her voice came back to him with quick urgency, speaking in low tones.

"Mr. Stone, please forgive me," she said. "I didn't have a chance to call you before. I'm so glad—"

"Never mind that," he interrupted her. "What happened to you?"

"I—well, nothing much," she said lamely. "I can't tell you. You see, I found out it would hurt dad if I brought the police into this thing. So, if you don't mind, forget that I ever came to you. I'm dropping everything. Please try and understand!"

"I'm afraid it's too late for that!" Stone snapped. "You've gone too far already. Damn it, Betty, don't be a fool!"

But she didn't get angry. "Listen, please," she begged. "I can't help myself; it's the only way to save dad and me! What I said about dad last night, that still goes. He's innocent! But that's the end of it. I'll deny that I told you anything. I'll deny that I ever saw you. You can't prove anything, you haven't even got that note I showed you."

Her voice broke in her panic-stricken pleading; there was hurt wonder in it, and a sense of helpless defeat. Stone could almost see the tears in her eyes. "Maybe you didn't see me. Maybe it was all a dream. But I don't want my father to die! *I don't want to die!*"

Abruptly the connection was cut off at the other end. . . .

After he hung up, Stone cursed long and savagely to relieve the bewildering effect of these rapid-fire developments. He might have guessed it. Whoever had forced Betty's father to write that incriminating note, using some inescapable threat, had struck immediately at the girl—and had used the same power.

But that train of thought snapped suddenly and his eyes narrowed in speculation. After all, what did he know of Betty Waller? It was only her loyal belief in her father—a natural thing—that insisted he was innocent. Suppose he really was guilty? Every logical, cold clue pointed that way. And suppose it was her father who had appeared suddenly before Betty, asking her to forget what she knew—to help him. . . .

But it wasn't Stone's method to keep

on supposing until he came to the answer. Action was the only answer—fast action, before further threatening hell broke over the city.

He went up to his bedroom and changed rapidly to his street clothes. He was about to leave the room when a sentence from that note of Waller's ran through his mind: "*Terrible things are going to happen soon, things you never dreamed of, and now that I've started it, I'm frightened!*" That whole business in those early hours before dawn *might* have been a fantastic dream, an impossible thing that never had occurred. Stone's hand went up to his head and felt the lump there. It was the only tangible proof he had that the experience was real.

Robert Stone rarely carried a gun, but now he went downstairs to his desk and adjusted a shoulder-holstered .32, a tight smile on his lips. Nightmares that caused a kidnaping plague to spread among a city's young girls, that went to the insane extreme of indiscriminate mass poisoning, dreams of that kind could throw some pretty dangerous things his way. Then he flipped the telephone directory again and looked up an address. A moment later he slammed out of the house.

Two minutes later Stone was in a cab and roaring downtown. He wasn't thinking of the bewildering maze of leads that faced him—clues that branched out in impossibly opposite directions. And he wasn't wondering any more about the reasons behind the crimes. He was going to smash his way, step by step, to the very center of the spreading rotteness. And the first step along that trail was obviously—Alice Henderson.

CHAPTER THREE

Merchants of Human Ruin

ALICE HENDERSON'S apartment was in a cheap tenement walk-up with a bell-register in the downstairs foyer

and a grimy front door that was supposed to be locked, but wasn't. Stone walked in unchallenged and climbed to the top floor; Alice's apartment was in the rear of the building, at the end of a dark, grubby hall.

The detective tried the door, but it was secured by a snap lock that the girl must have had put on herself. Stone worked for a minute with a celluloid calendar he carried in his billfold, wedged it past the loose jamb, and a moment later heard the tongue of the lock click back as the door swung open before him.

He walked in and shut the door behind him, then came to a dead halt. As his eyes fell on the pitiful body of the dead girl lying in the center of the room, he drew his breath in sharply and his fists knotted in fury at his sides. He had found Alice Henderson, all right. Silently he stood where he was, fighting down anger. Finally he crossed the room and dropped to his knees beside the dead girl.

The girl was lying on her back, her grotesquely sprawling limbs giving a graphic story of her death struggles. The shredded bodice of her blood-soaked gown showed plainly how the savage killer had wielded his knife. Her sightless, wide-staring eyes were looking directly into Stone's, still seeing that last terror, and her open mouth seemed to continue an agonized screech, even in death. Stone, the hard-boiled guy, felt his throat tighten with something that was suspiciously like the beginning of a sob.

"I'll get them for you, kid!" he muttered. "I'll square it up for you, and Betty—and all those others!"

Then he leaned closer as he noticed something in the girl's face. In the dim light of the room he saw the dark circles that were under her sunken eyes, saw the drawn, pale cheeks, prematurely lined, and the white pallor of her skin.

The detective picked up one of the girl's arms carefully and rolled back the

sleeve of her dress. The arm was marked from shoulder to wrist with scores of ugly blue welts and bruises. The answer to that was obvious; they had been there long before her death.

He uncurled one of her tight-fisted hands—the palm was beginning to show the growth of a heavy callous. Bruised arms, calloused hands, on a dress model? Then he noticed something else. On the back of her right hand was a small brown scar, about an inch long, in the shape of a half moon. An accident? Possibly.

Stone began a systematic search of the girl's room. First he went through her handbag; it contained only the usual stuff a girl carried, plus a few coins and a key. Then he went through the suitcase, the bureau and dressing table, but in the end he was disappointed. His only find was a vague possibility, but he stuck it in his pocket and decided to check, anyway. It was a small card that announced:

EAST SIDE WELFARE HOME AND CLINIC

After that, Stone left the apartment and went down to the street. His cab was on the corner, and he hopped in and hurried downtown. His next stop was Police Headquarters to see Dr. Kellan. What was it he had said on the phone? "*All hell is breaking loose in this town, Stone!*"

But neither dreamed how far it would go. . . .

As the taxi dug deeper into the east side of the city, Stone was acutely aware of the doleful clanging of ambulances that raced through the streets. In the past, Stone had noticed the quick tenseness, the silent fear, that gripped a crowd as an ambulance sped noisily past. In the emergent haste of those grim cars the public had seen the desperate urgency of the dying expressed by a physical symbol. Now that quiet terror held them without

ceasing, hour after long hour, and they looked at each other in dumb panic as they were crushed by a thing from which they could not flee, a thing they could not fight!

THE same brooding silence prevailed in the corridors and rooms of Police Headquarters as Stone strode through. There was swift activity and orderly purpose among the men, but that same strange hush was upon them.

In the Directing Police Surgeon's office were a group of men, detectives and medical authorities. Dr. Kellan himself was on the phone, snapping staccato orders to the police short-wave broadcasting room. It was an all car alarm.

"But get this out first!" he was barking when Stone came in. "Close all drug stores in every borough! Immediately! Issue drugs only on physicians orders. All medicines and chemicals to be tested before use—rigidly tested. Toxins and anti-toxins are dangerous, despite registered serial numbers. Issue counterfeit-registry warnings. Ban sale of all cosmetics and associated beautifiers. Contact social workers and municipal broadcasting systems to spread this alarm. That's all now. Stand by." He slammed down the receiver and swung toward Stone.

"Glad to see you, Bob," he said, as he relaxed with a deep breath. "By God, I hope we can stop this thing before it goes any further. Further! It's gone too far already!" Kellan saw the questioning look on Stone's face and he swept his arm toward a mass of boxes, jars and bottles that littered a table across the room. "Look at 'em, mister! Just look at 'em! Fakes! Rotten, poisonous fakes, every one!"

Stone saw the labels and insignias of the country's greatest and most trusted chemical manufacturers, names that had led the medical-supplies world for decades.

"Counterfeit labels on poisonous medicines!" Stone exclaimed. "But—but, look here, Kellan. The thing's impossible! Stuff like that might bring down a few victims, but it'd be caught after that. It can't sweep a whole section of the city and threaten the rest!"

"Can't! Hell, it has!" Dr. Kellan grunted. "Here's how we tracked it down. Checked the contents of the victims' stomachs and discovered the poison; searched their homes and found the source—medicines in every case; traced the retail sources—widely separated drug stores that seemed reputable enough. From there we tried to get to the wholesale source, but we were stumped. It was sold and delivered by a non-existent wholesale house that had advertised cut-rate drugs, radically reduced for a bankruptcy sale. The name of the house and the address were both pure fiction. Never existed.

"Now wait a minute," Kellan interrupted himself. "Don't get the idea that this was a deliberate poison plot. It wasn't. Most of the drugs delivered by this criminal outfit were just pure junk that could masquerade as the McCoy—chalk for toothpowder and face powder; colored jelly for expensive salves; water for perfumes and tonics, and so on. But a lot of it was deadly poisonous, made with denatured alcohol, lye, caustic irritants, plain poisons. The criminals just didn't give a damn. Anything went.

"And here's the answer to this mass poisoning," Kellan concluded. "All that stuff had to be released in one day. Too dangerous, otherwise. So the whole city was canvassed for these cheap orders, every order was filled day before yesterday, but first delivered to the East Side. It went on sale first on the East Side, yesterday, and they started coming in last night. Now they're beginning to come in from all over the city—and we've got to stop it! But do you get the angle? Over

a million bucks worth of worthless and poisonous drugs sold in one fell swoop, and then the gang clears out—maybe." Dr. Kellan's voice was tight with apprehension. "And maybe they'll go on to some other city, or have already done so—"

The detectives and doctors who had crowded the room had left, one by one, until now there was only Stone, Dr. Kellan and a third man, a shy, small fellow who had remained in the background. Now he stepped forward with an apologetic air.

"Excuse me, Dr. Kellan," he said, "but maybe we ought to tell about the other angle of this business—the living victims."

Kellan shuddered involuntarily. "That's the most horrible angle of all," he said softly. He heaved himself to his feet. "Come along, Stone," he muttered. "I'd rather show you than talk about it."

The three men left the room and trooped down the hall.

"I'M Dr. Brewster," the small man explained to Stone as they followed Kellan. "I'm not connected with the police department, but I happen to be in this poison case. You see, I work in the free clinic of City Hospital. During the past few days I came across some very strange clinical cases—degenerating skin and tissue, cancerous sores, failing eyesight, tumorous growths, suppurating wounds that wouldn't heal. The only medical indication was some external agent. I became suspicious, so I came to the police. Now, of course, we know the source of those infections, given twenty-four hours more and we'd have had the criminals behind the whole business. Look!"

They had entered a room, and when Stone looked about him he winced in pain in spite of himself. A group of police doctors stood around, making notes, examining records and studying several pa-

tients. It was the sight of those living victims that brought the look of pain to Stone's eyes. Now he knew what Dr. Brewster meant.

