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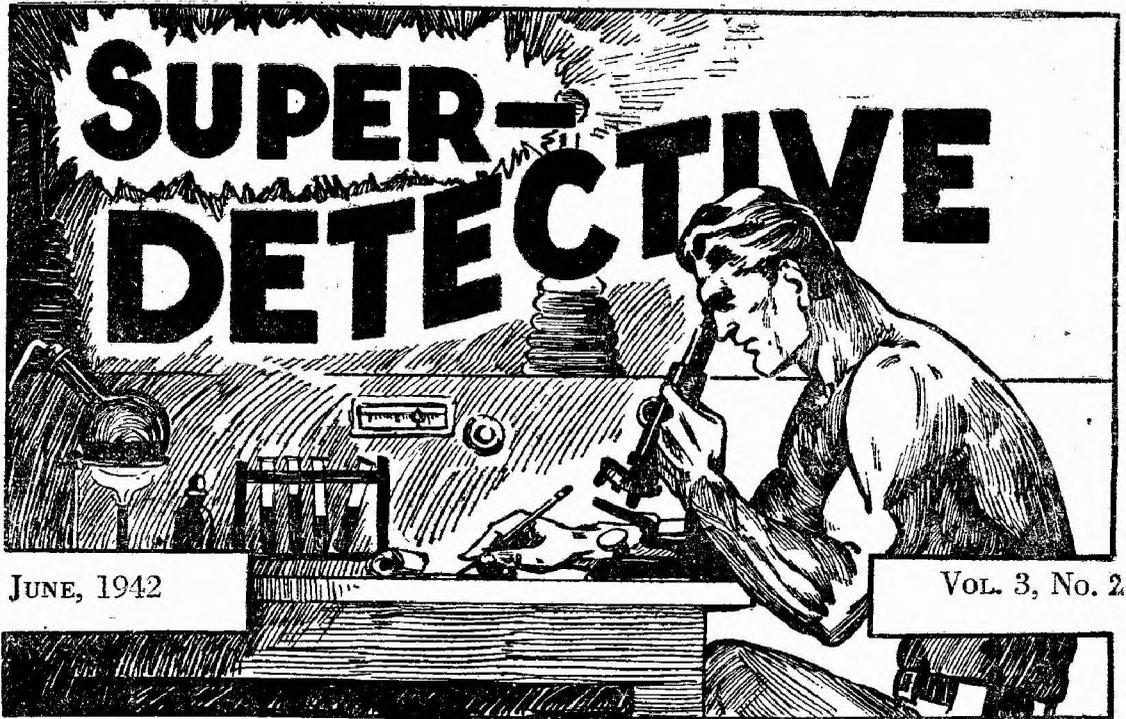
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He'd framed his partner and married his partner's wife, but even then he hadn't finished the crime he'd planned!

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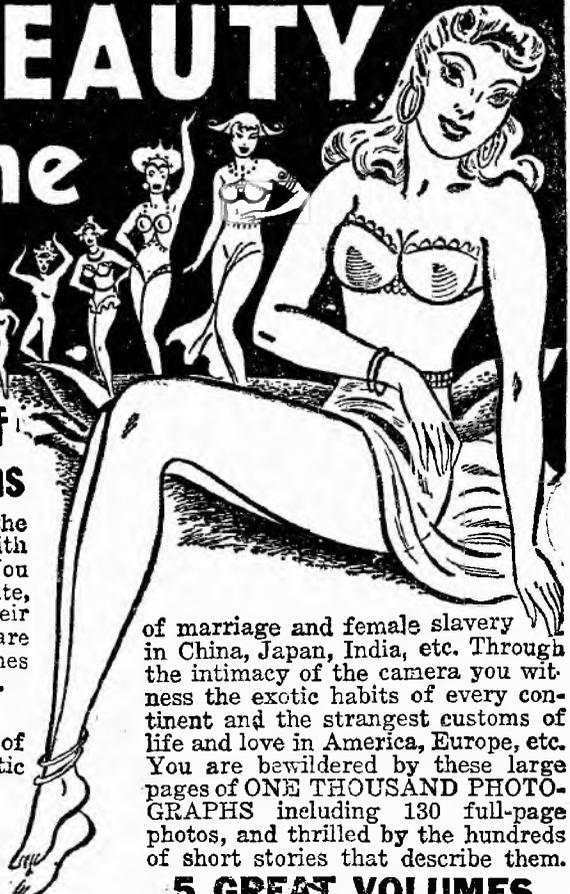
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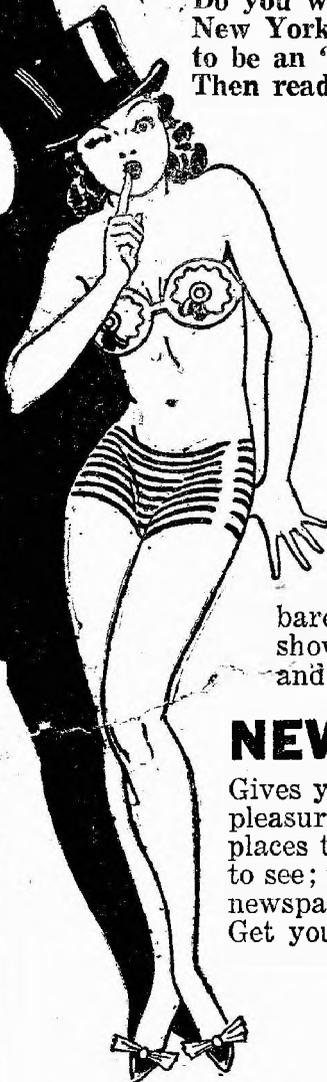


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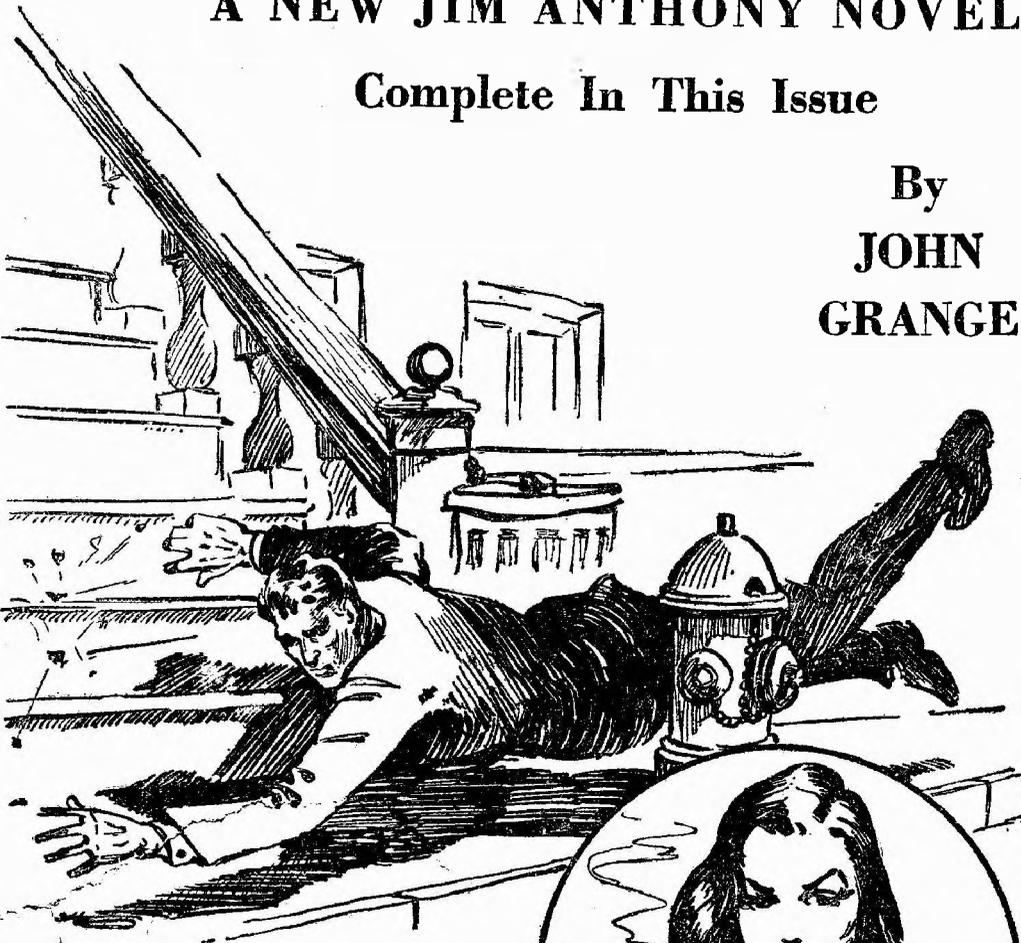
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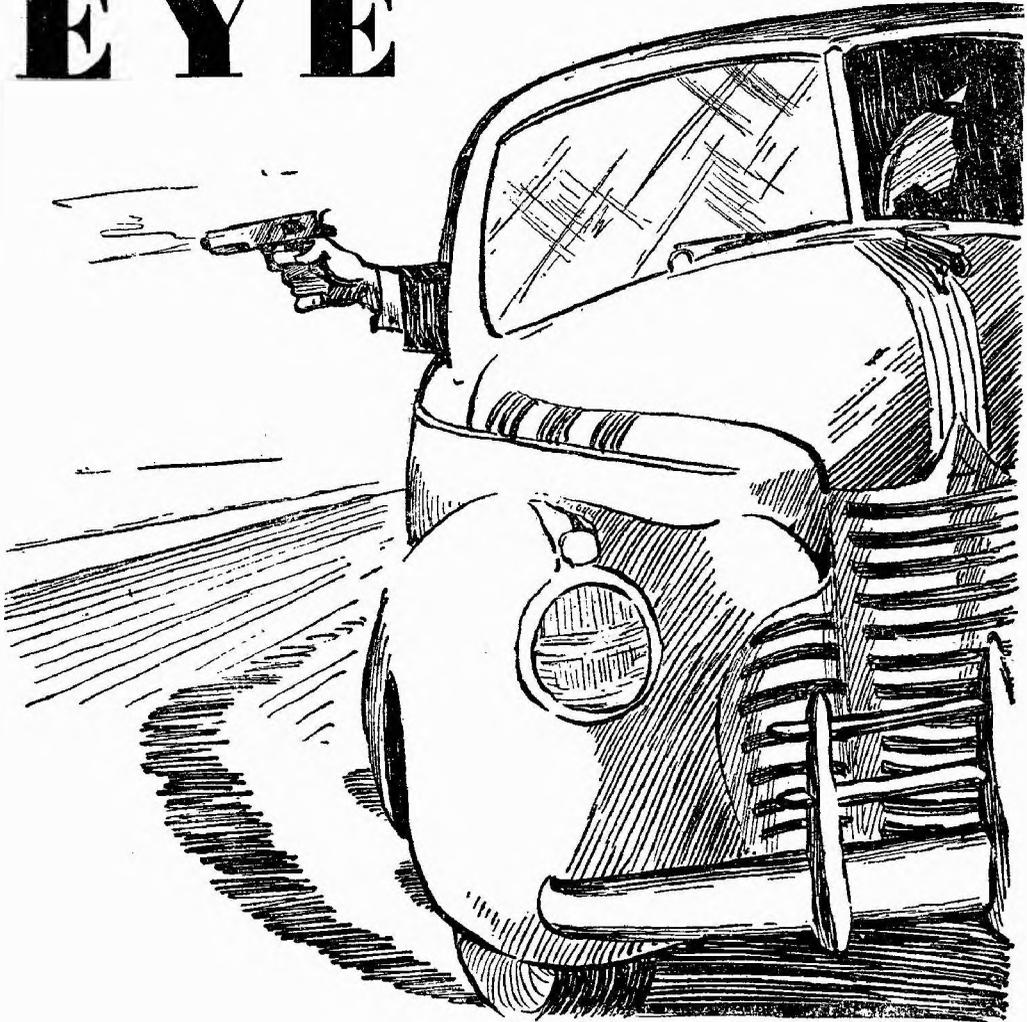


With the roar of the first shot, Jim threw himself to the sidewalk.

Terrible are the passions that make for murder! And none stranger than those Jim Anthony finds in the case of the artist's ex-wife and the men who would kill for her

THE big white convertible slid to a law-obeying stop when the light changed from green—to yellow—to red. The radio softly emitted the strains of one of the nation's foremost rhumba bands, the moon beamed down softly from over-

NEEDLE'S EYE



head, the four occupants of the car were correctly attired in proper evening clothes. In short, it looked like a very big and enjoyable night.