Before him stood an old woman, her lips tight with suffering. It was her eyes that made Stone's stomach feel empty. Eyes? She was blind, horribly blind, and the puffed, swollen things that had been her eyes looked like two white onions, slowly peeling. Beyond her was a young girl whose lips had been eaten away by some corrosive acid. Her teeth showed plainly, as though grinning in agony, through the ragged hole of shredded flesh that once had been her mouth. Another girl patient had a hideous, fleshless face that had been eaten almost to the very bone by some caustic face cream. And there were others.

Stone swung on his heel and walked out. It was more than he could bear. The three men were silent for a time as they walked back down the hallway.

"See the fiendishness of this thing?" Kellan asked. "The criminals began letting their slow-acting poisons out on the market a week, maybe ten days before the big killing with their quick poison. They must've cleaned up two million dollars before they quit. Two lousy millions for lifetimes of agony and slow death! By God, if I ever get my hands on one of them!"

Back in Kellan's office, Stone asked the one question that had been on his mind. "Look, Kellan, have you figured this thing in connection with the kidnaping wave? Are there any possible angles? Anything we've overlooked?"

The eyes of both men jumped up to his. Each man must have been wondering privately, keeping his thoughts to himself. And as the conversation went on, Stone was conscious of another remembered fact that intruded on his thoughts: Betty Waller's family was in the wholesale drug business. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

The Scar of Satan's Kiss

IT was late in the afternoon when Robert Stone finally took a cab back uptown. Some unconscious sense kept every nerve alert; somehow he knew that the show-down was close, and that Death was rejoicing. He had to force his mind to calm thought. And he resolutely put the picture of Betty's beautiful, pleading eyes out of his memory. There was only one thing to do. Betty knew some of the answers behind the horrible crime: he had to get that information from her! For her own sake, for the sake of thousands of innocent people, she must be made to see the truth! The poison wave might sweep the country. . . .

Earlier that afternoon, as soon as he and Dr. Kellan were alone, Stone told all he knew of the case. Then the two of them went over to the city morgue. During the past week, the bodies of four young girls had been dragged from the river. On each one Stone had found that same half-moon scar he had seen on Alice's hand! They were undoubtedly part of that legion of the damned—the missing girls. Poor, homeless kids, unmissed, unwanted. And they were the branded creatures of the merchants of wholesale death. That was the first fact. The second fact had been discovered by the toxicologists at the morgue. Each of those four girls was a confirmed drug addict, but an addict of no more than sixty or ninety days time! Were those poor youngsters somehow being forced into the dreadful toils of drug addiction?

With questions like that in his mind, and with the sight of the poison victims—living and dead—still fresh in his memory, Stone yearned for purposeful action and the chance to crush the horror that still hung over the city. He felt relieved when the cab squealed to a stop before the

Waller home. The detective flipped the fare to the cabbie, then strode up to the massive front door of the house and punched the bell.

Across the street he noticed one of the several detectives that headquarters had posted about the house. Grimly he realized that their only possible course now was one of watchful waiting. Waiting! But there was no suspect except the missing Henry Waller, unless Betty— And it was Stone's job to play that angle.

The manservant who opened the door looked at Stone curiously when he said he had to speak to Betty Waller, but a sight of the private investigator's badge made him open the door and usher Stone into the living room. Stone didn't have to wait long. Presently, a tall, important acting man who wore a Vandyke beard came into the room.

"May I ask what your business is with Miss Waller?" he asked brusquely. "She's my niece and I can answer for her. At the moment, unfortunately, Miss Waller is indisposed." Stone identified himself and a slow smile spread over the man's face. "Oh, the private detective!" he said. "Well, she's changed her mind about that, I know. My name is Spalding, and if there's any further—"

"Just a minute, Spalding!" Stone snapped. "Either you produce Elizabeth Waller now, or I'll return in five minutes with a warrant for her arrest, to hold her for questioning!"

The oily smile faded from the man's face and his eyes became angry. The beard hid his other expressions. After a moment's hesitation he rang for the servant and gave the necessary order, then strode back to Stone. When he spoke he forced his voice to be caustically pleasant.

"Her father's disappearance was quite a shock to Elizabeth, obviously," Spalding said. "As a matter of fact, she's under medical care. I doubt very much whether you could get the authority to hold her in

her present health if her doctor intervened, but I don't want any more trouble. Questioning her will be of little use, anyway. Her mind has been affected by this tragedy; she's the victim of delusions."

Stone grunted. "We'll see!" he snapped shortly.

The detective's quick ears caught the sound of a door unlocking upstairs, and a moment later a uniformed nurse came into the room leading Betty. One look at Betty made Stone's stomach turn over queerly and angry blood pound in his temples. For a moment he couldn't speak.

Betty stood in front of him, her beautiful face lax and vacant looking, her deep blue eyes round and dreamy in expression. She seemed to be concentrating on Stone's face, trying to remember him, and after a while a flicker of recognition passed through her features.

A dead hush had settled over the group. Betty struggled to say something, pain and terror showing in her eyes, but the best she could do was whisper his name in a thick voice. Then Stone saw the back of the nurse's hand!

"You madmen!" Stone shouted. "You can't get away with this!" He stepped quickly into the doorway to the room. "By God—!"

"Quiet!" the nurse broke in. "The patient—"

But Stone's gun was in his hand now, covering Spalding and the "nurse." "You're under arrest!" he snapped. "One move and you get it! And I hope you try something!" That tell-tale scar on the nurse still showed plainly. For a second they made a tense tableau.

IF Stone's ears hadn't been unusually sharp he never would have heard the whispering rush of feet behind him. He was only half turned, however, when the hurtling form of the servant thudded into him. The two men crashed to the floor, rolling, and then Stone felt a blazing pain

smash across his temple, a blow that brought dizzy half-darkness. It was the instinct of a fighter that carried him on after that, and as the attacker swung viciously again, Stone's legs straightened out with tremendous force and hurled the man from him. Stone's gun roared before the man hit the floor, and when he landed he lay still.

The private investigator fought his way to his knees, was swaying drunkenly and shaking the haziness from his head, when the two police detectives came bursting into the room—a room that contained only Stone and the dying servant. Stone shouted orders in a hoarse voice and the two headquarters men bounded away to search the house. But when the investigator came groggily out into the hall five minutes later, the detectives returned blankly from their mission. They had been too late; the house was empty.

"Get these facts down to headquarters immediately!" Stone's voice was clipped and sharp as he ticked off the points. "One; Spalding, brother of Henry Waller, is one of the top men and perhaps the boss. Two; Elizabeth Waller is a prisoner, has been abducted, and is probably facing death. Three; send out an alarm to pick up a man and a woman who will be escorting a presumed girl 'patient'. One of you stay here to guard the house. I'll call headquarters if I get anything else."

Stone turned on his heel abruptly and stalked out of the house. He was afraid to say anything more; afraid to stay longer on the scene. In his mind there was only a seething rage that he had allowed Spalding to get away, and that rage was turned scathingly upon himself. He could have found excuses: the suddenness of the whole thing; the sight of Betty in that cruel trap; the unexpectedness of the attack from behind. But that wasn't Stone's way. He gave his anger full rein.

It was growing dark out in the street. Stone turned over toward the park, then

started slowly uptown in the direction of his own home. He was lost in deep concentration, and the people who passed him, the traffic, the street numbers, all were like things in another world. He was going over in his mind every event of the day, each word that had been spoken. There was bound to be something in it somewhere, something he had missed, that would point clearly to the answer that had escaped him so far. And he was almost in front of his house when the fact struck him.

Stone came to a dead stop for a second, then broke into a run, raced down the last street and went bounding up the stoop of his house. Up in his library he had rows of reference volumes, and a minute later he was searching quickly for a check on the tie-up that had struck him. Then he found it, and the detective drew in a long breath. He was right! The single problem remaining was—would he be in time?

WHEN Stone came downstairs, there was a cold, merciless glitter in his eyes. He walked to his desk and took out a long-barreled .22, the nearest thing he had to a silenced gun, and shoved the awkward revolver in his side pocket.

"Target practice," he muttered to himself in a savage voice. "That's what we need. A target revolver for human targets!"

He grabbed up the phone and called Police Headquarters, dialing swiftly. After a short wait he was speaking to the chief of detectives. Stone gave his message, briefly and emphatically. Then he left the house and trotted to the cab stand at the corner. The taxi scuttled away with a roar at the detective's urging, and as they raced across town, Stone knew the last act had begun.

Within ten minutes the cab scrubbed to a stop before a building deep in the East Side slums. Before the grimy entrance of

the dingy place hung a weather-beaten sign, its faded characters reading:

EAST SIDE WELFARE HOME

Stone glanced at his watch, it was shortly after ten in the evening, and the welfare home looked deserted. The detective stepped to the sidewalk. His face set expressionlessly, but in his mind he kept repeating a single thought: "God willing, I won't be too late!" All his actions now were slower, more precise, sure. His own life, the lives of other thousands, now depended solely on Stone. He couldn't afford a mistake.

"Wait, buddy," Stone told the cabbie. "Be right back—I think!" Then he strode into the foreboding entrance and disappeared.

THE two-by-four "lobby" was lighted by a single unshaded bulb. A scar-faced thug stood behind a shabby registry desk. He glanced up as Stone came in, and a scowl spread over his ugly face. He kept both hands beneath the counter.

"Watcha want, guy?" It was hardly more than a challenging grunt.

Stone didn't waste any words. His left hand shot out and grabbed the thug by his coat lapels, jerked him half way across the counter, and simultaneously his right hand completed its short arc to meet the oncoming chin. The thug's head snapped back and he sank down out of view. The detective vaulted the desk and landed on the scar-faced man just as he was trying to struggle to his feet. A solid right clipped under that chin and the man relaxed, cold.

His movements unhurried but certain, Stone bound and gagged the thug with his own belt and necktie, then stepped from behind the desk and surveyed the place. At the far end of a dark hallway, leading away from the street, he saw a thin crack of light that showed from beneath a

door. Otherwise the house seemed deserted. He strode down the hall, the long-barreled .22 in his hand, thrust open the door and stepped boldly into the back room.

A small man had been kneeling before a safe, stuffing papers into a brief case, and when he heard the door closed firmly he whirled and came to his feet. The papers he had been holding dropped unnoticed to the floor and his mouth fell open. "Stone!" he gasped.

Stone laughed once, shortly, and his voice held a blood-chilling sound. "Yes, it's Stone, Dr. Brewster," he said quietly. "And I have a little present for you—in fact, several of them."

The .22 in the investigator's hand spat once, viciously, and the white-faced Brewster jerked backward, fell into his chair. He was clutching at one shoulder, blood running between his fingers, and a defiant snarl came to his ashen lips. But the man's diffident-seeming self-assurance was gone now, and the panic he tried to hide showed plainly in his cornered-rat expression.

"I brought a .22 purposely," Stone said in a soft voice. "It's going to take you a lot longer to die, Brewster, and I'm not going to rush the matter. You're not big enough for a .32."

"How—how did you know who it was?" Brewster whispered.

The detective wasn't interested in killing Brewster alone; he wanted to get the man talking, discover who the others were, first. Now he played Brewster toward that end.

"You're clever enough, Brewster," he said. "But you made one small mistake. Today, when I spoke to Kellan about the wave of kidnappings—a subject that was a close police secret and which you couldn't possibly know—*both* of you looked at me with complete understanding, and *both* of you showed you were aware of that possible angle. I didn't

think of that until later, but when I did, I looked up your pedigree, Dr. Brewster. I discovered that you had formerly been connected with the East Side Welfare Clinic.

"Furthermore, it so happens that Alice Henderson had been coming to this clinic just before she got in trouble. Spalding was known to me to be one of the bosses behind this crime, and I wasn't surprised to see his name listed in the association's board of directors. But it took only two small slips to trip you up—the card I found at the scene of Alice's murder, and your unconscious give-away in Kellan's office today. Otherwise, you might have got away with it.

"Oh, you're a sly little rat," Stone went on. He pretended to be unaware of Brewster's attempt to sneak his hand into the desk drawer. "Once you started this brutal crime, you went to the police yourself, pretended to 'discover' it. You knew it was too late to do anything then, anyway, and you knew you could keep up with every step of the police investigation—just in case. But you overlooked another angle through your cocky self-assurance, the scar-branding of your captives was discovered because of Alice's murder."

Stone broke off abruptly and his little gun spat lead again. Brewster screamed in pain this time as the lead pellet tore through his other shoulder. He was almost hysterical now, and sheer animal terror showed plainly in his eyes. Stone laughed quietly again, building up the man's fear, breaking his nerve and spirit.

"Keep it up, Brewster," Stone said. "I like this. But I'm afraid we've wasted too much time already. Right now, while you can still walk, you're going to take me to your criminal headquarters. We'll find it anyway, if you refuse—but if you do, you won't be the principal of a criminal trial. You'll be chief subject at an inquest!"

"Alone?" Brewster babbled. "You going down there alone?"

Stone grabbed him by the neck of his coat and pushed him out of the room. "March!" he snapped. "And I wouldn't think of going alone. The two of us will go together!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Legion of the Damned

THE cab was still waiting outside and Stone shoved his captive into it. With Stone's gun prodding his side, Brewster directed the taxi driver through the downtown streets, working over toward the East River. And as they wound their way deeper into that deserted, gloomy section, the private investigator heard the thin wail of police sirens singing in the distance. But the only information the police had was that the East Side Welfare Home seemed to be the criminal headquarters.

After driving for about fifteen minutes, Brewster told the driver to stop. They were beside a crumbling warehouse that looked as though it hadn't been used for twenty-five years. Part of the wooden structure projected out over the river, its front once having been used as a barge wharf for direct loading. The two men got out, Stone's hand on the scruff of the doctor's coat.

"Look," Stone snapped to the cabbie. "Get back to that Welfare Home as fast as that hack will fly. Police'll be there. Bring them back to this warehouse. And, mister, don't forget where it is!"

The cab swung in a circle, bouncing over the curb, raced to the end of the short street and took the corner on two wheels. Then Brewster led Stone down to the very edge of the river, walked onto the garbage-strewn river bank and ducked under the rotting wharf. In that absolute blackness, Stone lit a match to reveal a small, rusted iron door. The doctor

rapped a signal on the metal with his ring, and a moment later it creaked open.

The detective didn't hesitate a second. As soon as the form of the guard was visible, his gun barked once and the shadowy figure collapsed at their feet.

Brewster led the way, Stone's gun in his back, and for seemingly endless miles they tramped through long passages, climbed rotting ladders, mounting ever higher. At intervals, dim bulbs lit the way, suddenly they walked out onto a high balcony in a brilliantly lighted room—it was the central chamber of the warehouse, a cavernous barn of immense proportions. Then Stone saw what was in the room, far below them, and a whispering breath of surprise left his lips. Here was the focal point of the poison epidemic—the *factory of murder!*

Long rows of benches, row on row, stretched across the floor, and each one was laden with retorts, bunsen burners, racks of test tubes, jars and boxes of raw chemicals and other equipment. A young girl stood before each bench, chained by one wrist, and each girl worked with the fury of desperation as she compounded fake medicine, bottled it, put the finished product to one side. Among the girls walked ugly guards, and every now and then one of them would strike a girl and shout at her, telling her to speed up her work. It was a sweatshop, all right. A sweatshop in hell!

Other thugs moved between the benches with rolling cars, collecting the bottles, jars and boxes, taking them to the labeling station, then delivering the finished goods to a crating section. The whole mad scene went on in a fury of activity, but there was little actual sound except for the snarling voices of the guards. Stone swung toward the doctor, but he didn't have to phrase his question.

"Another shipment tonight," Brewster said shortly, hopelessly. "Consigned to Chicago. We had hoped to get it away

before news of the New York epidemic got out. The Chicago orders are all filled. Had hoped to get the shipment out tonight, make delivery tomorrow morning." For a brief second his vicious spirit came back. "And, by God," he shouted, "we may yet!"

Stone spun him around. "Get going, rat!" he snapped. "Take me to Betty Waller—and God help you if anything's happened to her, or if anyone gets in my way! I'll shoot through you, Brewster!"

AT ONE end of the balcony was a massive wooden door, and Brewster repeated his official knock. Stone held the .22 in his right hand now, and when the door opened he hurled Brewster's slight form forward. Stepping into the room, Stone swung a right that knocked the surprised guard in front of him across the room. Brewster stepped toward a box containing acid. The detective's dynamite right smashed into the little man's face, and he went limp. Then Stone's gun spoke. The guard had pulled a revolver. The detective's bullet caught him in the throat. He collapsed on top of Brewster's unconscious form.

On one knee, Stone's gun swept the room—but the only other figure was Spalding, stiff with amazement. He just kept gaping at Stone. At the far end of the room, Stone saw Betty and a big, white-haired man roped to chairs.

The detective slammed the door shut behind him, a satisfied grin on his face. At his direction Spalding untied the two prisoners. There was no fight in Spalding; he was licked, and he knew it. The white-haired man, Betty's father, held one of Stone's guns on Spalding, and Betty threw herself in the detective's arms. He held her for a moment, comforting her and rejoicing that the drug Brewster had given her had worn off. Then, one arm about Betty's waist, Stone turned back to Spalding.

"All right, Spalding," Stone said softly. "I'd like to get it on record while there's still someone left to speak, so start talking. Let's have the story—briefly."

Spalding sank into one of the chairs, his drooping expression plainly one of defeat. "It was all Brewster's idea," he whined. "So help me, I wouldn't have thought of it myself!"

"Talk!" Stone gritted. "And fast!"

"It went like this," Spalding started. "Brewster, being a doctor, knew the expensive cost of medicines and knew the enormous profit that is made. His one dream was to manufacture counterfeit drugs and make a fortune in one big stroke. He was in the East Side Welfare Clinic at that time, treating poor, homeless girls. So he started to work on them. He had about eight girls who were taking injections for various reasons, and he began mixing narcotics in those injections, increasing the amount slowly. Well, in about a month, all those girls were confirmed dope addicts. They were in his power.

"The girls didn't know until too late. By then they just had to have the stuff. They'd do anything for it. They came back to him, begging, and he gave them more dope. Then he was ready to start the thing. He approached me and asked me into the plan." Spalding glanced at his brother with hatred. "He knew that I was fed up with my part in the chemical business, taking orders from my brother and getting a miserly salary. He knew I could make a lot of dough, which I needed badly, and he told me I could gain control of the chemical business through my brother's death or imprisonment. So I agreed."

Spalding was silent for a minute, still greedily thinking, perhaps, of the money he might have had. "We rented this warehouse," he went on. "Then we were ready. The drug addicts were sent out by Brewster to make friends with other poor,

homeless girls, to gain their confidence and bring them down here, unsuspecting. Once lured here on some pretext—work, maybe—they were seized and held prisoner. We began manufacture with fifty slaves, gradually increased the number to an even hundred. Brewster got the drugs and the counterfeiting machines for the fake labeling. Everything was fine.

"When we had enough stock, Brewster and I canvassed the city, along with some hired thugs, and took up orders. Then I arranged with about a dozen of Waller's delivery truckmen to distribute our stuff. They thought it was a legitimate delivery by an over-rushed house—and we got legitimate trucks to take out our stuff. We didn't have to be too careful about later discovery—we'd be clear by then. But before the big delivery, we sent out a lot of slow-working medicines—mostly cosmetics and eye-wash—to keep up our running expenses."

THE look of maniacal hatred came back to Spalding's face while he looked at his brother again. "But I wasn't satisfied with the profit of this one plan. I wanted my brother's chemical business—and most of all I wanted revenge! I wanted him disgraced, in prison! So the two of us had him kidnaped by our gunmen and brought down here. We showed him the lay-out, told him the scheme, and threatened to seize Betty and throw her in with the others. He knew I'd do it. So he begged us for her safety; said he'd do anything." Spalding laughed.

"We said the price of Betty's freedom was that self-accusing note he wrote. And he believed us! He wrote it. I left the note for Betty. It covered his disappearance, and our crime! We could kill him any time we wanted. But Betty took that note to Stone, here." There was a snarl in his voice. "We were afraid of him. Brewster could keep an eye on the work of the police, but not on Stone. The an-

swer to that was obvious, we grabbed Betty away from Stone, told her we had her old man a prisoner, and that the price of her silence was his life. You see? We played one against the other! Betty shut up, all right, and Brewster gave her a hypnotic sedative, just in case."

No one had noticed Spalding's hand go carelessly up to his mouth. "There's nothing much else," he said. "One of the captive girls escaped, as you know, so we trailed her and killed her. All the girls here are kept in a half-daze so they can't think straight even if they do manage to get away." Spalding swallowed the capsule.

Stone saw the man begin to sway on his feet weakly, but he said nothing. It was probably the best way out; the same poison that had killed others was dealing justice now. "But what about that branding on the girls' hands?" Stone asked quickly. "What was the reason?"

"Brewster's idea," Spalding said thickly. The others now could see that the man had taken poison. "He said if one of them escaped, it would be easy for our men to spot her. We couldn't possibly remember what each one of the captives looked like, and if they escaped they had to be killed. Brewster said, too, that it would scare the girls—they'd figure they'd be caught. And the only girls we let go free—like that

nurse of Betty's—were those original eight dope addicts. They couldn't turn against us. But as soon as they did a job for Brewster, he killed 'em off. Too dangerous to let them—" He toppled forward on his face, squirmed for a few horrible seconds, then lay still.