But that was before the traffic policeman recognized the car and came charging over to it, threading his way imperiously through the constant stream of cabs and pleasure vehicles

coming from the opposite direction.

The man at the wheel, black of hair, swarthy of skin and deceptively wide of shoulder, grinned affably. "Hello, Connor," he said. "Fooled you that time, didn't I, stopped for the light."

Connor touched the visor of his cap, grinned in answer, but there was

a trace of self-conscious worry about the grin.

"Evening, Mr. Anthony and Mr. Gentry—and ladies. It's a double pleasure to see you, on account of I've been standing there hoping you'd come this way, ever since Hoyle and Murphy came by in the cruiser."

"Yep," put in Tom Gentry, from the back seat, "it's nice seeing you, but we've a big night ahead, so let's move, Jim." He patted the arm of the very slim young brunette beside him. "It's Marcia's birthday and we're celebrating. Just the four of us, Jim, Dolores, Marcia and myself."

Jim, being a bit shrewder than his friends, knew the big cop had hardly stopped them merely to say hello. "All right, Connor, we're sure enough in a big hurry. What's on your mind?"

"It's hard to say, Mr. Anthony, on account of you may think I'm butting in. Truth of the matter, we cops like to prevent trouble rather than make arrests after it's over and too late. Hoyle and Murphy heard it first up in the Fifties, so they found him, and sure enough he was roaring drunk and toting a gun which he had a perfect right to do but you know who and what he's looking for and——!"

The words emerged in such a torrent, due to the blasting of impatient horns behind, that they were senseless. Jim Anthony leaned over the blonde at his side, Dolores Colquitt, and threw open the door. "Get in," he said. "You don't make much sense this way." Connor got in, more red faced than ever; the convertible crossed the street and continued uptown.

"Now, start at the beginning. Who did Hoyle and Murphy pick up, why'd he have the gun, and where does that concern an innocent party of four out for an evening's fun?" Irrelevantly he added, "And a good night for a party, too, eh Connor?"

"A better night for a murder," answered Connor grimly. "The party I'm speaking of is Manny Meredith."

Marcia Higdon's gasp was plainly audible over the purr of the motor. Jim glanced swiftly into the rear view mirror, saw that she had stiffened beside his friend, that her eyes were wide with sudden fear. The back of one hand was tightly pressed over her mouth, the other clutched the base of her smooth, columnar throat.

MANNY MEREDITH was a Manhattan legend. His trouble had always been too much money, for he had inherited from both his father and his mother at an early age. His foibles and follies were proverbial, and yet his reputation as an etcher and artist placed him in the van of the younger group. Screens, fans, porcelains, portraits and even sculpture tempted him, and at each of these various branches of art he excelled. But etching was his first love.

In twenty-eight years, besides his art, he managed to find time to lead a Himalayan expedition, to fly in Spain and thereby lose his left eye, to back at least a dozen shows and revues—and to get married five times.

Everyone agreed that he was a nice guy—except for his money, which is an odd thing for Broadway-

ites and Cafe Society to say about any of their own set. The point was that his money constantly had him in hot water. For he was an incurable practical joker who couldn't take a joke on himself, and was possessed of a violent temper which was liable to flare up and explode at any time.

Manny Meredith's money was his downfall because he worked on the mistaken theory that there is no trouble at all which a man with sufficient money cannot overcome.

CONNOR, the cop, went on apologetically. "Everybody in town knows that this is not only Missus Meredith's—excuse it, I mean Miss Higdon's birthday, but also the anniversary of her marriage to Manny Meredith. The papers was so full of it a year ago and——!"

Now he was floundering helplessly again. Marcia Higdon, Meredith's last wife, or ex-last wife, was crying openly, Tom Gentry's shoulder sheltering her cheek.

Jim laughed. But he was wondering the cause for the woman's so evident fear. "Come on, Marcia, buck up. He's probably passed out by now. And there's nothing to be scared of anyway. Many a woman has divorced a husband."

"You don't know him when there's something like this on his mind. Let's call it off, I want to go home!" Her voice rose to a wail. Connor, who evidently was one of those bluff Irishmen that couldn't stand crying women, opened the door briskly. He said he just figured they ought to know about it, on account of Manny was such a crazy son—well, such a crazy

guy, and no telling what he would think of. He stood on the curb and watched them glide away, the flushed and worried look still on his face.

Dolores Colquitt, Jim Anthony's fiancée, was an anomaly, in that she was as practical minded as she was blonde and beautiful. Jim grinned at the prompt way she took over. "Now," she said, "I'm talking to three of you. We've planned this little celebration for a month and nothing is going to stop it. Marcia, you're legally separated from this screwball, he has no legitimate claim on you at all. In fact, now that you and Tom are—well, like that—he has less claim than ever. Now suppose we just forget about him, don't even mention his name, and go on with our plans." She laid slender fingers on Jim's arm. "Anyway, with Tom and Jim along I think we're sufficiently protected."

And that was that, thought Jim Anthony, for Marcia Higdon ceased her fearful crying and began repairing her complexion as well as it could be done under the circumstances. Nor was it anyone of the four who mentioned the affair first again. Rather it was the garage man. He drew Jim aside.

"——that's all I know about it, Mr. Anthony. The guy evidently was in the Casa Loma looking for you. Scranton, the manager must have checked to see if you had reservations, and knowing where you always park, called here. That's all he said, just to do him a personal favor and go somewhere else tonight."

Leaving for the two block walk to the club, Jim was in a quandary. He knew the temper of his friend,

Tom Gentry, all too well, and Tom had observed the sideplay between the garage man and Jim with a suspicious eye. Just a little private business, Jim had told him, and as soon as the words issued, was sorry for them. Now he *had* to go to the Casa Loma, to keep Tom quiet! And, as a matter of fact, a bit of a hunch was playing inside the big millionaire-criminologist.

That hunch was whispering—*"Stay away from Manny Meredith tonight. There's death in the air! Death!"*

The blind newsman on the corner found something familiar in his footsteps, spoke to a cabby—and called him back. His information fell in line. And when the doorman at the exclusive Casa Loma asked to speak to him privately, that foreboding, worked overtime within Anthony.

FAT Louie Scranton, owner of the Casa Loma hustled pompously up to their table after they were seated, mopping at his florid forehead with a tremendous handkerchief of white silk. He wanted to know if the damned fool garage man had passed along the word he sent, and in spite of Jim's trying to give him the eye, persisted in telling all. Fat Louie Scranton was glowing at thought of his own wisdom, and when Scranton glowed, he talked.

"So there I was," he said, "hardly knowing which way to move. My doorman sent in word that the coppers took a gun off him up in the Fifties, but he had another one in a shoulder holster. I tell you he acted like a mad man. Kept squirting that

glass eye of his out into his hand and polishing——!"

"Wait, Louie, let's let it lay. After all it's not very pleasant for Miss Higdon."

Scranton looked aggrieved, greatly resembling a small boy just scolded. "Okay," he said, "if you feel like this. But I managed it, I got him out and home. Only he left this for Missus—I mean Miss Higdon."

He drew a folded half menu from his coat pocket, laid it before the ex-Mrs. Meredith. Arising, he started to move away, and his good humor returned at thought of his accomplishment. He winked at Jim over his shoulder. "See me before you go, Jim. This will kill you, the way I got rid of that guy." He ambled away.

Marcia Higdon spread open the folded piece of menu. Her fingers were steady, she bit at her lower lip as she cast puzzled eyes on the bit of cardboard. Suddenly she swayed back into her chair, would have fallen sideways had Tom Gentry not seized her arm. Her face was dead white except for the spots of rouge on her cheeks. Her breast trembled violently with the deepness of her breathing. She took the cocktail just brought by the waiter; the glass rattled against her teeth.

Jim Anthony knew psychology. He fully realized that he was watching a woman fight with every muscle of her lovely body, every cell of her brain to regain control of herself. A little glow of admiration swept through him as she tossed the note on the table and forced a smile.

"Some more of his practical jok-

ing," she said, almost in a normal tone of voice. "Not being a very cultured person I don't know what he means—it's written in some outrageous language." She pushed back her chair. "Should we dance, darling? After all, we agreed not to mention this any further this evening."

"She comes down to the cab and picks him up like a baby and totes him into the house!"



The pair of them danced away, swaying rhythmically, Marcia Higdon chattering up at her partner. Dolores, the eternal feminine, reach-

ed for the note. She said, puzzled, "It's Latin, I believe. And Jim, she lied. She could and did read it!" Jim nodded, took it from her and put it in his pocket, without reading it. He said that he, too, thought a bit of dancing would do no harm.

WHEN they returned to the table, Tom was alone. "Washroom," he explained laconically. But as long moments passed and Marcia did not return, he looked at his watch more and more often. Again Jim and Dolores danced—this time the table was unoccupied when the music ceased. And this time it was Jim who looked at his watch more and more regularly as the moments passed.

"Okay," said Dolores, in answer to his unspoken question, "I'll go." In no time at all she was back, more than a little excited. "Jim, she made two phone calls and *left*. Tom questioned the maid in the powder room, and now *he's* gone. Do you suppose there's trouble after all? Tom is so crazy about her and——?"

For a moment he stared at her. Then he pulled the piece of menu from his pocket and spread it open. His lips formed the words aloud. "Latin, all right," he said, laconically, "but it doesn't make much sense. '*Urbem lateritiam invenit marmoream reliquit*'."

"And that is a fine note to write anyone! A fine——!"

"More or less literally it means 'He found the city brick and left it marble'."

"Who? Who found what city? And why would a crazy-jealous nut like

Manny Meredith write it to Marcia Higdon? Why—yes?"

The waiter said, "Pardon me. Call for you, Mr. Anthony. Will you take it here?" Jim Anthony nodded, the waiter plugged in the phone. But the extent of Jim's conversation was a few startled *whats, wheres* and *okays*.

Without a word of explanation he called for his check. Nor did Dolores ask exactly what had occurred. Fat Louie Scranton, however, caught them at the checkroom.

Jim said, "Oh, yeah, Louie, you were going to tell me how you got rid of Manny."

"I took him home," answered Scranton proudly. Anthony thought of the tall, wide shouldered Meredith, gazed with disbelief at pudgy, short Scranton. Scranton read the thought and grinned.

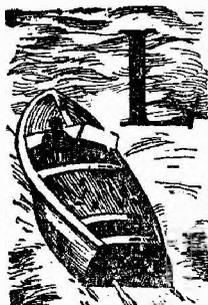
"You won't give me away? I should have trouble here! Not an old timer like Fat Louie. It ain't like it would hurt him, you know, on account of he's got a constitution like a horse. Jim, this'll kill you, but I pulled the old Gay Nineties gag. I slipped him knockout drops. A little—hey, what's wrong?"

"And then you took him home, Louie?" Jim had the fat man by his lapels now.

"Sure, me and the cabby, and we saw him stretched out on his bed. Why——?"

"You better get your hat, Louie. I just had a call from Meredith's, from Tom Gentry. You were wrong, those drops, that gag, won't kill me—but they damned sure killed Manny Meredith. Let's go."

CHAPTER II

Dead Man's House

LOUIE SCRANTON dated back to prohibition days. Not only had he owned and operated many speakeasies, in those old hide-out times, but he had been connected with a good many rings that dealt in the stuff in wholesale quantities. He was an inveterate gambler, rumor having it that he would bet an interested party that the sun would fail to come up the following morning—if the odds were interesting enough. Scranton was definitely in the know.

Now, seeing him approach from the direction of his office, Jim realized the type of man with whom he was dealing. No longer was he the garrulous, rosy-cheeked host so well known to the *bon vivants*. All affability had dropped away from him, like discarded clothing, or a mask tossed aside to reveal the real man. His eyes were cold and wary, he walked with his fat shoulders thrown back, and there was a challenge about him.

A pace to his right and a pace to his rear came a man known to Jim only as Fargo. Fargo was no taller than Scranton, and was as thin as Scranton was fat. His face was dead white, his eyes like shoebuttons, his waxed mustache a thing of beauty. It was Fargo's mouth that was the giveaway. Scranton inevitably introduced him as his secretary; the mouth was almost lipless, a thin, in-

delible line drawn across the unhealthiness of his skin. It was the mouth of a killer.

Anthony said, "Why Fargo, Louie?"

"Because I want Fargo," snapped Scranton. He hustled past Jim and Dolores, Fargo keeping his position. Over his shoulder he said, "I hope to God that same damned cabby is here."