Robert Stone had heard the sounds of commotion downstairs as the man was talking, and he knew that the police had arrived on the scene. He walked to the door, opened it and shouted to the detectives who came swarming along the balcony. Others stood about the room downstairs with tommy-guns covering the thug guards. The chief of detectives, was one of the first to come in the room.

"Stone rings the bell again, by God!" he called cheerfully. "And nice work, too, mister. Got 'em all! The place is surrounded."

Stone had turned to Betty. "I can do my own surrounding," he said quietly as his arms went around her. "And isn't this the point where I say the prisoner gets a life sentence?"

Betty smiled back at him. "Yes, and this is where I say that I—" She had to stop talking while he kissed her. "Why, Mr. Stone!" she laughed in mock surprise. "What will these people say?"

Neither one realized that the room, by now, was empty.

THE END

Spine-Tingling Action—Baffling
Mystery

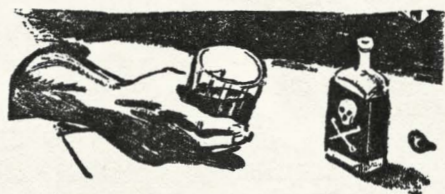
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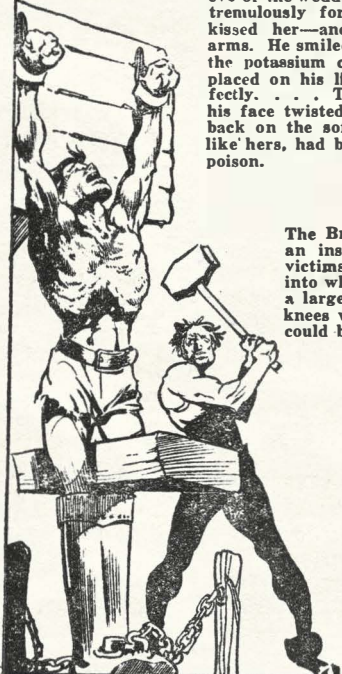
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FANTASTIC BUT TRUE



Twenty years ago the French countryside was horrified by the discovery of several headless bodies floating in a well. The famous Bertillon, then an inspector, trailed the underground springs which fed the well to a barren, windswept mountain in the foothills of the Alps. With a detachment of police he closed in on the stone house that stood nearby, and overpowered the male occupant, Dr. Hollyer, a twisted little gnome of a man whose physician's license had been revoked several years before. With Dr. Hollyer was his young assistant, Miss Catherine Pollack, who, under his power, had aided him in experiments in vivisection that defied credulity. The detectives broke into their laboratory, a lofty, dimly lighted room. On a table were arranged several jars containing human brains, and attached to each set of brains was a soft wire that was connected with a large horn, hanging from the ceiling. To the utter horror of the police, the wires vibrated and writhed in the manner of human muscles, and from the horns at the ceiling emanated indescribable sounds of agony. Bertillon could stand the sight no longer. With a cry he threw himself upon the hideous apparatus and smashed it to bits. Seizing the momentary opportunity the confusion offered him, Dr. Hollyer rushed from the laboratory and leaped off a cliff to his death.

It was Christmas Eve, 1910. A troubled man walked the streets of Cumberland, Md. He turned the events of the past few months over in his mind. Some time ago he had met and fallen in love with Miss Grace Loeser. She had agreed to marry him and he was very happy—until he met and fell in love with her sister. His passion grew as the day of the wedding to Grace neared. Almost mad with anguish, a means of escape from his promise formed in his tortured mind. With deliberate steps, he entered the Loeser home. It was the eve of the wedding, and his bride waited tremulously for him. On the sofa he kissed her—and she fell limp in his arms. He smiled as he sought to remove the potassium cyanide he had carefully placed on his lips. It had worked perfectly. . . . Too perfectly. Suddenly his face twisted in agony, and he sank back on the sofa . . . dead. His lips, like hers, had been burnt by the deadly poison.



The Brodequin, one of the 'milder' forms of medieval prison devices, was an instrument designed for slow torture that did not necessarily kill its victims. It consisted of a strong wooden box made in the form of a boot into which the victim's legs were placed. It was chained to two posts. Then a large wedge was driven between the knees with a sledge hammer, till the knees were forced out of joint. In this manner, also, the bones of the legs could be broken, if the case called for more drastic treatment.

Charles Charlesworth of Saffordshire, England, was born of normal parents. He was a strange child and, to the amazement of all, he grew with unheard-of rapidity. The speed of his growth increased with each year of his life, and by four he had full whiskers and had reached maturity. At seven he collapsed and died of old age.



THE CHARRED

CHAPTER ONE

The Frightened Girl

MAL VARNEY cursed silently as he trailed the girl in the apple-green dress down the aisle of the great department store. Under his leathery tan, his face and neck flushed a deeper red as salesgirls giggled and nudged each other. A marble-visaged floorwalker lifted supercilious eyebrows and stared curiously at the lean, hard-muscled figure stalking with such obvious embarrassment through the lingerie department.

It was just before closing time; there were few customers on the floor.

Varney forced himself to saunter leisurely. He hadn't any real right to dog

this girl's footsteps, even if he had just saved her life. But that sensitive instinct for threatening danger, which had so often saved his own skin on night patrols and in blind flying, warned him sharply that the girl was terrified to the point of frenzy. It was barely possible that she had stepped in front of that truck accidentally, down on the street in front of the store a few minutes ago—but it hadn't looked that way to Varney.

He halted a counter away. He could just see her pert profile, the saucy up-tilted nose, the defiant chin and loosely



*A novelette of bizarre
and sensational crime*

By STEWART STERLING

WRIST KILLINGS

bobbed tawny hair. And he could see her hands, too, busy at the stocking counter. Too busy!

"Something for a lady, sir?" A wise-eyed salesgirl leaned forward provocatively over her counter of lacy brassieres and satiny girdles.

"Hell, no," Mal answered, absently. "That is, yes. Certainly. You don't suppose I want any of this damned stuff for myself!"

The salesgirl giggled, appreciatively. "Her size, sir?"

"Hold the pose, ladies and gents," drawled the cop. "Keep your eyes fixed on the birdie."



Mal Varney couldn't let a pretty girl kill herself—without first learning why she wanted to. . . . The first of the weirdly charred corpses, hidden under her living room sofa, told him what he wanted to know—and a cop's sub-machine gun, leveled at his belly, made it very clear he had dropped up to the ears in hell-hot trouble!

Varney watched the girl in the apple-green dress out of the corner of his eye. She was about—

“Five feet, three. Hundred and ten pounds, say.”

“Her height won’t help much, sir. What size—” The salesgirl cupped her fingers into a suggestive silhouette. “What size dress does she wear?”

Varney’s face felt hotter than ever it had felt in flights over the Mongolian deserts; sweat trickled down the back of his neck. He had to stall for time; the tawny haired girl had opened the mouth of her handbag, an inch below the counter top; clumsily tried to conceal it with a pleasantly slim body.

“Sir?” The salesgirl was amused at what she conceived to be Varney’s acute self-consciousness at the display of feminine intimacies.

But Varney wasn’t self-conscious now. He was very much on the alert. Fifty feet down the aisle ambled a husky-shouldered individual who spelled trouble. He wore a dark gray suit, a medium gray hat, a tie of no noticeable color. Every item of his attire was so patently unobtrusive that, to Varney’s keen scrutiny, he might as well have worn a badge on his lapel.

He did not accost the girl in the green dress; he merely stood a dozen feet away and smiled smugly behind her back. . . .

Varney knew the methods of store detectives; they waited until the customer had actually left the floor where the merchandise was stolen before they made a pinch, so there wouldn’t be any alibis about absent-mindedness. And the girl was already moving along the aisle. Her bag was closed now, but she had made no purchase.

Varney dug out his wallet; stepped quickly over to the stocking counter. A sign on a miniature easel said, “Special, 97c a pair.” He tossed a five-dollar bill at the gray-haired saleslady, who was gazing angrily after the girl.

“Take five pairs out of that,” he snapped. “Be back for the change, later.” Surely the girl couldn’t have filched more than ten stockings!

AS he hurried past the store detective, he caught the high-sign with which the saleslady signalled that the chase be called off. Varney caught up with the green dress at the top of the escalator.

“As a shoplifter,” he stood behind her on the down-moving staircase, “you are a flop, sister.”

She whirled to face him; he was surprised to see that her hazel eyes registered only relief. He was sure she recognized him as the man who had dragged her out from under the truck radiator at the risk of his own neck, but there was no sign of it in her reply.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Those stockings. In your handbag. Very amateur. A blind man would have spotted you.”

She put a hand up to her throat. “Am I under arrest?”

He chuckled. “Lord, no. I’m no cop. I’m just a guy who liked your general get-up and didn’t want to see you—*Hey!*”

She had slapped him, hard, across the face.

“Why don’t you mind your own business?” Tears welled in her eyes.

“Now, just a minute, sister. I’m not trying to put the bee on you. I’m not even trying to make a pass at you.”

She didn’t wait to hear the rest; she had reached the bottom of the escalator and dashed for the nearest exit. He sprinted after her, knocking parcels out of last-minute customers’ arms, leaving a wake of scathing remarks behind him. He caught her just outside the revolving door.

“Listen to me, babe. You’re in a jam. I don’t know what it is; I’m not asking any questions, but—”

She stooped over, snatched off a high-heeled shoe, swung it like a hammer at the gleaming surface of the store window beside her.

There was a crash of splintering glass, a startled scream from a passerby, a hoarse shout from the uniformed doorman half a block away—the shrill whistle of an attendant inside the store. In another second, Varney and the girl would be the center of a crowd.

He didn't wait for that second. He hooked a short right to the point of the girl's chin, caught her before she collapsed, dived with her unconscious body out into the moving stream of traffic!

He had a break then. There was a cruising cab moving along the curb, empty. He yanked open the door, leaped inside with his burden before the driver could come to a stop.

Varney called sharply, "Nearest hospital, fast. Dame's been cut! Flying glass! Step on it!"

The doorman was running along the edge of the sidewalk, bellowing, but the taximan apparently thought the store employee was merely urging greater speed. The cab rounded a corner on screeching tires.

The girl opened her eyes, stared blankly at Varney for a second. She opened her mouth to scream.

"Yell your head off, sweetheart." he encouraged her. "Sorry I had to clip you, but you're not going to break into jail while I'm around."

She didn't scream. Her eyes were wide with half-smothered fear.

"Where do I take you? I told the driver to hustle us to a hospital, but the only thing you need is a mental examination. I don't suppose you'd care for that?"

She shook her head, dumbly.

VARNEY reached for her handbag, snapped it open. In addition to three pairs of chiffon sheerness, there was a

compact, a lipstick, a key-ring, a crumpled pack of cigarettes, twenty-one cents and a comb. No letters, no bills, no papers or cards to identify her.

"Had it all figured out, didn't you?" He grinned, reassuringly. "Get locked up in the hoosegow under an assumed name and nobody would have any idea where you were. But why? What happens here?"

She watched him silently as he fingered the keys on the ring. A couple of tumbler keys—those would be for her home. A tiny round one—probably a suitcase. A thin, flat one with the numerals 92704 and the lettering CLAYS, the name of a famous chain of restaurants.

He held it up. "Locker, at the restaurant?" She said nothing; stared at him fearfully. "Cashier or waitress at Clays. Sure. All I'll do is call up the nearest one of the chain and ask who has the number 92704."

"No," she whispered. "You wouldn't do that—"

He called to the driver: "Forget about the hospital, fella. The lady's okay, now. Take us to the nearest Clays—"

"No, no, no." moaned the girl. "I can't—they wouldn't—he'd be sure to—"

The cab braked to a stop. The driver looked around, resignedly. "Long as it's on the meter, my time is your time, like the guy says on the radio. But if you'd give me a rough idea where you want to go, it would help."

Varney leaned back and waggled the key.

She gave up. "1644 Burke Street," she said faintly. "The Bronx."

The taxi gears clashed; they rolled over to First Avenue and turned north.

Burke Street was what they called it now, Varney reflected; but when he had been taking planes out across the Sound from the North Beach airport, they had called it the Big Dump. Seen from the air, it had been an immense swampy garbage heap, surrounded by gas-tanks, pow-

er houses and coal yards. A thin fringe of gray and rickety shame-faced tenements faced the waterfront and backed up on this fifty acre pile of smouldering refuse.

House number 1644 was at the end of this dilapidated row of three-story fire-traps. On one side loomed the huge grim cylinder of a gas house; across the street was a dejected shanty devoted to the dismantling of junked cars.

Varney paid off, followed the girl up a flight of shoulder-wide stairs, through an odorous hall. She unlatched a door at the rear of the second floor, went in a few steps, then stood still, listening.

He heard her sigh with relief when she realized the flat was empty.

"Come in," she said listlessly.

He walked into a living room whose only window was barred by a rusty fire-escape, whose only vista was out onto the Big Dump. The furniture looked as if it had been discarded by a second-hand dealer, but the floor had been scrubbed and there was no dust.

She motioned him to a chair, watching him nervously. Varney didn't sit down.

"What's it all about?" His eyes examined the cubby-hole of a kitchen. There was a closet; he moved casually toward it.

"It's about my brother," she confessed suddenly. Was she trying to distract his attention? No—for some of the tenseness had gone out of her face; she seemed more relaxed.

He tried the closet door, opened it a couple of inches. Brooms, mops, a pail—nothing more.

"He's been in prison," she went on, watching every move Varney made.

"That sometimes happens, even in the best families. Nothing to get panicky about." He came back into the living room again, felt instantly the heightened strain in her voice.

"It wasn't anything my brother did. They framed him. They sent him up—for life."

"Oh! That's bad," he said softly; but his brain was hammering, warning him something was all wrong.

CHAPTER TWO

Who Wants a Corpse?

VARNEY moved closer to her. She sat down on the couch, the only sleeping place in the tenement, her throat muscles so constricted she could hardly go on.

"It is bad. But—he's out, now."

Varney paused. "Broke out?"

"Yes."

"You're afraid he'll come here to see you; the cops will trail him and pick him up?"

She rubbed her forehead, wearily. "I thought if I got arrested and Frank saw my name in the papers, he'd know better than to try and find me—"

Varney smiled, a little sourly. "Listen, Miss——?"

"Songar."

"—Miss Songar. I don't mind being played for a sucker if you get a kick out of it, but don't expect me to fall for a line like that. You weren't trying to keep your brother from coming to see you when you nose-dived in front of that truck!"

She put her clenched fists up to her temples; her face puckered up as if she was about to burst into a fit of crying—but she kept a grip on herself.

"You're scared silly." He went over to the bathroom door, noticed the deeper breath she drew, the let-down in her nerve-taut limbs. "I don't know what about, but it isn't just that your brother will get chucked into the jug again."

There was nobody in the bathroom; no place for anyone to hide in there. He came back toward the girl. She stiffened as if she expected a blow when he sat beside her on the couch.

It was just like the old game of "Hot and Cold" he had played when he was a kid. There was something in this apart-

ment the girl was desperately afraid would be discovered. It wasn't in the kitchen, because she eased up when he went in there. By the same reasoning, it wasn't in the bathroom. It was in this room. Close by, somewhere.

The only place in the room big enough to conceal a lurking figure was . . . the couch they were sitting on.

He stood up, and his hand caught the spread which covered the couch, pulled it away.

The girl was rigid with terror. Varney saw a pair of shoe-heels. Men's heels.

"Don't!" She tried to push him away. "Please don't."

He stooped down, grabbed the feet, dragged. The man came out from under the couch. Even before Varney saw the face, he knew from the limp feel of the legs that the man was dead.

He was a small, middle-aged fellow with narrow, weasel-like features and pale fish-eyes that bulged far out of their sockets. The skin of the face and hands was nearly black, though the throat and ears showed the man was white. He was dressed in evening clothes; the legs of his trousers and the sleeves of his coat had been slit open.

Around the ankles and wrists were charred and swollen bands of flesh. Varney knew what those cracked and blackened strips meant.

This man had been electrocuted!

THE girl was standing, now, leaning against the wall and looking very pale and sick.

"Is this your brother?"

"No."

"You know who it is?"

She looked up at the ceiling, as if for help. "Yes. His name is Daillo. Felipe Daillo."

"A Filipino, huh?" And now Varney noticed the black tie; the "evening clothes" were possibly a butler's uniform. "Who

was Mister Daillo—a friend of yours?"

"The man who sent my brother to prison. At the trial, he lied. He claimed Frank had been out in the car with Georgie Haskell, and all the time Frank was asleep in the garage."

Haskell! Now it began to come back to Varney. The younger brother of Chester P. Haskell, of the real-estate family. Barons of the Bronx, the papers called them—because old Eben Haskell, a century ago, had the good sense or good luck to hang onto a six-hundred acre farm in the heart of one of the city's fastest growing boroughs.

Varney remembered the trial, too. A plain enough case it had seemed, when he read the reports in the month-old newspapers that reached him on the Hankow front. The spoiled, arrogant scion of wealth and the surly young chauffeur who objected to George Haskell's attempts to fool around with the chauffeur's sister. This girl would be that sister.

Varney couldn't blame the murdered Haskell too much; but he wouldn't blame any brother, either, for getting angry and knocking down a rat who tried to play fast and loose with a sister like this.

And if the rat happened to die and the wealthy and politically powerful Haskells were looking for a scapegoat—why, that was understandable to Varney. But none of that seemed to explain why the Haskell butler should be found in the Songar tenement, burned to a crisp, just when Frank Songar managed to crash out of stir!

"You figure your brother did this?" Varney indicated the blackened features on the floor.

She looked straight at him; her lips were gray, but there was no quaver in her tone: "I did it."

He made a gesture of impatience. "Stop being silly. How would you burn a man, like that? Saying you did it, won't help your brother. If he killed Daillo, when they catch him, he'll probably get the

chair. If he didn't, the best thing you can do is tell me what you know."

"But I—I don't know—who you are."

He put a hand on her shoulder. "I'm Mal Varney—sort of a trouble-shooter. Other people's troubles, mostly. Maybe you've heard about—"

She nodded. "I have, of course. But I don't believe everything I read. You mean you'd really help me—without calling in the police?"

He chuckled, grimly. "If I called in the law, I'd find it raining eightballs, Miss Songar."

"I can't afford—any fee." She held her hands out, helplessly, to the bare furnishings of the flat.

"I can't afford to take one, sister. Spoil my amateur standing. Suppose you tell me how this corpse happens to be here?"

She hesitated only a second. "I don't know," she admitted dully. "Honestly, I don't. I haven't seen Frankie. I found Daillo dead, lying on the bathroom floor, when I came home this afternoon."

"Work on the morning shift?"

"Eight to two, yes. I hid the body under the couch; I've been here all afternoon with it and it's nearly driven me out of my mind."

"No wonder."

"I thought, if Frankie had come home this morning, while I was out, and found Daillo here—well, anything I could do to give him a little more time to get away, might help. And if I went where my brother couldn't find me—he'd get out of New York."

VARNEY wagged his head from side to side. "So first you tried to commit suicide and then you aimed to get arrested so the police wouldn't come snooping around for a day or so, at least. How'd you hear about your brother's escape?"

"A policeman came last night. A Lieutenant Cady. Said if I failed to turn my brother in, if he showed up here, I'd be

guilty of a felony and liable—" she broke down and began to sob, convulsively.

Varney thought he understood. She'd been sending money up to the penitentiary, probably paying for lawyers to fix up a new trial, doing her best to keep some sort of home together in case Frankie should come out. And now, this.

"You don't believe your brother murdered George Haskell, do you?" he asked gruffly.

"I don't believe he ever killed anybody."

"Didn't he threaten some of the Haskells, at the trial? I remember something—"

She dried her eyes. "Oh, yes. After the judge sentenced him to life imprisonment, Frankie went crazy in the courtroom, swore that every one of the Haskells would burn in hell for the injustice they'd done him. You can't blame him much for that—"

"*You're damn right you can't!*"

Varney pivoted to face a thin, pinch-featured youth who held a menacing automatic in his fist; he had evidently come in through the window opening onto the fire escape.

"Grab for your ears, gumshoe, and hang on tight."

Varney obeyed. The youth stalked warily into the room.

"Frankie!" cried the girl. "You shouldn't have come. They'll get you; they're watching for you. You mustn't stay—"

"I had to see you, Hester. I'm going away. I had to see you before I go." Songar stared incredulously at the body on the floor. "For the love of God! Flip Daillo! Who—?"

Hester clutched his free arm. "You, Frankie—you didn't?"

He shook her off, angrily. "Hell, no! You think I'd crash out of the pen just so's I could go back to the hot seat? Certainly, I didn't do it. I haven't been here for three years; I haven't seen Flip since the rat lied about me at the trial." He

jabbed Varney's belt buckle with the muzzle of the gun. "Maybe you know something about it, fink?"

"No, no!" Hester wedged in between them. "This is Mal Varney, Frank. I—I brought him here. He saved my life. He's willing to help us."

"I don't need any hawkshaw's help," snarled Songar. "I wouldn't trust one of 'em—" He broke off, stepped close to Varney, spun the bigger man around as a screen between himself and the window.