His hopes were realized. The cabby was there. He even said, "Hiya, Louie, hauling more drunks or is one enough for the night?"

"One will be enough for the rest of my life," snapped the fat man. "Back to the same address, but before we start, tell my friend here just what happened! Everything, pal, and leave out nothing."

The cabbie was a little abashed, it took several more questions and even a harder tone of voice to elicit the information. "Why," he said, at last, shoving back his cap and scratching at his head, "Fargo here, he comes out and tells me to drive around the alley. I did, then Louie and Fargo bring this guy out and dump him in the cab. So we——!"

"We? Did Fargo go too?"

"Nope, he went back into the Casa Loma. Louie tells me where to drive—it ain't very far—then I goes up and rings the bell and this female gorilla comes down the steps. I tell her her boss is passed out in the cab, and whaddaya think? She comes down to the cab and picks him up like a baby and totes him into the house."

"Neither of you went in?"

"Did I say that, hell no, pardon

me, lady." The cabbie sounded ag-grieved. "We both went in, me and Louie, figuring this dame couldn't make the front steps. She took him clear on up to the third floor and lays him on a couch and——!"

Louie broke in, "I think my friend would like to know whether or not the fellow was alive when we left."

"Can a guy that ain't alive swallow? She puts him on the couch and drags out a bottle, raises him up and gives him a drink. Then she gets her darning or something and thanks us, and says she aims to sit up with him for awhile on account of sometimes he snaps out of it and goes around the joint busting his pictures and little undressed statues and stuff and ——!"

"Okay, okay, go on, get started, take us back there." The cabbie, once started, was reluctant to quit talking. It took added persuasion from Scranton to get him under way. "Now, Fargo," said the fat man, "how much stuff did I slip in Manny's drink? You saw me."

The voice suited Fargo's appearance, flat, colorless, clipped. "Not over a teaspoonful."

A traffic light held them up momentarily. Beside him, Jim could feel the tenseness in Dolores' body, and wondered if she was thinking as he thought. *Why was Scranton so anxious to clear himself?* And, furthermore, *why had there been such urgency in the voice of Tom Gentry?* As a matter of fact, it did seem highly improbable that the administration of knockout drops—in one drink—could kill a man like Manny Meredith.

THE house, from the outside, hardly lived up to the money possessed by young Meredith. It was the usual brownstone of that particular locality, a series of some dozen steps leading to the front door, three or four steps leading downward to the basement door, which was concealed by the longer series of steps. It differed from its neighbors in height, looking a good deal like a tall, gangling human, badly dressed.

For a moment they stood on the sidewalk, a bit uncertainly. Two houses down a man came out of the cellar entrance to bang a trashcan down on the curbing. Jim looked up at the Meredith house, saw that the top floor was illuminated—the fourth. But even as he looked the entire house suddenly blazed, light pouring from every window. The front door came open, a strained male voice called, "Come in, Mr. Anthony. Quickly, please!"

They went up the steps, leaving the wondering cabbie to wait for his fare. The door, swung wide to admit them, partially concealed the man who had called. Louie Scranton had seen the hallway before, but Dolores and Jim paused instinctively to gaze about them. The entire entrance hall was of marble, gleaming and shining as if the walls and floor and ceiling were alive. At regular intervals were niches, some eighteen inches in height, perhaps half that in width. These niches were curtained with some sort of bronze cloth, matching the double doors leading to the right, and the door of ordinary width—also bronze—at the end of the hallway. Some six feet from the floor, leading from the front door toward

the rear, was a deeply carved frieze.

In the brief seconds that he stood there, startled by the cold beauty of the hallway, Jim's trained eye noted two significant things. The frieze was unfinished, it did not reach entirely down the right hand wall. It represented nymphs at play with satyrs.

Already Scranton's heavy tread could be heard on the marble steps. The same strained, petulant voice said, "*If you please, Mr. Anthony!*"

"Just a moment," he answered, and deliberately walked away. He could hardly believe his eyes. For each nymph, no matter what her posture, was identically the same!

His fingers drew aside one of the small bronze curtains. Evidently this made contact with a concealed switch, for soft light poured down on the twelve inch figurine of a woman within. Her hands were crossed over her high breast as if in shame—or supplication—but her head was thrown back on the column of her throat. Again, the same woman!

And the woman was Marcia Higdon, ex-wife of Manny Meredith, who no doubt had carved this marble.

HE TURNED away then, knowing that Dolores waited at the foot of the stairs with impatience, and for the first time observed the man who had admitted them. He was tall, as tall as Jim himself, his shoulders fully as wide. He wore a yellow silk sweater that showed his magnificent torso, and a pair of baggy, dark blue corduroy trousers. But it was his face that attracted attention, for it was a face of ultimate evil—that of a beardless Mephistopheles.



"It would take a hell of a shot to kill a man like this!"

Now where have I seen this guy, before?

Wonderingly he turned back to the

frieze. There was no doubt of it now.

He spoke again. "Yes, yes, I modeled for Manny if that's what you're wondering. Will you please hurry?" Scranton and Fargo were already out of sight about the first bend, Dolores had paused up some half dozen steps. The model stepped aside for Jim to pass him, saying, in explanation, "I've studied with Manny for over a year, paying him by modeling when he needed me. My name is Nic Remus, with no *k* on the Nic, please."

Jim nodded, grinning, took Dolores' arm, hurried upward. In the middle of the third flight of marble stairs, he felt a tremor run through her. She whispered, "Marble! Ugh! Too cold and tomblike to suit me!"

And then they were on the top floor and Jim understood why the house looked so oddly out of proportion from the street. This floor had evidently been added by Meredith as a place to work. The door to the right stood open, revealing an ordinarily furnished room with a not-too-expensive rug, and rather cheap furniture.

Passing through the far door, Jim Anthony, millionaire criminologist extraordinary, entered into one of the strangest scenes and likewise one of the strangest groups of people he had ever encountered in his life.

There was but one word for this littered studio, and the word was *dirty*. The smell of paint and turpentine and lacquer overhung all. Odds and ends of furniture sat about disconsolately, some half covered with stained rags and articles of clothing,

all white with dust. Here and there were irregular chunks of Carrara marble, as yet untouched by a sculptor's hammer. There were at least three easels, each bearing its own unfinished painting, and sculptured details, hands in various postures, feet, forearms, calves, solitary shoulders. A wide alcove at the far end of the long narrow room was almost obscured by a group of people.

Someone called, "Jim!" Hurrying footsteps came toward him. Tom Gentry's face was so pallid that his freckles looked almost black. "Jim!" he said again, and seemed suddenly speechless.

"Take it easy, Tom. Come on, we'll have a look."

CHAPTER III

Before The Inquest



OF COURSE there were some sane and normal people in the room, Anthony reassured himself wryly. Dolores Colquitt and Jim Anthony, at least. Marcia Higdon was the epitome of stark, cruel fear. The sort of fear etched on a person's features when he or she knows there is absolutely no escape from the catastrophe that threatens, and yet is not at all certain from where that catastrophe will strike. She stood against the wall of the big alcove, her arms outstretched, palms flat. The wall was darkly painted. Clad in a white evening gown of some soft material that followed

every contour of her figure, she might well have been again that statuette in the niche downstairs. Her lips were a red blotch, doubly red because of her pallor, her eyes were wide, and filled with nameless terror. Her breasts rose and fell in quick tremors that seemed to flow through every inch of her body.

Anthony had a curious thought: *How like blood are her nails and her lips.*

Tom Gentry made a sound of pity and compassion in his throat and rushed to her, seizing a hand and attempting to reason with her. She did not take her eyes from the corpse, she might have been a manikin rather than the extraordinarily desirable young woman of Manhattan who had ridden so joyously beside him only a few short hours before.

From those two, Jim's eyes carried on to the woman who kept darting about, bumping into first one person and then the other, a sewing basket beneath her arm, her eyes on the floor. There was no doubt as to her identity. She was the woman mentioned by the cabbie as the "gorilla" who had carried Manny up three flights of stairs. She was all of six feet in height, and possessed the frame to go with it. She weighed at least three hundred pounds. Her dress was the black, conventional garb of elderly housekeepers, and she wore a small lace cap on her head.

Jim Anthony stepped forward into the group by the corpse just in time to receive her massive shoulder, as his eyes had temporarily left her. She raised her face to glare at

him. The face went with the body, large of mouth and nose, a fringe of black moustache over her thick lips. The eyes, too, were large, black until it seemed there was nothing but pupils, the whites criss-crossed with tiny veins, the composite picture pillowed on bluish liver pouches.

Jim snapped, "I'm Anthony, what are you looking for?" The trick had worked for him in good stead before. It did again.

"I'm Mrs. Siddons, the housekeeper," she wheezed. "Thank God you've come, he's been murdered." She gulped, and added, "I'm looking for a needle." And to his amazement she went right on looking for it!

Which allowed the next Dantesque figure to fall into his line of view. This one, thought Jim, had the features of a well aged satyr rather than a young one.

He was bent over the corpse of Manny Meredith and the top of his bald pate cast back light like a reflector. From time to time he glanced up at the group hovering about, like a knowing gnome, with his dirty, streaked beard and parchment face. He wore an old fashioned nightshirt, and only later—because he was on the opposite side of the couch on his knees—did the wrinkled black trousers and the sloppy house slippers become visible.

SCRANTON was an evil Budha waiting to see which way the wind would blow, and Fargo, at his elbow was a snake ready to do his master's doing. Nic Remus—with no *k*, please—leaned against a wall smoking,

every secret evil and vice since the world began seeming to show plainly in his face.

Because Jim Anthony had a card index mind, because he could sweep his eyes over a group once or twice and definitely classify each member, it was only a few seconds, perhaps a minute, after his entrance that the words of the play began. The fellow arose from the corpse, and spoke in a peculiar monotone. His little eyes danced from beneath bushy brows, he rubbed thin skinned hands one after another over the shininess of his bald head.

"I warned him. I told him. It was his heart, I often told him he'd go off in a spell!"

Mrs. Siddons ceased the relentless search for her needle and shook the sewing basket at the goatlike little man. "You! You!" she screamed in a voice that made the windows tremble. "You old reprobate, you—you—Uncle Ike—you lie! Warned him! You encouraged him! And no matter how much he drank he was strong as a horse, a horse! Ask his real doctor, Doctor Steel, not an old quack like you!"

Jim grabbed her shoulder, shook her into quiet. "Hey," he admonished, when she paused for breath, "not so loud. Who is the fellow?"

This time her voice was sullen, but lowered, at least. "Him!" she sniffed. "Nobody at all but Old Ike Crane, who calls himself a doctor. Some ragtail relation of poor Manny's, living here on him, getting his spending money by getting the poor lad drunk! I tell you Manny's been murdered, and here's the one that

did it, that old goat right there! They quarreled every time they saw each other!" She pointed her finger dramatically at the old man.

He cupped his hand behind his ear, leaned forward, his eyes venomous. "Hey? Hey?" he intoned. "What's that she said? What's that?"

The younger satyr spoke, smoke pouring out of his nostrils, studiously studying the glowing cherry end of the cigarette. "I don't want to mention any names, but I'm of the opinion a man like Manny wouldn't have heart failure. I saw a certain young woman ring the bell and enter here about ten, I believe. I——!"

ALL eyes turned to Marcia Higdon. But she did not take her gaze from the corpse on the couch. Tom Gentry, however, bounded from her side blazing with anger. Only Jim's clutching fingers prevented his hurling himself on the man in the yellow sweater.

"Why you—you!" he sputtered. "What are you going to say when ——!" He actually choked on his anger and it was seconds before he recovered. Then, "Listen, Jim, listen to this. Marcia discovered the corpse and called me—but she fainted first and has no idea how long she was out! I grabbed a cab and came here at once, and this fink here was running down the front steps while I paid off my cab. It's——"

"A damned lie," put in Remus. "Mrs. Siddons will tell you she called me to come over. You were here too, you probably heard her call and——!"

This time it was Jim Anthony who



lence. A tense, expectant silence, as though everyone present was waiting for the explosion of a powder keg and was not certain whether the best thing to do was to run for it or stick around and hope for the best.

raised his voice to a harrowed scream. "Shut up! Damn it, shut up! How can I make heads or tails out of anything." And Anthony obtained si-

A moment later Remus reeled back, bleeding, into the cops' arms.

"In the first place," he went on stiffly, "all we know is that Manny Meredith is dead. We don't know that he's been murdered. I doubt it very seriously." He strode toward the corpse.

Manny Meredith looked about in death as he had looked in life, three sheets in the wind. His lips were pulled back in a sardonic grin, both his eyes—the artificial left as well as the right—stared straight upward, seemingly with natural brilliance. He was not wan, and pale, rather there was a flush on his cheeks. Someone had loosened his white silk shirt at the throat, and his coat of Scotch Tweed was thrown back. He leaned ~~and~~ smelled the dead man's lips; there was no odor other than that of liquor.

Tom Gentry interrupted. "If you'll let me finish what I began, perhaps you can land in the middle of the funny occurrences that have been going on around here. And I do mean funny!" He glared at Nic Remus, who smiled in reply and lit a cigarette from the butt of its predecessor. "Should I start at the beginning?"

Fargo contributed his first bit to the affair. "Hey, you ain't no cop, you ain't the law!" He was rewarded by an elbow in his ribs that almost upset him—from Fat Louie Scranton.

Jim disregarded the gunman and told Tom the beginning was the customary place to start anything.

"Okay. Marcia got worried as hell as we danced, and I don't mind telling you why. Meredith had warned her that if he couldn't have her, no one else could. Strange as it seems,

we're in love. She simply got afraid that Manny would sleep off his drunk and come back again. So she called him up in the powder room and—!"

"Talked to him, when he was out like a light?"

"No, she talked to Mrs. Siddons, damn it!"

"That she did," said the housekeeper. "And I told her Mr. Manny wasn't home, though he was." She sniffed again. "The very thought of her drives him to more drinking and I knew he'd had enough for——!"

"Go on, Tom. You found out from the maid where she called and came out here?" Tom nodded, started to continue, but Jim snapped, "She made two calls. To whom was the other?"

Nic Remus, the man of evil, spoke up. "To me," he said, calmly. "Manny and I were friends. She wanted to know if he was at my place. Which is three houses down the street."

MMARCIA HIGDON said nothing at all. The body of the man to whom she once was married fascinated her, drew her eyes like a bright and glittering snake draws those of a bird. She did not move.

The only noise in the room for the moment was Tom's strangled breathing. "Okay. She called you, then, and to hell with you. I know she merely wanted to talk him out of trying to do something to me." He glared about as though defying anyone there to deny it. "She came here and no one answered her ring, so she came on in——"

"How?"

"She still has a key, damn it, Jim. Just never gave it back." He crossed the room again and put his arm about her unstirring shoulders. "She didn't hear a sound in the whole house, so she went on upstairs and into the studio. She found Manny dead, and she fainted. When she came to, she called me."

"Where were the housekeeper and Doctor Crane?"

"I'm coming to that. I beat it over here just in time to see this monkey running down the steps——!"

"It's a lie," said Nic Remus. "If you came in a cab maybe you can prove it by your cabbie?"

"Damn you, you know he was driving off, he wouldn't have seen you!"

"So you came in," encouraged Jim, "and——?"

"The door was open, so yes, I came in. I called and heard nothing. Oh, don't raise your brows, you'll understand in a minute. So I started up here. On three, the floor below, I heard some one hammering on a door. I went in there——there's a small hallway behind the bronze door——and found Doctor Crane locked in his room and mad as hell!"

Mrs. Sidons' sniff was again awe-inspiring.

"I came on up here then, and found Marcia, fainted again there in the entrance room. Right by the phone. She'd passed out right after calling me, but that was the *second time*, remember. Once by Manny's corpse, again after calling me. While I was looking at Manny——!"

"Where was Mrs. Siddons?"

"Damn it, let me finish. Locked

in that supply closet there with a lump on her head as big as an egg. Somebody turned out the studio lights while she was sitting there sewing beside Manny——!"

"He was alive then?"

"And snoring," put in the housekeeper.

"——and when she walked over to turn them on again, somebody bopped her on the head and locked her up and——!"

FAT Louie Scranton snapped, "And so Fargo and I will be going, Anthony. You saw me at the club while all this was going on. Somebody came in and put the screws to Manny, that's all. Locked the old goat in his room and whammed the Big Bertha here. So——!"

"So damn it, Scranton, you're not going until I get the police. Maybe he was killed by this 'somebody' but there's not a mark on him that's visible, like throttling marks. There's no blood to denote a wound. He might have died while a burglar was in the house, died from the effects of your ch——!"

"Stop! Fargo!"

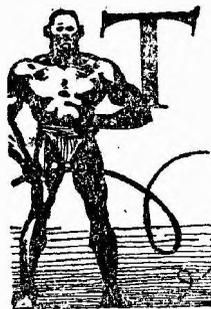
Fargo moved then. He stepped from behind the boss and the big .45 looked the size of a cannon. "I'm going to give you a little advice, Anthony, then I'm leaving here. If I were you, I'd forget about what I told you as a joke, see?"

And of the two, the most dangerous by far was the fat man.

Anthony was no fool, and he was unarmed.

He waited until they had been gone a full three minutes before calling headquarters.

CHAPTER IV

More Than a Haystack

TROTTER of Homicide was a rarity, so to speak—an honest cop who had come up the hard way. He was not given to derby hats or tilted cigars, nor to saying, "So you won't talk, hanh?" But somehow or other he would never be mistaken for anything else but what he was—a homicide detective. There was little love lost between him and Jim Anthony, though circumstances had thrown them together on many cases. Trotter was of the old school, he believed in a mild form of the third degree and relied a great bit on stool-pigeons. Anthony was scientific and deductive, and also a millionaire athlete and sportsman who dabbled in criminology as a hobby rather than a profession. Which, of course, doubly damned him in the eyes of the professional, Trotter.

To top it off, Trotter was troubled with dyspepsia and had been hauled out of bed by headquarters, for Anthony had particularly requested his being sent.

Now he stood in the alcove glaring down at the dead man as the medical examiner finished his work. Trotter growled, "And you claim to be brainy, Anthony. Damn my eyes, why you'd get a homicide man on the case is more than I know. Hell, all you needed was a doctor and the robbery detail. The guy died from

either the chloral or an overdose of liquor, and somebody else robbed the house. You saw his clothes—wallet gone, and Fat Louie Scranton wouldn't pull anything like that. You also saw the safe open, and——!"

Jim, the detective, and the medical examiner were alone in the alcove with the corpse of Manny Meredith, now stripped naked. The medical examiner arose and pulled the sheet over the body. "No external mark," he said, beaming and rubbing his hand. "Body well developed, shows lots of exercise in spite of his drinking so heavily. Have to remove his in'nards to get the truth on the chloral but it would take a hell of a shot to kill a man like this and——!"

Anthony said, a bit coldly, to Trotter. "You heard me talk to Doctor Steel, his personal physician. Steel said his heart was all right. You have the story of what happened, Trotter, and I'll give you six, two and even the man was murdered!"

"How?" asked Trotter patiently. "Poison, maybe, we'll know tomorrow. In the meanwhile, nobody will run away. Surely not his ex-wife, and not his housekeeper, or not Uncle Ike. As for Fat Louie Scranton, hell I can pick him up anytime I want him. I feel bad, I tell you; I'm going home. Matter of formality I took everybody's prints and let them go—only your girl is waiting for you. If I had something to go on——!"

"Prints on the safe?" asked Jim.

"Be done anytime, damn it. No matter what it is, murder or what-not, it'll have to wait till tomorrow, I got the damnedest bellyache a man ever had." He turned and walked into the studio proper, pausing mo-

mentarily before each *objet d'art*, rocking on his heels disconsolately.

BUT the thing would not adjust itself satisfactorily in Jim Anthony's mind. There was the matter of the note left at the Casa Loma for Marcia Higdon by her ex-husband, a note written in Latin, apparently meaningless, but which caused her to rush to a phone and call a man she hated. Also, her two faints, which although entirely possible, were hardly plausible.

Fat Louie did not quite ring true, either. He was entirely too willing to go too far to keep himself out of it, to please Jim. The drawing of a gun had been uncalled for. If he wasn't lying about the knockout drops what was he afraid of?

And old Uncle Ike Crane, who had lived on his relative's bounty for years, why had he lied? Claiming he had warned Manny that his heart was bad and liquor would kill him, and, according to the housekeeper, drinking with him like an old toper instead.

Nic Remus lied, too. Tom Gentry was Jim's friend, Jim knew him through and through. If Tom said he saw Remus descending the steps to the street as he, Tom, arrived, then without doubt Remus had been so doing. Remus was a smooth one, a wise one. He'd challenged Tom about the cabbie, implying of course that it was Gentry's word against his, and no doubt he would stick to his denial. What was *he* covering?

As far as Mrs. Siddons was concerned, it was probable she was knocked unconscious in the darkness and put in the closet as she said. At

least the knot was on her head. And undoubtedly she loved Meredith, for she had carried him up the stairs herself when they first brought him home and——

He was only faintly conscious of the fact that Trotter was talking to a man at the door, but at the sound of approaching footsteps he broke out of his train of thought.

Trotter was worried. He said, "Look, Jim, this Higdon woman, just what do you know about her?"

"Why, not much. She and Tom are in love, she used to be married to Manny Meredith and I think he met her in New Orleans."

"How'd her story go? Said she discovered Manny dead, made it as far as the phone in the anteroom, called Tom and fainted again?"

"That's what she said. What's wrong?"

"Not much," said Trotter with infinite sarcasm, "except she lied like hell. Her prints are all over the safe we found open, the only ones that are worth a damn."

Jim laughed. "And then I suppose she locked Uncle Ike in his room, kayoed Mrs. Siddons, all three hundred pounds of her and dragged her to the closet, after which she robbed the safe like a Jimmy Valentine, sandpapering her fingers——?"

"Hell, she must have known the combination, she was once married to the guy. According to her own admission she still carried a door-key."

THERE was no denying this. Trotter asked for and received Marcia Higdon's address and phone number, and while he was gone to dis-

patch a policeman to bring her back—after which Trotter had all intentions of turning the thing over to the robbery detail and departing for home with his aching stomach—Anthony resumed his original thread of thinking.

He had been turning Mr. Siddons over and over in his mind. Funny, how in the presence of the corpse of a young fellow she loved she could go bunting her way about looking for a—what was it? By God, she was looking for a needle, she'd been doing some sewing or darning when the lights went out. Could it be like that? He moved toward the dead man on the couch, thankful that the meat wagon hadn't arrived.

He leaned over the corpse, gritted his teeth and forced himself to the act. Closer and closer he bent over the cadaver, and a moment later when Trotter found him so engaged, he said, "Well, hell, if you want to kiss a corpse go ahead, I won't tell. Your girl got tired waiting anyway, said to tell you she was going home. Which is where I'm going as soon as robbery—."

"No, Trotter," said Jim grimly, "I think you'll stay. Look."

"My God," said Trotter, "you got a nerve. You took out the glass eye. Look where?"

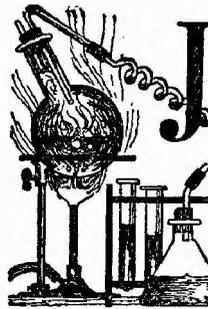
"In the eye socket, Trotter. See that gleam there? That will be a needle, probably a darning needle. Somebody that didn't like Manny locked the old guy in his room, turned out the light and slugged Mrs. Siddons, squirted out Manny's eye and shoved a needle beneath it, probably with a thimble."

Trotter looked. His face turned

red and choleric. Straightening he growled, "Dames use needles. Dames sew. By God, wait till that Higdon babe gets brought in!"

CHAPTER V

Etched In Blood



JIM ANTHONY spent the next few seconds damning himself vigorously for his own acute powers of concentration and detection. Tom Gentry loved Marcia Higdon. The least that Jim Anthony could have done, he told himself, was to keep his suspicions to himself. Without doubt, at the autopsy, the m.e. would have discovered the truth, that a needle driven into his brain through an empty eye socket had been the cause of Manfred Meredith's death. But, at least it wouldn't have been Jim Anthony who tightened the web on his friend's fiancee! Now—now what?

For try as he might, Jim could not make the circumstances less damning for Marcia Higdon. At least not in his own mind, and Jim could hardly withhold truth. Her great fear and nervousness through the early evening when Connor the cop, the garageman, the news vendor and the others had warned them about Manny, how she had even wanted to break the party up. Her prints on the safe, too! Her actions in the alcove, her various lies.

Could it be, he wondered, that she had called Nic Remus to assist her?

For most assuredly she had never slugged the big housekeeper and dragged her into that closet. Uncle Ike Crane was deaf. It would be easy to turn the key in the lock of his door. But the matter of three hundred pounds of Mrs. Siddons was something else again.