There was a figure silhouetted on the fire ladder; only the head and vizor of the uniformed cap were visible—that and the circular drum of a sub machine-gun.

"Hold the pose, ladies and gents," drawled a deep voice through the open window. "Just like that. Keep your eyes fixed on the birdie. Don't startle it with any sudden movements. Because it spits fire."

CHAPTER THREE

Gauntlet of Death

SONGAR swore luridly. If it had been just himself and Varney, Mal was certain the convict would have shot it out with the officer. But the sister was there; if there was any lead spraying she'd be sure to get hit.

"Up against the wall, all of you. Hang pictures. You know. Hands well up. And don't try any dash for the door, because there's another one of these babies out there, just waiting to speak its piece." The policeman tapped the barrel of the tommy-gun, slid one leg over the sill and ducked into the room.

Hester made a word with her lips. "Cady," she said, silently. Varney had already recognized the thick-shouldered, heavy-jowled bloodhound of the Homicide Squad. He hoped Cady hadn't recognized him.

"Turn around. Face the wall-paper." Cady put a whistle to his lips, blew shrilly.

There was a dull thud against the door, another and still another. The policemen in the hall weren't bothering with any formality about locks.

In a split-second they would be in the room; then all the legal talent in the state would have a tough time keeping Frankie Songar from the death-house. And nothing in the world could keep his sister from being broken-hearted. If anything was to be done about it, Varney decided, it had to be done now!

The ex-aviator stood flat against the wall, his hands over his head. No chance of going for his gun; no sense in risking a free-for-all shooting, if he could have gotten it. But right before him, just in front of his top vest button, was an oblong metal plate in which was set a tiny black lever. Above the lever was white lettering: *ON*.

He bent his knees a little just as the lock on the door gave way and three bulky plainclothesmen stormed in. The "V" of his vest rested right under the down-angled lever of the light switch.

"Cuff 'em up, boys," called Cady, cheerfully.

Varney straightened up suddenly. The lever caught in the notch of his vest. The switch clicked; the room was plunged in darkness.

There was a shout from the three officers who had their backs to the light; a warning yell from Cady!

Varney shoved Frankie toward the lieutenant, lurched after him.

"Window," he hissed in Songar's ear. "I'll hold 'em off."

Aloud, he yelled, "Here he is," toward the door; turned swiftly and plowed clumsily into Cady and sent him sprawling to the floor. No one dared to shoot in the uncertain light; Cady—for fear of hitting his own men; the plainclothesmen—afraid they might put a bullet in their superior.

For a couple of minutes there was a

free-for-all rough and tumble. Varney, after spilling Cady to the floor, shielded Hester from the melee of fists and clubbed revolvers. By the time someone found the light switch and snapped it down to ON, Frankie Songar had vanished into the night.

There was no use attempting to trail him across the Big Dump, but Cady sent two of his men to try it, anyway.

The lieutenant hustled Varney and the girl down to the squad car and drove through the red lights all the way to headquarters.

ONCE at the white stone building on Center Street, Cady wasted no time in rushing Varney up to the Commissioner's office. Paul Wainforth was just getting ready to go home to dinner, and Cady's report didn't improve his disposition any.

He waited until the lieutenant had finished, worried the stub of his cigar and smiled disagreeably at his old friend Varney.

"I warned you, Mal. I told you to lay off cop business."

"I know you did, Paul." Varney didn't smile; his relations with Wainforth were something less than cordial, since the rejection of his attempt, some time before, to join the force in a free-lance capacity.

"Now here, after I give you some friendly advice, what do I find? You're up to your ears in murder."

Varney studied the ash on his cigarette. "You don't really believe I had any part in Daillo's demise?"

The Commissioner spat out a strip of tobacco leaf. "Maybe I don't, Mal. But I wouldn't be surprised if you were getting in the way of our putting the clamps on the killer. I've told you before, crook chasing is a professional's job; we don't want any amateur paddling around in the law-and-order puddle. Not in this town."

Mal nodded soberly. "I heard you the first time. You're afraid I might show

some of your dimwits up. I understand."

The Commissioner's cigar tilted at an aggressive angle. "Get this right, Sir Galahad. You may have been very big stuff over in China, bringing down your three planes a week. They tell me you were a top shot when you were test-piloting for the Douglas people, and it's too bad you got cracked up so you can't get all the excitement your system requires. But don't breeze in here and try to lone-wolf yourself into a reputation as a private investigator! Not on police cases. We've got men on the city payroll supposed to do that. I like you. I've always liked you. When you were flying a crate you were undoubtedly a great guy; but that doesn't milk any moose around here. I warned you about bucking the Department. Now, I'm going to teach you a lesson."

Varney's eyebrows lifted. "You don't say."

"I do say. I'm going to take your pistol permit away from you and I'm going to file charges against you for obstructing an officer in the performance of his duty. If you keep your nose clean, I won't press the charge. If I get word that you and your side-kick, Tabor, are cutting in on any homicide cases, I'll bear down and make 'em stick."

Little crinkles showed around the corner of Varney's eyes. "You can take the gun permit away, but if you prefer charges against me, I'd make the complaining officer look very silly in the Magistrate's Court. You wouldn't risk that."

Wainforth smiled disagreeably. "Wouldn't I?" he began.

Varney stood up abruptly. "Better sweep it out—have it cleaned up right."

"What cleaned up?"

"Your cell. Your best cell. Because, let me tell you this, Wainforth." He leaned over, putting his face close to the Commissioner's. "If you think what I've been doing has showed up your fat-headed

flatfeet, then what I'm going to do will be enough to send me up the river for life."

Wainforth showed his front teeth without humor. "So that's it. Want to play tough. Buck the whole department. Okay, Mal. You might be able to take a Jap bombing squadron apart in the air the way they say you did, but one'll get you fifty if you think you can tangle with the blue-coats' department without getting your rump booted hard and often. Keep on; you'll find out."

"I'll keep on, Paul. I figure this Songar kid has had a lousy break. I'm going to do what I can to rate him a better one. In or out of jail."

"Ah," Wainforth beamed sagely. "I get it. The girl. The influence of the good woman, huh? Sold you a bill of goods. Convinced you her poor, abused brother is an innocent scapegoat. Sad stuff. Old stuff—so old it stinks."

Varney sniffed the air thoughtfully. "Something smells rotten around here; you're right about that, Commissioner."

He went out without a backward glance.

CADY went down in the elevator with him. "No hard feelings, Mister Varney."

"None, Lieutenant."

"But I hope I don't see you some more, forever."

"Mutual, Lieutenant."

There was a man waiting for Varney in the lobby; a tall, rangy man with short-cropped blond hair, a long and prominent nose and the jaw of a pugilist. There was a worried scowl on his face.

"You got bail, Mal? Or just a suspended sentence?"

"Hi, Jock. Neither. The Commissioner gave me his blessing. And a kick in the pants."

Jock Tabor sighed, resignedly. "I wish you would quit playing puss-in-the-corner with the John Laws. One of these times you are going to get shoved in the clink

and nobody will be able to pry you out. When we were bombing them ammunition dumps together you would sometimes listen to a pal's advice. But nowadays—"

"I've just been listening to some advice, Jock."

"What was it?"

"To stay out of police precincts and keep my eyes averted from mistakes of the ruling authorities. Specifically, to keep my paws out of the Songar case—or else."

Jock Tabor squinted at him, gloomily. "I know you, Mal. You ain't content to have a potful of money and a nice, comfortable home and everything a man could wish for. You've got to go looking for trouble. You're aiming to mess around with this dynamite, huh?"

Varney clapped him on the back. "You don't suppose we could ignore a challenge like the Commissioner's, do you?"

* * *

It was ten o'clock that night when Varney's convertible rolled past the impressive arched gateway of the Haskell country estate. The heirs to the fortune of the Baron of the Bronx preferred to live in a more exclusive section of the city than that from which they received their income, these days.

Varney slowed the car only momentarily, picked up speed and drove along the shady road on the Westchester side of the grounds.

"I am glad," growled Jock, "that you are getting some sense in that scrambled skull of yours. I thought for a minute you were going in."

Varney stopped the car. "I am going in, but not through the main gate."

"I take it back," Tabor said. "You are still as screwy as ever. You don't think they've put all their guards out by the front entrance, do you? They'll have just as many of them lugs sneaking around in the shrubbery and hiding in the shadows."

"You may be right, Jock, but I'm still going in. You stay and watch the bus."

"Oh, well, if you're set on it, I'll come along. What do you figure on doing—hack down a section of this fence?"

THERE was a seven-foot wall of heavy steel netting with an angled top strand of barbed wire. Also, there were lights scattered over the lawns and gardens, so that anyone working on the fence for any length of time would be certain to be spotted by the constantly patrolling guards.

"Why do it the hard way?" Varney inquired. "We want to get in fast, because we want to get there before Frankie Songar does, if we're going to stop a killing. We don't want anybody to ask us any questions, so we won't climb up the fence. We'll climb down. Pack your chute, Jock, we're bailing out." He climbed out of the car; looked up and down the long lane of birches and poplar.

"Honest to cripes, Mal. Sometimes I think that crack-up in Nanking really stripped your gears. What do you mean, climb down?"

For answer, Varney stepped quickly to a small birch standing perhaps ten feet from the impregnable fence. Without a word, he began shinnying, hand over hand. One of the branches bent slightly toward the Haskell grounds. He crawled out along it until the weight of his body swayed the flexible limb lower and lower.

When he was a dozen feet from the ground, he hung by his hands, dropped inside the fence and sprinted instantly for the concealment of a clump of evergreens. The limb of the birch sprang back.

Mal grinned as he heard Tabor inching his way along the same branch, grunting painfully. A moment later his ex-observer had joined him in his hiding place. They crouched there in silence as two patrolling guards came down a gravel path.

"The old beezark sure has the jumping jitters tonight," one of the guards remarked. "Shoot any intruder on sight and ask questions afterward."

"How the hell would we know an intruder?" snorted his companion. "There are so damn many stooges snooping around here now you got to be a camera-eye to remember half of 'em. . . ." They disappeared in the gloom.

"You hear that?" muttered Jock. "If any of them slugs catch a sight of us—"

"Don't worry about us, Jock. Just hope they don't catch sight of Frankie Songar."

They didn't make a dash for the shelter of the out-buildings, as Jock had expected; they walked down the path, side by side, after the guards.

"If Chester Haskell has so many of these punks on his payroll they don't even recognize each other," argued Varney, "we can walk right up to the house this way."

They did. Once in the protecting shadow of the huge mansion, the problem became more acute.

"The windows are out, Jock. They're sure to be wired with burglar alarms."

"We'll get a set of lead fillings in our teeth, that's what I'm thinking."