*"I'm asking you one thing,"
Jim said grimly. "Did you kill
Manny Meredith tonight?"*



Trotter, dyspepsia forgotten, was now going into action. He dispatched a policeman to the house of young Remus, another for Uncle Ike, or the Doctor as he called himself, and still

a third for Mrs. Siddons.

"Might as well get started," he said mildly, eyeing Jim in a peculiar way. "The others will be here before long. I also got a pickup for Fat Louie and Fargo." He hesitated for a minute. Then, "You suppose Tom took the girl right home?"

Jim stared at him while a man might have counted a full score slowly. "I get it," he said. "You said women used needles, and you've got Marcia's prints on the safe. Tom and Marcia were the ones who should fear Manny and you're figuring Tom and Marcia killed the guy—Tom kayoing the housekeeper? Trotter, you're nuts! You're—what?"

The door from the anteroom burst open and a white faced copper yelped, with no respect for seniority, "Hey, Trotter, come along quick. The fat dame bumped herself off!"

THE kitchen and Mrs. Siddons' quarters occupied the basement of the tall, thin house. The uniformed cop sent for the housekeeper panted ahead of them, talking breathlessly. "And I knocked and I knocked and knocked and nobody answered so I said hell, maybe the big dame is a hard sleeper, like my wife. I opened the door and turned on the light and there she was stretched out on the bed as dead as——!"

Trotter managed to gasp, "How do you know she did the Dutch?"

"Hell, she's been hitting the bottle and crying like hell, and she was nuts about that Manny wasn't she? She——?"

They skittered into the basement, through the kitchen, the spic and

span little living room, and into the bedroom.

God, Anthony was thinking, could *she* have killed this Meredith and knocked herself off from remorse?

She was, as the policeman said, sprawled out on the bed, not lengthwise as she would have been normally, but across it, her great legs dangling over the side, her great feet on the floor. A bottle of brandy sat on the table at the head of the bed, a bottle about three quarters full. The glass was in fragments, shattered at her feet.

Together, Trotter and Jim leaned over the corpse. Tears were still damp on her cheeks, she could not have been dead over a few minutes. "Get a doctor," roared Trotter to the gaping cop, "and maybe we can save her yet!" The cop clattered out.

Jim said, "Not a chance, Trotter. Know what it was, don't you?" The fat face had a strangled, contorted look, and the skin was slowly turning cherry red in larger and larger spots.

"Sure," answered Trotter bitterly, "I've seen it before. She took herself a slug of potassium cyanide. Damn it, now we may never know the truth about Meredith!"

Jim shook his head slowly. "She didn't commit suicide, mister, and you can bet your money on that. Look how she's dressed, or undressed I guess you'd say. One stocking off, her dress off and corset off. A dame that size takes off her corset soon as she can. Besides, she'd have modesty enough to keep them all on or put on her gown if——!" He broke off, picked the bottle of brandy up carefully by its neck, took

off the cap and sniffed. It gave off a distinct odor—the smell of potassium cyanide. “And here’s more proof. If you meant to kill yourself, wouldn’t you just put the stuff in *one* drink? Why mix a whole bottle full and then put the cap back on the bottle after pouring your dose? It doesn’t make sense.”

In a matter of minutes the ambulance surgeon arrived. He was a young man with an old man’s cynicism. He leaned over the big woman with his stethoscope, listened for a moment, sniffed the bottle. “Not a chance,” he said laconically. “There’s enough in that bottle to kill an elephant—not that she damned near wasn’t one.”

Another policeman elbowed his way through excitedly to Trotter, spoke swiftly in his ear. Trotter’s face turned redder and redder, he cursed viciously. “And what the hell is going on here, anyway?” he asked the room at large. “Get upstairs, doc, there’s another one—only he ain’t dead yet.”

As Jim dashed out of the room after him, he saw the grinning, sardonic face of Nic Remus in the dead woman’s living room. The policeman who had been sent for him had evidently brought him on downstairs.

ENTERING the cell-like room on the third floor close behind Trotter, Anthony was so struck by the room itself that he paid but half attention to the action transpiring. The bed against the wall was plain, iron and white—three quarter size. There was a bed table with a small radio, a rocking chair and a straight chair. A prim white chifforobe with

a shadowed mirror and a bare top stood against the opposite wall. Almost the entire available wall space was given over to book shelves, and a quick glance proved the books to be the oddest assortment that Anthony had ever encountered. Next Sir William Osler’s complete works on medicine, handsomely bound in calfskin, were volume after volume of Horatio Alger’s books for boys, “Pluck and Luck”, “Sink or Swim”, “Jed the Poorhouse Boy”, “Grit”, and dozens more. These were flanked by a set of Gibbon’s “Decline And Fall of the Roman Empire”, next to which were literally dozens of dime novels and Wild West books!

Trotter suddenly roared, exasperated, “Shut up your whining and tell me why you did it, damn it!”

Jim remembered that the old man was deaf; he peered over Trotter’s shoulder. The old man who called himself Doctor Crane lay on the white iron bed in his night shirt, running tremulous fingers through his scraggly beard. Spittle flecked his lips. His beady little eyes flickered from one person to the other. Then the ambulance surgeon patted his abraded throat with a swab of iodine. The eyes lighted up frantically, the mouth opened to reveal purple, toothless gums, the throat constricted, and the cry of pain that came from those lips was hardly human.

The ambulance doctor grinned. As the echo of the shrill ululation died away he said, to Trotter, “He’s okay. Broke the skin a little.” He gazed toward the open closet door, and Jim too, turned to look. “Looks like he’d just hung himself up there when

the cop barged in. Another five or six minutes and——?" He shrugged, snapped his bag, added, "If you think there won't be anymore suicides or attempted Dutchs tonight I'll run along, captain."

ALREADY Trotter had forgotten him. He leaned closer to the man on the bed, roared his question in his ear and waited. A fit of trembling swept over Doctor Crane, his lips twisted, his eyes squinted. Then, in that same, flat toneless, he said, "I loved him like my own son. He was always so good to me! And now she's gone and killed him!" He began sobbing all over, in spasmodic bursts. Trotter turned to give Jim Anthony a comprehensive look and a ponderous wink. He shook the thin shoulder on the bed.

"Shut up," he roared. "How do you know she killed him? You said it was heart trouble. And who is she?"

"She? Mrs. Siddons! It just came to me, sir. I know she did it, she killed him because she loved him. She often said she was going to do it to save his soul!"

"So she stuck a needle in his eye, eh?" screamed Trotter.

The little satyr, the aged satyr, sat up, his eyes widening. "Needle? Eye? She told me she was going to poison him! But he's dead, dead, dead!" In the space of ten seconds he was well launched into hysterics. The ambulance doctor was caught before he could leave and returned as laconically as ever.

Anthony walked to the open door of the closet, Trotter beside him. From a hook, set high in the back

wall, hung a length of bright yellow rope. On the floor was an overturned stool. The peculiar part of the rope was that it had a hondo spliced into one end, the opposite end passing through the hondo, or metal eye, to form a noose—as is formed in a lariat.

Trotter growled, "This old guy is nutty as a fruitcake, in his second childhood. Hey, what's that?" For he had squirted his flashlight across the floor. Crumpled in a corner was a red box which, upon being straightened, read, LONE RANGER LARIAT. Doctor Crane had attempted to hang himself with a play-rope.

The ambulance doctor called, "I'll have to give this guy a shot, captain." He waited while Trotter growled something in his throat. "And it'll probably keep him out the rest of the night."

Disgusted, Trotter led the way back up the studio on the fourth floor. By now the corpse of Manny Meredith had been wrapped in a sheet and deposited in a wicker basket for its journey to the morgue. Nic Remus had been brought up during their absence by his attendant policeman, and now stood before an easel scanning an unfinished portrait by the dead man. He nodded, smiled crookedly, said, "The overtones are all wrong, aren't they? That was always poor Manny's trouble."

Trotter favored him with his hottest glare, continued his conversation with Jim. "——and potassium cyanide is pretty hard to get and ——!"

"Not so tough, in this house," interjected Nic Remus, and Trotter

wheeled back on him with a demand for explanation.

"Why," asked Remus, "haven't you been over the whole house yet? I thought that was what policemen always did, go through the house with a fine tooth comb! The second floor, my dear sir, is given over to the noble art of etching. Not only is there a fine collection from modern etchers on the walls, but poor Manny did his own etching there. Naturally his cabinet holds the necessary chemicals, among which is potassium cyanide. We use it to clean plates."

"We!" barked Trotter. "Then you got some of the stuff, too?"

"Certainly. I've been studying with Manny a long time, one of my studies was etching."

"And sculpturing?" This last from Anthony. There was something malignant, an odor of evil about this self-assured artist that got under Jim's skin.

REMUS' Mephistophelean face twisted in a sneer. "No! He couldn't teach me much about that. The shoe would be on the other foot, though I admit he had the acclaim." He caught his anger with a visible effort. "Why don't you check up on the potassium bottle down on two?"

"That," said Trotter, "is what we'll do, and you can come along and be helpful some more."

A switch near the door flooded the room full of etchings with soft light. A quick glimpse showed Anthony that the collection on the wall would rank far to the front with any moderns. But now they were more interested in the workroom

opening off the exhibition room. There was a table with the various paraphernalia of the etcher's craft, a special cabinet for steel plates, and another filled with bottles, all plainly labeled. The cabinet was unlocked.

Nic Remus opened the glass door, reached inside, and before Trotter could prevent, picked out a glass flask. "Gentlemen," he said, sarcastically, and handed it in the general direction of Trotter. Trotter's anger knew no bounds, he hopped from foot to foot. At last, handkerchief in hand, he took the bottle gingerly from Nic Remus, who, for once seemed nonplussed.

"You double damned idiot," Trotter at last simmered down, "and what if there were fingerprints on this! I ought to—I ought to——!" Evidently he could think of no expletive choice enough for he fell silent. He hardheeled to the door, yelled for the print man in stentorian tones. Returning he found a grinning Jim examining the etchings on the wall, Nic Remus sitting before the table, the inevitable cigarette dangling from his lips.

The bottle was half full of potassium cyanide.

CHAPTER VI

Murder Motive



YOU nitwit, what if the murderer's prints were — oh, hell, what's the use?" Trotter's dyspepsia was again active, due, perhaps to his flare of anger. His face showed it:

Remus had recovered his composure. "What murderer?" he asked. "I thought you concluded poor Manny passed out naturally or something while a robber was in the house. Mrs. Siddons was absolutely crazy about Manny, I'm not at all surprised she killed herself. The poison was handy, and——!"

"And so she filled up her brandy bottle with cyanide, put the poison bottle back in place in the cabinet, carried her brandy to her room and poured herself a drink, neatly replacing the cap on the bottle, got herself half undressed and bang! She's off." Trotter's brows were meeting in the center of his forehead, his face was beet red. "I sent a copper for you, Remus, because we learned Meredith was murdered. Before you arrive we discover that Mrs. Siddons has been poisoned! And at the same time old Doc Crane, that fruit cake, tries to hang himself!"

When he paused for breath, Remus said, softly, "And where do I come in on all this, why was I sent for a second time? I've already told you——?"

"Practically nothing! That's what you've told me, practically nothing. Now we'll get down to a few facts, mister. Just how long have you known this screwy household?"

"I've known Manny about three years. Never had much occasion to come around the house until I started studying under him, let's see—about eighteen months ago."

"HMMMM, I see. How'd you and Manny get along?"

"If you mean did I kill him——!" He broke off as Trotter waved a beefy hand, and continued: "We

got along swell. As a matter of fact we were what might be called bosom friends, although, of course we didn't move in the same circles socially." He corrugated his brow. "I was friend enough to be best man at his wedding—the last one—up in Connecticut."

Jim Anthony had been merely pretending to study those etchings. He was paying particular attention to the words of this man whose very features repulsed him. And the last words, given with hesitation might mean much or little. Remus, not long ago, had practically accused Marcia Higdon of having a hand in the affair. Yet Marcia Higdon had called Remus on the phone from the Casa Loma. And now Remus was himself stating the fact that he had been best man at their marriage. He could have been forestalling the fact that this information would soon be coming from Marcia, or—he stored the remark away in his mind, for Trotter was rushing on.

"How'd you get along with Mrs. Siddons?"

"She hated my guts," was the amazing answer. Remus went on to say that Mrs. Siddons had practically raised Manny, that she was intensely religious and disapproved of much that occurred in the house, blaming Manny's friends for "leading him astray!"

"Occurred in the house. What was that?"

"Parties," laconically. "Some of them might as well be called bacchanalian revels, so to speak."

"Wild parties, hanh? And you were in on some of them?"

"Most of them. I like that sort

of thing, but my private life is my own."

"Not when a couple of murders touch it," replied Trotter. "How about Old Doctor Ike Crane. What does he mean, 'doctor'?"

"Doctor. A word of six letters meaning physician, healer of the sick. He's some sort of second or third cousin of Manny's mother. Been living on Manny's bounty for years. Harmless old coot, but not so damned crazy as he seems. I hear he tried to hang himself with a cow-boy rope?"

"Never mind that, that's my business. Now let's get on to tonight. You say you saw Marcia Higdon enter the house here about ten?"

REMUS hummed and hawed and at last admitted he might be wrong. He had been in a lunch room across the street when a cab pulled up and a woman got out and ran up the steps. No, he admitted, he hadn't exactly seen her face but an artist knows a woman from the sweep of her hips, from her general build, her carriage!

"So you knew her pretty well, this Higdon woman? Well enough to recognize the way she swung her hips, at least. hanh?"

Jim looked over his shoulder. Nic Remus' face was darkening with anger, his lips were pulled back from his white teeth. "I knew her before he did! I introduced him to her, she's modeled for me as well as for him." He seemed to realize the portent of his words, and hid his anger by taking time to light a cigarette. "Don't misunderstand me, my friend. She never meant a thing



Ultra-violet rays cast a queer glow on the rusted surface of the hook.

to me. She was merely something to put into clay and marble."

"You and Meredith never quarreled over her, did you?" Trotter was a shrewd detective.

Remus laughed. "Why should we? I introduced him to her. He had a barrel full of money and me, I'm practically penniless. Nope, I never quarreled with him. There was no doubt where her heart lay once she met him!"

"Okay, we'll let that lay for a minute. You still swear that Gentry didn't see you running down the front steps to the sidewalk when he pulled up in a cab?"

"Certainly I still swear it. He's

in love with her. As soon as I told the truth about seeing her—or who I thought was her,” he amended swiftly, “entering here at ten o’clock, he wanted to make my word look bad. So he pulled that one. Mrs. Sidons herself called me to come over once Gentry released her from that closet. She can tell you—but she’s dead!”

Trotter nodded. “*She* is dead. Gentry’s alive, if we can ever bring him in.” His glare at Jim Anthony was an accusation. Jim turned his head again.

“I know Manny was damned jealous of Gentry,” continued Remus. “He was damned jealous of any man that looked at Marcia, even after the divorce. That in spite of the fact she divorced him because she caught him with another woman.”

Trotter nodded. That was common knowledge. Also, she had testified in court concerning those “bacchanalian revels” and how her husband expected her to participate.

“If I knew an ex-husband was out to blow my head off for running with his ex-wife, well—the best defense is an offense.”

Anthony stiffened but did not turn his head. Trotter’s words were grave. “We’ve thought of that. As soon as Gentry and Miss Higdon arrive there’ll be a few questions to ask.”

NOW Anthony had paused before another curtained niche, similar to those downstairs in the entrance hall. Almost automatically his fingers searched for a switch. The curtain, colored to match the wall, slid back, made contact, and light poured

down on a statuette of a nude woman.

For a moment he could not believe his eyes. Then slowly the little figurine began to revolve! He stooped a bit for a better view, for it was a duplicate of that downstairs, with the head well down. By God, it was so! Half this woman was Marcia Higdon, the other half was a withered hag! It was as if two statuettes, the same size, had been neatly sawed, and alternate halves, one of each, put back together! What maniac’s mind had conceived this thing?

He heard Trotter saying, “By the way, do you know who gets all the Meredith dough now?” Heard Remus answer, “Manny didn’t have a will, I’ve often heard him say so. Nearest of kin, with a few bequests here and there. I—say——!” His voice arose incredulously as Anthony read the inscription beneath the twirling statuette.

“For a Judas who would drag Galatea down into his own slime—thusly.”

He had time to think that such an inscription was worthy of a lug who would write his ex-wife a note in Latin on the back of a menu. Then Nic Remus, a raging madman was beside him. “What has he done to you, what has he done to you,” he shrieked. “Look what he’s made you into! Oh, my dear, my very own dear, so he was the thief! The jealous thief who stole you and——”

He snatched the whirling statuette from the lighted niche, pressed it tightly against his lips, covered it with mad kisses. Trotter started forward, only to be restrained by Anthony, who observed the excited ar-

tist with narrowed, brooding eyes.

Now Remus turned the statuette so that the left side was to him in profile. He saw the aged weariness of flesh that once had been fulsome and fair, the sagging, broken lines that once had been so proudly curved, the promise of death in that which once had been an emblem of life.

"No! No! I tell you, no! He was the evil one, not I! There is his work, representative! He was the one to bring filth and sickness, hopelessness of body and soul and mind! Damn him, damn him to hell!"

He threw the statuette across the room. It crashed into a Pennell etching, and the two art pieces clattered to the floor in a thousand shards and fragments. Wildly Remus stared at them, then ran for the door.

"Let him go," snapped Jim. "One of the boys will nail him."

Trotter took off his hat and wiped his forehead. Grimly he said, "They better nail him. Anthony, the guy was nuts and is nuts about the Higdon woman himself! Insane! Murder motive, murder motive! Thwarted love! There's our man."

CHAPTER VII

Enough Rope



FRANTIC Nic Remus wasn't stopped by the policeman on duty at the first landing. Remus had the build of a professional football player, and knew how to use it. He bowled the copper over like a nine-

pin. But it slowed him, and two others leaped upon him, to be joined a minute later by a belligerent and triumphant Trotter with his gun in his hand.

"Hold him, hold him," he yelled. "It's the killer, boys, tie on to him." Remus didn't have a chance. But there was one thing in the struggle that was to his advantage—it seemed to bring him back to reality. At Trotter's words he quit fighting of his own accord.

"Now, my friend, just what was that? Who did I kill?"

Trotter advanced truculently, slashed him across the face with the back of his hand. Remus rolled with the blow, but nevertheless, it landed hard, and a trickle of blood reddened the pointed beard on Remus' chin. A foul stream of curses issued from his lips.

"So you were his best friend," sneered Trotter, "you were his best man! Damned right, and head over heels in love with his wife."

Remus slanting eyes merely stared at him hotly, his tongue darted out at the red worm of blood from his cut lip.

"What was it you yelled when you saw that two sided lady? Something about a jealous thief who stole her from you? Was that your statue, mister? Answer me!" He raised his hand again.

Remus did not move, but gave Trotter stare for malignant stare. At last he said, "What difference does it make? Yes, it was mine, I carved it, and he stole it. I simply wanted to show him who was the pupil, who was the master. Did you see what he did to it? Did you see, damn him,

did you see?" His voice rose to a shrill crescendo.

"Now, now, hold it," soothed Trotter, seeing the mad light appear in the eyes so close to his.

Jim Anthony was thinking of that inscription on the double statuette. *For a Judas who would drag Galatea down into his own slime—thusly.*

"You might as well talk," said Trotter, going from toughness to gentleness, reasonableness. "You carved a statue of Marcia Higdon, maybe to show Meredith you were better than he was, he got sore because you used her as a model, you quarreled and——!"

"Used her as a model! Why would I need her when memory——!"

He broke off, biting his lip, his ears reddening a bit.

"Go on," snapped Trotter. Remus shook his head. Jim Anthony didn't like what followed. A moment later when Remus reeled backward, bleeding, into the arms of the men behind him for the third time, he turned and walked toward the stairs, more than a little nauseated.

THIS, he decided, once again in the second story room of etchings, is one of the damnedest things I've ever kissed into! Anthony's friends often said his mind was like a card index, wherein he tucked away facts and features of every case he worked on. If that was so, he now started methodically through his entries as he went from the etchings themselves to where the statuette had shattered against the wall. Almost absently he reached down and picked up the inscription, which, fortunately had remained intact. He dropped it

into his pocket without fumbling a fact, continued on his meditative round of the room.

Tom Gentry's willing complicity in the murders was not to be thought of at all; he knew his friend too well. The man had a temper, true enough, but even if he were angry enough to kill another, it would not be through fear. Nor would it be with a needle thrust into an empty eye socket. But——! To be perfectly truthful with himself, Jim had to admit that Tom was none too brilliant where a beautiful woman was concerned.

Marcia Higdon was a woman of exquisite, ravishing beauty. Could it be that she persuaded Tom to assist her, him not knowing that murder was to follow? He loved her enough to do almost anything she asked. What if she told him she had to have *something* from that safe, something that might affect their future happiness? Tom Gentry was the man to take the risk! Then, while she sent him on a fool's errand, could she have slipped the needle in the eye.

Nuts, he told himself. Tom might be pretty much of a fool, but she couldn't pull the wool over his eyes in that manner. But where were Tom and Marcia? She was feeling bad. Tom had surely taken her home. Or had he? At least no one had brought them back to the house obeying Trotter's orders.

Marcia Higdon. What was her past? What of the note in the Casa Loma. "He found the city brick and left it marble." And the inscription on the statuette originally carved by Remus and altered by the jealous Meredith. And the use of the word

Galatea. Galatea was the woman carved by Pygmalion in an old myth, carved from the finest ivory. Pygmalion fell in love with his figure and prayed to Venus, who breathed life into the figure because of the vast depth of Pygmalion's love.

DID it fall in line, then? Galatea, created by Pygmalion. A city found brick and left marble! Which only led on to who and what Marcia Higdon had been before coming to New York City.

Nic Remus? There was no doubt about his loving Marcia Higdon. He said he had introduced Manny Meredith to her. It would be like Meredith, the ghoulish practical joker, to insist upon Remus being best man at the wedding of his own girl! And there was the argument concerning pupil and master, which was which, in sculpture. Artists are notoriously jealous people. And Tom swearing he saw Nic Remus running down the steps when he first entered the Meredith house of death. Assuredly he, Remus, was suspect.

Mrs. Siddons according to dual testimony, loved Manny greatly. Yet she was a religious fanatic. Old Doctor Crane had said she threatened to kill Manny to save his soul. Could she, swept away by her own fanaticism, have actually killed him and framed the rest, somehow locking herself in the closet. Could it be that she actually had committed suicide from remorse, then, in spite of all logic pointing elsewhere?

And Fat Louie Scranton. Somewhere in the damnable puzzle he fitted. If he had merely given young Meredith knockout drops as he claim-

ed, what was the cause of his fear? Fear so great that he used a gun to leave the house before the arrival of the police. And fear so great that the police had not as yet been able to find either him or his bodyguard, the snakelike Fargo.

Doctor Crane, Uncle Ike. A harmless old goat, surely, and deaf as a post. What motive—Jim stopped, looked a bit startled. Remus said Meredith had left no will, and old Uncle Ike, the doctor, was a cousin twice removed. My God, what if he was the heir to all those millions? What a laugh! But Uncle Ike had been released from his room by Tom Gentry; he'd been locked in. But so had Mrs. Siddons.

Jim was uneasy, there in the room of etchings. Something was hardly right, there was some little piece of the puzzle that fitted apparently but in reality did not. He went back over his checkup carefully, arrived at the end, which concerned Uncle Ike.

Had he lied when he said he'd told Meredith his heart was bad? Mrs. Siddons claimed so. The poor old guy must have been intent on suicide. There was the rope, the great abrasions on the scrawny throat. The incongruity of the room——? He snapped his fingers. Ah! Up the stairs he went, two at a time, closing his ears to the angry rumble of Trotter's voice coming from below.

A UNIFORMED policeman sat in spindle-legged monstrosity in the hallway outside the bronze door. Yeah, the little nut in there was still asleep. Doc must have given him a heavy shot to put him out. Jim went

through the small inner hallway, listened at the door but heard no sound.

He turned the knob, opened the door. Glimpsing and noting its thickness he realized the room was sound-proof through solidity. Across the room in the prim iron bed he made out the silhouetted figure of Doctor Ike Crane, and from his hoarse breathing, the doctor was still under the influence of morphine. Jim turned on the light.

Doctor Crane was a grotesque figure, his ragged beard on the outside of the sheet pulled high beneath his chin. There was hardly any need for quiet, deaf as the old man was.

Jim looked swiftly around the room, smiling a bit as his eye encountered the odd array of books. Trotter had said the old guy was in his second childhood, and this must be true.

Directly behind Jim, where the door on being opened would hide it from view was a softball and a softball bat. Second childhood was right!

Swiftly he went across the room to the prim chifforobe. He opened the small drawers on top one at a time. They were empty. The next drawer beneath, a large one, likewise empty. The next. What was that in the corner? A brown paper sack.