"There's one other chance." They stole cautiously around the rear of the great house and stopped by a slanting bulkhead. It was locked and bolted from the inside. Varney took out a pocket tool-kit, fitted a screwdriver into the socket and went to work on the hinges while Jock kept watch. In five minutes the hinges were off; one of the cellar doors had been pried open.

"Come ahead. Don't fall over your feet, Jock."

When his partner was inside and the door had been allowed to fall back in place, Varney snapped on his flash.

CHAPTER FOUR

Empty Coffins Waiting

THEY were in a huge vegetable bin. There was a light out in the main cellar, but the place was empty. Beside a

huge, head-high cylinder, flanked with an air compressor, Varney paused. He put his head to one of the square metal pipes leading up to the floor overhead.

"Air conditioning," he whispered. "Science's gift to blackmailers. Better than a sounding board. Gives you a listening post in every room. Put your ear here, Jock!"

They stood there on either side of a metal duct labelled: SITTING ROOM, SECOND FLOOR.

". . . But he said he'd see every one of us in hell," complained a woman's squeaky voice. "He's already done for Felipe, and now that he's gotten away from the police he'll surely come here and kill us all, Chester."

"Stuff and nonsense," roared a rumbling bass. "Every cop in the country is looking for that maniac. He wouldn't stand a chance of getting near this house, Emma. Nason has had the fencing electrified; anyone who tries to climb over it will get a very unpleasant surprise."

"Holy mother," breathed Jock.

"I don't care what you say, Chester. It isn't a question of expense. I'm not going to stay in this house another night. I don't like being out in the country—it's bad for my nerves. Marie doesn't like it any more than I do. Besides, the doctor said I needed a change; I'm going to go to the city whether you come or—E-e-e-e-h!" A piercing scream rattled the galvanizing of the air vents. "Help! Police! Murder!"

Varney pulled down the corners of his mouth. "Sounds as if we better hike upstairs, Jock." . . .

Varney expected to find the door leading upstairs locked against them; but it was open. They found no one to challenge their progress until they reached the foot of the rear staircase. There, a burly individual barred their way momentarily, but stepped aside when Varney barked, "Homicide."

At the second floor level they were confronted with a stolid bluecoat who refused

to budge until Varney pushed him bodily aside, shouting, "From the agency, man."

In the sitting room no one commented on their appearance at all. The five people in the room were too busy with the dead woman on the floor and the live woman throwing a fit over on a chaise longue.

Varney didn't pay any attention to the frenzied female on the couch. A stout man with a brick-red skin and vivid blue eyes was chafing her wrists and speaking soothing words, while a gaunt, emaciated individual of uncertain age stood nervously by, gnawing at his fingernails.

The other two occupants of the room were obviously detectives. They were squatting, puzzled, beside the figure of a woman who must have been strikingly beautiful when she was alive.

Her hair had been a soft silver-gray; the finely chiseled patrician features were now contorted in a fixed grimace of agony. But what interested Varney was the marks on her wrists and ankles. Her stockings had been rolled down; around her slender leg bones were the same puffed and blackened bands which he had seen on Daillo. The skin of her wrists was cracked and charred in the same gruesome fashion.

"I'm telling you," one of the detectives blurted, "I seen them same disfigurings on a lad who got the hot squat, upriver."

"It might have been an accident," hazarded the other. "But if it was an accident, how did she come to be stuffed in that closet?"

VARNEY edged in. The two operatives eyed him doubtfully.

"Medical Examiner's office," he explained, glibly. "D.O.A., huh?" He knelt down by the body, flexed the fingers of one hand. They were as stiff as if they had been frozen; rigor mortis had set in.

Varney saw a question in the eyes of one of the detectives and he beat him to the punch.

"Who is she?"

"Mister Haskell's sister-in-law," answered the operative, automatically. "Mrs. George Haskell. They just found her body couple minutes ago."

Varney thumbed the woman's eyelids down professionally, strolled over to the group around the chaise longue.

"Deceased live with you, Mister Haskell?"

The florid man surveyed him coldly. "My sister-in-law has lived in this house ever since my brother's untimely death."

"Why do you stand there asking stupid questions?" wailed the pallid lady on the couch. She had a small, selfish mouth that seemed perpetually pouting; sharp, little close-set eyes and a faint moustache. "It's perfectly clear what's happened to Marie. That devil Songar, who killed Chester's brother, has made good his threat and none of you seem to be able to do anything about it. Now there are only two of us left, my husband and I. We'll be the next to go."

The haggard man put out a bony claw, touched her arm consolingly. "You mustn't excite yourself, Mrs. Haskell. The police have assured us that Songar can't possibly get near this house—"

Chester Haskell stared arrogantly at the scrawny man. "Don't be a fool, Nason. This looks as if he'd been near the house, doesn't it?" His eyes returned to Varney, "I don't remember seeing you, sir. Are you connected with—"

Jock saved him. "One moment, sir." He hauled Varney aside.

"Nice timing," the aviator said, under his breath.

"Nice, hell!" retorted Jock, bitterly. "Look over there, at the door."

Varney swivelled. A man in uniform stood in the doorway. Lieutenant Cady marched toward them with an ugly glint in his eyes, beckoning to the policeman in the hall behind him as he came.

"The nearest exit, Jock," murmured Varney. "Run, don't walk."

There was no way out except through a door leading into an adjoining bedroom, presumably Mrs. Haskell's. They got through it, turned the key just as Cady's fist banged on the panel. The bedroom had another door, leading into the hall. Varney passed it up.

"This way out," he called, leaping through an open window looking out on the sloping roof. Jock slid after him, came to a stop with his feet in the copper gutter.

"Over the top!" Varney was in grim earnest, now. "This place will be alive with cops in a minute. Some of the fat-heads might mistake us for Frankie Songar and shoot."

HE led the way up a steeply pitched angle of the roof to the ridge and went down the other side.

"How would it be if we gave ourselves up and settled for ten years apiece?" Jock inquired, hopefully.

"We have to find a murderer before I'm satisfied, Jock. There is a murderer in these grounds—unless my hunch is very dizzy; and it will be the same killer who pulled the switch on Felipe Daillo and maybe on George Haskell, too."

They wormed their way up another shingled incline as the sudden glare from the contact sparks on a passing electric locomotive threw their figures into blue-white relief.

There were shouts from the lawn below and a spat of flame. A metallic "ping" sounded from a bit of weather flashing; an angry hornet hummed past their ears. They rolled over the top of the roof and dropped swiftly down the other side.

There were at least a score of guards on the lawn around the house shooting flashlight beams up at the roof.

"Damn fools," chuckled Varney. "If we were serious about it, we could drop every one of them in their tracks."

(Continued on page 105)

THE CHARRED WRIST KILLINGS

(Continued from page 104)

"If they didn't drop us off this roof, first. Listen, Mal, what are we sticking our necks out for? There's been two people murdered. Why are we going to bat for the killer?"

"W'ere not, Jock. We're going to bat for Frankie Songar. And his sister. Frankie couldn't have killed the Haskell woman; she's been dead better than an hour, I'd guess. Songar wouldn't have had time to get out here—even if he could get hold of a car which I doubt—and break into the house and electrocute a woman."

"You got any idea who did, then, Mal?"

"Just an idea. If the person who killed Haskell's sister-in-law wasn't Songar, then the one who electrocuted Daillo wasn't either."

Tabor leaned his head against the side of the chimney behind which they were concealed. "We been in a lot of tight spots, Mal, and we done a lot of wacky stunts, but lying cooped up on the roof of a house all night while a bunch of dimwits practice short-arm work on us—this is tops."

"We're not going to stay here all night."

"You got any idea where we're going, outside of maybe the morgue?"

"To the garage."

"Oh, yuh? And why?"

"Because the Haskell woman wasn't killed on this estate; she couldn't have been. There isn't enough electric current anywhere around here to burn her body up that way. By the same token, the Filipino wasn't shocked to death down at Hester Songar's place. So somebody has been doing a lot of running around with dead bodies."

"Oh!" Jock got it. "This somebody must have used a car."

"Correct, observer. And maybe that car is still down in the garage. It might not be—but if it is—" He let go his grip on

(Continued on page 106)

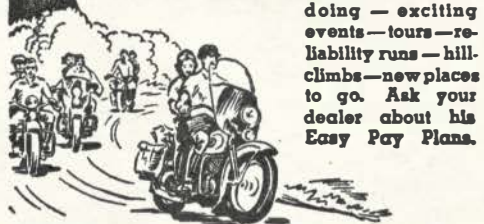


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STRANGE DETECTIVE MYSTERIES

(Continued from page 105)

the other side of the chimney and slithered down the roof. Fifteen feet below them was the flat top of the connecting four-car garage.

"Take off your coat," ordered Varney, stripping off his own. "Tie one sleeve of mine to one sleeve of yours." He knotted the other sleeve of his own coat over the corner of the rain spout. "Makes a fair rope. Take it easy when you go down, those seams might rip."

CHAPTER FIVE

Short-Circuited Murder

TABOR let himself down gingerly, dropped with bent knees, landed safely. Varney followed quickly. In another instant they had gained the turf back of the garage.

"Nice going, Jock. Now, if they've left one of the doors open—"

They had. There were three cars inside; a big, black limousine, a maroon sedan and a station wagon. Varney put his palm against the radiators of all three.

The front of the sedan was the only place he felt any warmth. He looked in the back seat. A couple of lap robes and a folding bridge chair—nothing more. He sat in the driver's seat, looked in the dash compartments. The sedan was the property of Robert Nason, judging by some of the papers in the side pocket. Robert Nason was Chester Haskell's personal and private secretary. But there was nothing in the car to arouse suspicion.

Mal went around to the back. The trunk compartment was locked. In a rack on the back wall of the garage, he found a heavy screwdriver and a wooden maul. He used the screwdriver as a jimmy and forced the lock of the trunk compartment.

"Grand larceny," moaned Tabor. "We committed everything but arson, so far, tonight."

THE CHARRED WRIST KILLINGS

"That's all right, Jock. Here are the tools somebody has been committing murder with, if I'm right."

Varney brought out some rubber gloves, a long pair of heavy glass tongs, similar to fire tongs but made entirely out of glass. Then there were a couple of pairs of bicycle clips, the sort used to keep trouser-legs from tangling in the gears. Finally, he extracted a spool of copper wire and a cannon; a toy cannon of the type employed at camps and clubs for saluting the colors.

"If anybody ever killed a guy with that artillery, he deserves a medal for marksmanship," grunted Tabor. "Damn thing's only good for making a noise. You ought to know that, Mal, being as handy as you are with a Lewis."