He opened it cautiously, held it to the light. He probed its contents with his forefinger, shook a bit into his palm, sniffed it, tasted it and finally blew at it. It promptly disappeared. He chuckled a bit at the eccentricities of the aged. It was dust, common dust. He put it back the way

he had found it and closed the drawer.

The bottom drawer held a cracked and well worn medicine case. By its weight it still held instruments, or medicines. He did not bother to open it.

Passing the old man he did not glance at him at all on his way to the closet. The closet revealed one suit of clothes swinging on a hanger at the right hand side. A shiny hat reposed on the shelf above. Next it was the gaudy box which had contained the play lariat. The shoes, with the socks tucked inside, would be beneath the bed, he surmised.

He stepped into the closet and thrust his fingers into the pockets of the coat, one after another. The result was a few advertising letters, some white cards, three by five in size, a couple of pencil stubs and a half used plug of chewing tobacco.

He fumbled at the trousers pockets, found the wallet he sought in the left rear. About thirty dollars in money. This? From one of the smaller pockets he drew two stiff cards. They were claim checks at the railroad station checkroom.

Deep within the closet as he was he could hardly make them out. He stepped toward the door, read them half aloud. "F-17906 and F-17907."

The lights went out in the room; he was in total blackness, half in, half out of the closet. He did as any other man would do, hesitated one split second, then stepped toward the switch. He caught himself just in time, else another corpse would have joined the other two. As it was, the swishing blow was enough to knock him unconscious.

CHAPTER VIII

Shot In The Dark

H H HE STRANGLED. Hot, raw liquor ran up behind his nose, down his throat, down his chin from his mouth. He was conscious of the buzz of excited voices, recognized Trotter's impatient anger. But he was afraid to open his eyes. He felt sure that if he did so, the entire top of his head would blow off. Here came the bottle again. This time he swallowed, and the warmth of the brandy permeated his body; he felt better. He opened his eyes.

A policeman was holding his shoulders with one arm, the bottle with the other. He said, "Feel better, bub?" Jim took another drink, the room quit spinning. He recognized the red face of Trotter above him. He felt a little flattered at the obvious worry written on the choleric features.

Trotter said, "You okay Jim? You all right, boy?"

"If my head is still attached to my body. What happened?"

"Somebody busted hell out of you with a ball bat, mister, that's what happened. It's a damned wonder you wasn't killed. Look, your girl wants you to call her right away, and me, Trotter, I damned well want to talk to you."

"Somebody busted me," said Jim, sarcastically. "And there were only two of us here, me and——!" He

turned his head, wincing at the surge of pain.

Doctor Crane lay exactly as he had lain before. Anthony struggled to his feet, his jaw set. That blow had been meant to kill him. He laid his ear against the old man's chest. The heart beat was hardly half normal. The man most surely was under the effects of morphine. Jim's pre-medic training told him that.

"Hey," he said, remembering, "there was a wallet mixed up in this! There was——!" Trotter extended the nondescript wallet.

"It was on the floor beside you," he said laconically. "Now if you're okay—hey, what's so important in the wallet?"

Jim tried to make his grin matter of fact. "Not a damned thing important," he said, and added, under his breath, "anymore." For the two checks were gone.

He followed Trotter out of the room to find a strangely familiar scene transpiring in the hall. A group was gathered about the recumbent form of the cop who had been sitting outside the door. Jim nudged the big homicide man and gestured.

"My wide awake man Casey," growled Trotter. "He heard the commotion in the room there and being a smart boy, stuck in his head. The guy teed off for a three bagger, stepped over Casey and got out. How or where I don't know as yet." He led the way up the stairs toward the studio.

Anthony was thinking: Casey heard the commotion through a soundproof door? Aloud, he said, "Did Remus crack?"

GLOOMILY the answer came, "Damn it, I'm inclined to believe the fool." He clenched and unclenched his hairy right fist. "When Mary Ann fails to get results there aren't any results to get. He stuck to the original story. Friend Marcia Higdon was a model in New Orleans, Remus' home town. After Remus came east he became friendly with Meredith. Meredith took him on a trip and they ended up in New Orleans, where he introduced Manny to the gal. You know what happened. Meredith played Mr. Bountiful, brought her east, used her as a model and even got her a part in a show."

"And married her, over Remus' head," added Jim, dryly. "That would be like Manny Meredith."

"Funny, though," puffed Trotter. "Remus claimed he didn't hold that against Manny. Hell, he loved the woman; he couldn't blame anyone else for agreeing with his taste. They quarreled over art, by God. Remus admits Manny was the best at etching and painting people's pictures and the like, but he figured he had Manny beat hands down when it came to carving. Said Manny couldn't carve but one figure—this Higdon dame—and he, Remus could beat him all to hell at that. It's just screwy enough to make sense."

He opened the door into the ante-room, walked across to the safe. "Damn, if I had some idea of what that dame took from the safe," he said.

Almost casually—and that was certainly not the way he felt—Jim asked if Tom Gentry and the Higdon woman had been located yet.

"Nope. You wouldn't have any

idea where they are at? Look Jim, I'm being frank. Their dropping out of this thing like this doesn't help their case much."

"What case?" He made his voice cold.

"Her prints were on the safe! She was here! He was here!"

"Afterward!"

"Says they!" For a moment the two men glared at each other. Trotter shrugged. "He's your friend. I like the dame and I like him, but I'm a policeman. I'm just telling you what to do and that's get them here!"

"If you'd put in as much effort finding Fat Louie Scranton and Fargo as——"

"We found Fargo, and Fat Louie will turn up," Trotter interrupted.

"Where was Fargo?"

"Shot to death, in Central Park, and a hell of a lot of good finding him does. Scranton will turn up soon as he hears about the fire, though I can't see what he has to do with it. Hell, the knock out drops didn't kill the guy—the needle did. And could Fat Louie have——?"

"Poisoned the old lady? Certainly. That isn't all the potassium there was, though I'll admit I hardly see—hey, did you say fire? What fire?"

"Fire at the Casa Loma tonight. In Fat Louie's office. Damned near gutted the back end."

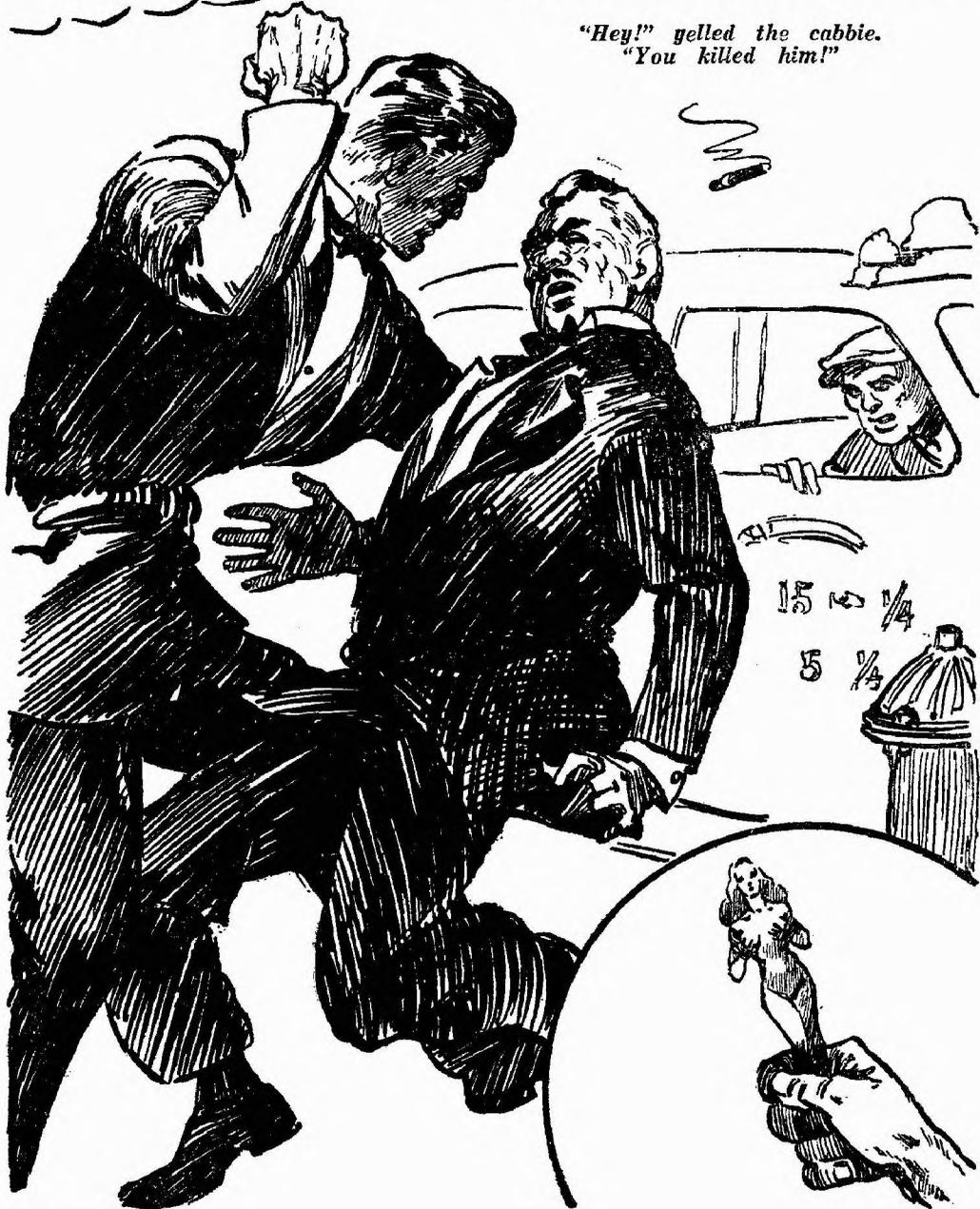
Anthony's eyes snapped; something clicked in his brain. He grabbed Trotter's lapel, shook him. "You get the Fire Marshal that covered that fire, Trotter. Tell him you want a chemical analysis from the arson squad. Go on, get them started, and don't let them hand out any of that cigarette in the waste basket hooley!"



"Arson squad? Are you nuts? Arson——!" Jim was rapidly propelling him toward the phone.

LEAVING him there, Jim went back to stare out the window into the blackness of night. Things were falling in place a bit more, but there

*"Hey!" yelled the cabbie.
"You killed him!"*



were still more than enough missing answers to keep an ordinary man busy for a lifetime. Unless he got a break.

He knew now, or thought he knew, that this was not one case, but two. The house next door was not more than twenty feet distant. Most of its window were blanked out by brick, for privacy, and it presented a solid wall. Almost directly beneath where he was standing was a square of light. This could come from no other place but Uncle Ike Crane's bedroom.

For a long moment Jim stood there staring at that square of light. Softly he swung the window inward and peered down at the ground. Four stories. With his handkerchief in his hand he twisted and pried, turned and toiled until he had removed both the old hooks, once used by window cleaners for safety belts. Now, since the windows installed by Meredith swung inward, they were no longer of use. Wrapping them in the handkerchief he dropped them into his pocket and turned to meet Trotter.

Trotter said, sourly, "A hell of a time to catch air. Where are you going?"

"My girl called," said Jim. Trotter followed at his elbow. He heard Jim say, "All right, right away. One stop only, then I'll be there."

"Where you going, damn it? Seeing as your friend is involved I'd think you'd help me clear this up."

"My girl has a stomach ache," grinned Jim. "That comes first." But he went down the steps whistling, for the thing was working out. The cop on duty opened the door respectfully. Anthony was well known and liked by the beat walkers.

Jim nodded, stepped out, paused for a moment on the door step. He heard the purr of a car motor, saw a small black sedan pull away from the curb some three or four houses down. The driver did not turn on his lights.

As Jim passed the Meredith house, orange flowers blossomed. With the roar of the first shot Jim Anthony threw himself sideways, untouched. Three times the unknown one fired before the motor leaped to life. By the time the cop came through the door, the car was gone.

CHAPTER IX

The Past Is Dead



IT WASN'T fear that held Jim Anthony where he had plunged. It was momentary stupefaction. He was conscious of the thunder of heavy soled shoes across the porch and down the steps, the excited yelling of heavy voices, a car plunging away from the curb. Then hands were picking at him, a flashlight bathed him in silver. He pushed up on one elbow, a hand, then sat up.

"Turn off that damned light," he said. "I'm not hurt." The light disappeared, Trotter helped him to his feet. Jim said, "Trotter, let me look at all the stuff Manny Meredith had in his pockets." He knew the answer to that one, but was merely checking.