"This thing will shoot," Varney answered, "far enough and accurately enough to send a man to hell. *What's that!*"

A crackle of pistol fire echoed loudly through the night. Tabor ran to the door. "They must've cornered Songar," he reported. "There's about a dozen of 'em running like crazy over toward the rock garden there. Will you tell me why that kid came up here, if it wasn't to rub some of the Haskells out?"

"Sure. To get the proof he needs to convince a court he's not guilty of the murder he was convicted of. Part of that proof consists of identifying the person who *did* kill George Haskell."

"Listen to 'em hollerin', Mal," Tabor said sourly. "Like a pack of wolves."

"They've got orders to kill, Jock. Swing that door wide," snapped Varney, diving for the driver's seat of the sedan. "Grab hold of the running board."

He kicked the starter, raced the motor, slammed in the gears. The maroon car leaped out of the garage and into the drive like a startled animal.

"You gone clean nuts, Mal? They'll start shooting at us, now."

(Continued on page 108)

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STRANGE DETECTIVE MYSTERIES

(Continued from page 107)

"Shut up and get inside. That's what I want 'em to do! Hang on to your hat!"

Far ahead in the shrubbery Varney could see a slim figure dodging in and out among the evergreens. Songar had managed to get over the fence, or through it, somehow, but they had spotted him and now they had him cut off and surrounded.

VARNEY thumbed the horn, kept it on as he zoomed the car around the curving drive. The strategy worked. Part of the boy's pursuers were distracted and began to converge on the driveway. The others were stalled for a moment.

It gave Varney enough time to jump the car out of the driveway, onto the lawn and in among the spruce and cedar trees. Men were running toward him, closing in rapidly. He couldn't see Songar, but the kid must be somewhere in that maze.

"Jump in, kid," he shouted. "They're trying to finish you. They won't dare if you're with us."

The boy scuttled out of a clump of bushes, plunged through the door Tabor held open for him. There was still some sporadic shooting. One bullet shattered the side window an inch from Varney's ear, but the guards were on foot. The ex-airplane pilot drove straight at a group of them and the hurtling car scattered them like ten-pins.

Mal ran the car smack against the steps of the front porch. Lieutenant Cady ran up red-faced with rage. Robert Nason was with him, trembling with anger.

Cady poked his gun through the shattered window. "Come on out quiet, Songar, or I'll spatter your brains all over the drive."

"Go ahead," counseled Varney. "You don't need to worry. I think we've got what you came for, here in the back of this bus."

The Haskells emerged cautiously from the front door; Mrs. Haskell was leaning on her husband's arm.

THE CHARRED WRIST KILLINGS

"You've got him!" she shrieked. "Thank heaven you've captured the murderer. We'll be safe now."

"This time," cried her husband, "he'll get the chair."

A dozen men with guns surrounded the car. Tabor and Varney got out, with their hands up.

"You've wrecked my car," whined Nason. "You've ruined it!"

"All in a good cause," admitted Varney. "I've probably saved a few lives as a result. Look here, Lieutenant." He took the paraphernalia out of the trunk compartment and set it on the porch; the tongs, wire, gloves and the cannon and the bicycle clips. "There's a metal bridge chair on the back seat here. That goes with the rest of this junk. Together they make up the trickiest murder set-up you ever saw."

"Are you trying to tell me Mrs. Haskell was killed with a cannon?" Cady was sore.

"That's right," said Varney. "Just what I'm trying to tell you. Here." He grabbed Tabor by the shoulder, forced him to sit back in the bridge chair.

"Hey!" objected Jock. "Not me!"

"Sit still," commanded Varney. "Show you the way these gadgets operate. First, the bicycle clips on wrists and ankles." He snapped them over Tabor's limbs.

"Then a short length of copper wire on each side to hook them up." He made the connections. "Now, the bridge chair itself is steel and forms a swell electric ground."

CADY was beginning to get the picture. "I thought of something like that myself when I saw the burns on those two bodies," he admitted grudgingly. "But where would you get the current? This house juice is only a hundred ten volts or so."

"That's right." Varney stooped over, pulled from the mouth of the cannon an

(Continued on page 110)

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STRANGE DETECTIVE MYSTERIES

(Continued from page 109)

inch-long block of wood with a brass ring attached to the outer end.

"You hook the end of the flexible copper wire in this ring, slip the spool back here so the wire will run easily, slap a cartridge in this miniature mortar, aim it at the moon—and there you are."

He suited the action to his words; yanked savagely on the lanyard. The gun roared like a field piece. The block of wood sailed high in the air, carrying the flexible cable with it, looping it over a telephone wire leading into the big house.

"There you are. If that telephone wire was a high-tension line carrying forty or fifty thousand volts, say, like the lines coming out of the power house down by the Songar tenement, or even like the overhead power wires for the railroad just back of here a hundred yards or so—then in ten seconds Jock Tabor would be a dead man. On his wrists and ankles there'd be the same charred bands you found on Daillo and Marie Haskell."

Nason started to edge back in the crowd. Cady stabbed his gun toward him. "Stand still, you. This is your car this stuff was in, huh?"

"Yes, but—"

"I guess you better mosey downtown with me and explain."

"Wait a minute, Lieutenant," Varney broke in. "How long have you worked here, Nason?"

"Little over a year."

"What I thought," Varney went on quickly. "That stuff was kept in your car to put suspicion on you, if things came to a showdown. The killer we're after, though, has been around a lot longer than that. Ever since George Haskell was murdered and this lad was railroaded."

Jock Tabor got out of the chair, slipped the bicycle clips off.

Varney looked at Mrs. Haskell. He thought she was about to collapse. "This killer put George Haskell out of the way

THE CHARRED WRIST KILLINGS

to make sure the Haskell estate stayed in one pair of hands, instead of being split up as old Eben Haskell intended it to be, among all his heirs—”

“Drop it!” barked Tabor, lunging toward Chester Haskell.

A small nickel-plated hammerless gun appeared magically in the stout man’s hand. He held the weapon on Varney. Mrs. Haskell shuddered, held her hands up before her face and fell to the porch.

“I won’t be compelled to use any such elaborate methods on you,” Haskell snarled at Varney.

He fired as Jock clubbed down his wrist and clamped a grip on his arm. The bullet splintered the glass tongs. Varney picked up what was left of them.

“This was the part I couldn’t figure out, Haskell. When you were through, you had to pull your feed wire off the high-power line. That’s where the rubber gloves and the glass tongs came in, eh?”

Haskell grinned wolfishly. “You will find it difficult to prove.”

Varney shook his head. “The proof will be found in the way you manipulated the estate your father left to you and your brother. You killed your brother and pinned the blame on Songar, here. Your butler probably got suspicious, so you murdered him and left his body in the Songar girl’s flat. Then to make sure your brother’s widow wouldn’t get her share, you put her out of the way, too. That hot-headed remark of Frankie’s in court probably gave you the idea for the business of your private electric chair.”

Cady took Haskell in charge and ordered an ambulance for the stricken wife.

“You, Varney,” he called, “you’ll have to come down to headquarters. We’ll need your testimony, if we’re going to send this baby where he belongs.”

“We’ll send him there,” said Mal Varney, grimly. “That’s *one* job I’d like to see handled by a professional!”

THE END

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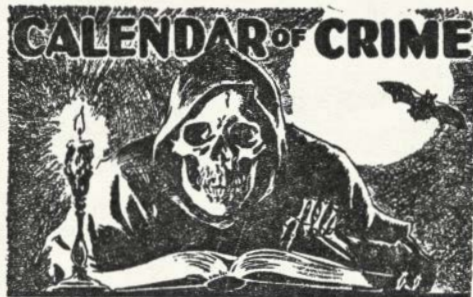
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WITH the world gone mad, criminal America has degenerated to a degree of viciousness and brutality unknown in the history of man. Torch murders, the fiendish Ohio killings by decapitation, torture deaths that plumb depths of diabolic ingenuity unequalled even by the Inquisition's maestros of mayhem—all these and more bear witness to the degradation and ruthless violence of the bandit of the 1930's.

The day of the gentleman safe-cracker, with cultured air and courtly ways, has gone. He was a glamorous figure, in his time—as was the suave, debonair jewel thief and the big-scale confidence man. Glamor and fine manners have no place in a crime picture that includes wholesale machine gun massacres and brutish torture murders. Today, it's the strong arm and the conscienceless heart that rule the underworld.

The war against crime has placed the very latest devices of science at the disposal of public and private investigators. Yet, when they have been brought into action, far too often the same devices have been found in the hands of criminals. In equipment, law and lawless are at a hopeless deadlock. It's Tommy-gun against Tommy-gun, teargas against teargas—and the law is at an actual disadvantage in a man-to-man battle, because it must not endanger the lives of innocent bystanders.

It sounds pretty hopeless, doesn't it? It sounds as though the day is coming when the vicious criminal element will have gained power enough to wipe out the forces of law and order. . . . Well, thank God, that isn't quite the case.

The reason is that the war against crime has enlisted men of ideals and courage and intelligence. On the other side are men little better than beasts, devoid of ideals, of a warped and sometimes low intelligence, and frequently of a highly questionable degree of courage. They are dangerous, to be sure, when they have guns in their hands and the mad fires of heroin seething through their evil brains. But when they come up against a clear-witted, closely integrated law machine, which has the driving impetus of public duty behind it, they're not quite as menacing as they seem.

Curiously, the degradation and brutality of criminals in the last few years has brought new and potent blood into the country's law-enforcement agencies. The finest, strongest, best-fitted men in the nation, revolted by the outrages of the underworld, have joined the forces of the law. And their heroic fight against crime is writing, in red, one of the most thrilling, dramatic, glamorous pages in our history.

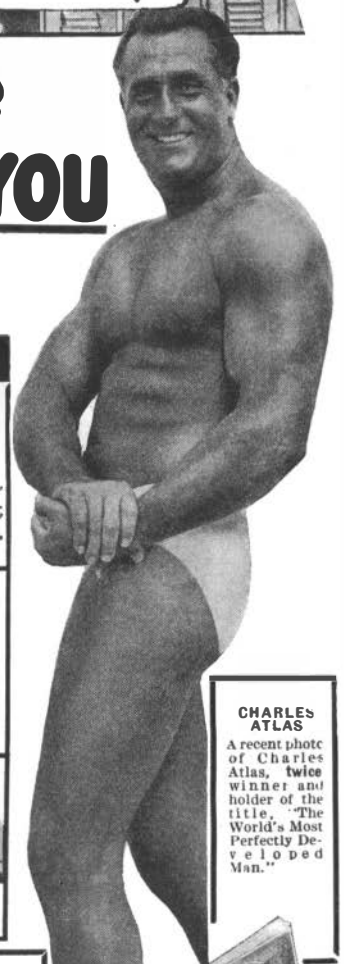


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