"Hell, Jim, you know he was stripped clean as a pin. There wasn't

anything at all in his pockets. Where you going?"

"Where I started," snapped Jim. "And while I'm gone, you might dig the slugs out of the door and have them compared with the slugs that killed Fargo. I think you'll be surprised, though I could be wrong."

"Hey," called Trotter after him, "you want a couple of the boys for bodyguards?"

"Nope. And neither do I want as many as one for a tail."

He hailed a cab and gave the address of Dolores Colquitt's apartment.

Dolores admitted him, with worried face, kissed him and whispered, "I don't know what's happened, Jim, but take it awfully easy for both of their sakes. Tom's walking the floor in the front room and poor Marcia is doing the same thing in my bedroom. She refuses to see either of us until she's talked to you." She led him toward the front room of the apartment where Tom Gentry was pacing back and forth like a caged tiger.

"Jim! Thank God, you've come. Marcia insists on seeing you. Trotter let us go, convinced the thing was a robbery at an unhappy moment and——!"

"You might as well know, Tom. The only fingerprints on the safe belonged to Marcia. You sure you're not covering up something for her?" The look of consternation on his friend's face was answer enough. "And you're positive you met Remus coming out as you were going in?"

"Positive! I'd like to crack that—but what's this all about, Jim?"

"Murder. A pair of murders." He told Tom and Dolores what had occurred at the Meredith house.

Tom gasped, "But surely they don't think Marcia——?"

"Trotter suspects everybody," snapped Jim, "you know that. It's only your word against Remus' that you saw him going out. I can swear what time you left the Casa Loma, but that isn't close enough. You're a suspect as well as Marcia and there's a pickup out for you right now. Where's Marcia?"

THEY left a shattered Tom Gentry in the front room. A moment later they paused before another door. From within came the clack—clack—clack of heels as Marcia Higdon, ex-wife of a murdered man, paced the floor. Jim tapped. The heel taps approached the door, a soft voice asked who it was, and when he answered with his name, the key turned and the door swung open.

He stepped into a room filled with smoke from innumerable cigarettes. She closed the door and locked it, waited until he was seated, and walked across the room to the vanity where she ground a freshly lighted cigarette into an ashtray already filled to overflowing.

She turned and leaned back against the vanity. The white evening gown had been discarded in favor of one of Dolores' negligees. The twin lights of the vanity reflected into the floor length mirror illuminated every line of her breathtaking body.

The memory of Nic Remus madly kissing a statuette came to Jim. The thought of a man who loved madly

even though he had lost! And the thought of his friend's love for this woman! All these things came to him before she spoke.

"They say you're Tom's best friend, Jim, and they say Jim Anthony will go to hell for a friend." He nodded, waiting, watching the mad intensity of her eyes. "Tom loves me, I love Tom, more than I've ever loved anyone in the world before. You must understand that, you must believe that."

Again he nodded, saying, "All right, Marcia, I believe."

She lighted another cigarette, began pacing the floor as before, one shapely white leg at a time emerging unheeded from the negligee. "I'm going to ask you to do me a favor, and by doing it, you also favor Tom. If you won't, promise not to mention it, and if you do—Tom mustn't know about it."

He waited so long before answering that she crossed the room and stood peering down at him. He said, "Let me ask a couple of questions first, Marcia, before I answer any. I love Tom. Because he loves you, you rank high with me. I'm asking only to get at the root of things. Did you kill Manny Meredith tonight, did you put cyanide in Mrs. Siddons' brandy?"

She swayed for a moment. He started to arise, but before he was well out of the chair she recovered herself. Her voice was husky, but she looked directly into his eyes as she answered, "No."

"What did you want from Meredith's safe—and did you get it?"

"That—that's part of the story. What I wanted from Manny's safe!

God! Will you promise the things I ask?" He nodded. Already he knew much of what she was about to tell him.

IT WASN'T a pretty story. It was a tale of a girl born in the Mississippi Delta of poor white trash, a girl who never went to school, who went barefoot until she was fifteen years old. She told it with no great bitterness, but simply to point out how she had wanted to leave the delta country so badly that she was willing to do anything at all.

Remus, the artist, had come along. With him she had gone to New Orleans, living together as man and wife. Eventually he had deserted her.

She eked out a scanty living as a model; too scanty, for modeling had not been enough. . . . Still she read hungrily, constantly. When Remus had at last returned, with his friend Meredith, thus they had found her. Meredith had fascinated her. He brought her to New York as a protegee, obtained work for her, taught her how to dress, gave her a smattering of culture, put her in a show—and at last married her.

"I thought he loved me and I guess, after his fashion, he did. But he wanted to show me off, to exhibit me to his friends as he would a statue that he had carved. Naturally we quarreled. Try to picture it. I came up from nothing, nothing at all! Oh, I'm no genius, I'm probably far below the average, but can't you see, the delta, and Rampart Street of New Orleans, and the atmosphere of the French Quarter—those were the things I was so anxious to forget. And he wouldn't let me!"

Jim nodded his head in understanding. Once or twice in a lifetime, he thought, a person meets such a woman as this!

"You'll never know how madly jealous of me he was. And yet he carried on his affairs! He didn't particularly want me, but he wanted to make sure no one else had me! It was sickening, repulsive! At last I divorced him. He had been so flagrantly unfaithful that he didn't dare contest the divorce. He was even generous about the money end of it."

He would be, thought Jim, because he had a reputation to maintain. Now she dropped down on the edge of a *chaise longue*, folding a leg beneath her, plucking nervously at the negligee.

"But he warned me that he would never let me marry again. He must have been crazy, demented. He said I was something he had created, that he'd—he'd found me in the gutter—and built me, molded me, into something desirable to a millionaire and a man of the world!"

Galatea and Pygmalion! And that Latin quotation concerning finding the city brick and leaving it marble!

"He—he sent detectives to Louisiana and they brought back a small stack of affidavits. From policemen who had taken bribes from me." She looked squarely, almost defiantly at him, but the pulse at the base of her throat throbbed madly. "From the proprietor of a hotel at which I lived. From other—girls. From men."

Jim said, gently, "You needn't go on, I can imagine the rest."

But she persisted in finishing the sordid tale. "He showed them to me,

after the divorce, and said if I ever made plans to remarry, he would show them to my husband. That's why I called him, why I went out to his house tonight! I was afraid he'd heard that Tom and I definitely planned on marriage and was going to show him the documents he has. Tom doesn't know."

IT WAS long moments before Jim spoke. "What has been is water beneath the bridge, Marcia. If you ever wish to tell Tom about all this, okay; if not, your past is perfectly safe with me. I'm inclined to think he's marrying your present and your future rather than the dead long ago. You needn't tell me what you want me to do—I know.

"You entered the Meredith house with your own key, and found Manny dead as you have told us. You fainted. Recovering, you started to call Tom, thought of those papers and opened the safe, knowing the combination?"

She nodded. "It's unbelievable and stupid of me to expect anyone to believe what followed. I called Tom first, then opened the safe. I remember peering there inside it, wondering if I should or shouldn't search it, thinking how many hateful things I might find in it. I thought I'd wait for Tom and tell him the whole thing. I even thought *perhaps Manny isn't really dead!* I made myself arise, I made myself go back to the corpse again. And the same thing happened—I fainted again. The next thing I knew Tom was there!"

"And you never got a chance to look through the safe?"

"While he was letting Doctor

Crane out of his room I managed. And Jim, the affidavits were not there, though I know that is where he kept them!"

To her surprise, Jim smiled. "Naturally they weren't," he said. "Someone very close to Manny knew about

those papers. Someone who was an opportunist. Entering and grasping the situation—he took those papers from the open safe—because he's mad for you, wants the same hold on you that Meredith had!"

Her palms pressed against her breast; her eyes were round. "Nic Remus! He knew! He——!"

Jim nodded. "So I'll pay a little

*From the fire-escape
he saw her posing for
the man she hated!*



call on Mr. Remus a bit later in the evening. I don't really think he pulled the killings. He might have killed Meredith, but he surely had no reason to poison Mrs. Siddon. However, I could frame it around his neck very nicely. Yes, I think our friend Mr. Remus will give back the affidavits. It may be that I can likewise persuade him to keep his mouth shut. If you want to tell Tom, as I said before, all right, but——!"

That was as far as he got, for he

was rising to his feet as he spoke. She flew across the room and wrapped her arms about his neck, talking brokenly, and he was more than a little embarrassed when he finally disengaged himself. He headed for the door in a hurry.



Her soft voice followed him. "Thanks, Jim Anthony. Will you send Tom to me in a few minutes?"

"Nope. I've got a little work for that young fellow. Even love and explanations must wait for murder. So long, Marcia, and I'll see you through."

"How is she," asked Tom anxiously, in the front room, and Dolores asked the same with her brows. Jim grinned.

"Okedoke—or she will be when you get back. Get your hat, Tom, you've got to give me and friend Trotter a little lift."

While he was after his hat Jim slipped an arm around Dolores' slender shoulders. He said, "When I was a kid I used to cuss to beat the dickens because my memory was too darned good. I couldn't go to sleep at night because the day's arithmetic problems kept dancing through my head with all the sums and answers—like some kids memorize poetry. Now, I'm glad of it, tickled to death of the ability to remember numbers."

He kissed her, and before he could explain what he meant, Tom reentered ready to go. "Tom," said Jim, "you got plenty of money?" Tom Gentry admitted that he had plenty of money. "Okedoke. You go down to the Penn Station and spend it, and more if necessary. The following two numbers may be trunks or bags, but they're checked at the station and I want to know what's in them, who they belong to, all about them. Get a pencil. All set? F-17906, F-17907. You can reach me either at the penthouse or at Manny Meredith's."

The numbers were those of the claim checks he had taken from Doctor Crane's billfold, which had likewise been taken from him after he had been knocked unconscious by a softball bat.

CHAPTER X

Double Check



JIM ANTHONY lived in Penthouse A atop the black marble and chromium edifice of the Waldorf-Anthony Hotel. The penthouse was not luxuriously furnished, but furnished, rather, for comfort. The rooms were large and highceilinged, the walls themselves consisted mostly of special plate glass, while the outer walls were of glass brick. Probably the most interesting room in the house was Jim's laboratory, which stretched entirely across the west side of the penthouse. Because he was immensely wealthy, and because he was exactly the type of fellow who rode a hobby hard, probably no police lab in the country could equal that of Jim Anthony for equipment.

There were powerful microscopes, apparatus for microphotography, a half dozen varieties of special ultraviolet rays, spectroscopes, comparison microscopes and other ballistics apparatus, all the hundred and one things used by the scientific criminologist.

Now he was bent over a powerful glass peering at the second of the

two hooks he had taken from the swinging window of Manny Meredith's studio. The rays from an ultraviolet lamp cast a queer glow on the rusted surface of the hook. Jim had a triumphant look when he rose from his work. And ten minutes later he rode down in the elevator whistling an aria from *Trovatore*.

FAT Louie Scranton stood at the deserted bar of the Casa Loma chewing his cigar. There was a strained, hunted look on his heavy features. The big room, with the tables pushed to one side, the chairs stacked on the table, still smelled of smoke. The rear hallway was damp and desolate; waiters were still at work cleaning the charred debris from the office.

The doorman said, "Hey, Louie, there's a guy outside in a cab wants to see you. Says his name is Anthony and can't he come in."

Fat Louie's eyes went cold. He shifted the cigar to a new angle. The meeting was inevitable. Better to get it over with. What the hell? He waddled toward the doorway, the doorman, still in uniform, pulled the lock and let him out. Anthony stood on the sidewalk beside a cab whose motor was idling.

Louie Scranton said, "Hello, Jim. I've been trying to get in touch with you. Sorry I pulled the fast one over at Meredith's, but damn it, when a man has spent as many years as I have regaining a reputation, he—well, he goes nuts when it looks like things are about to shape up for him in a bad way."

"Yeah, I know Louie. But listen, I came to tip you off. Trotter is wondering what happened to the stuff

in Meredith's pockets, particularly his wallet."

The fat man shrugged. His right hand was buried deep in the pocket of his coat.

"And some guy whispered in his ear that Meredith backed you in the Casa Loma, that he was holding notes of yours and——!"

"The hell!" It slipped out. But nothing further slipped from the thick lips. For Jim started his right belt high, and laid it resoundingly against the fat man's chin, caught him as he fell.

The cabbie said, "My God, mister, you've killed him." Almost automatically he opened the door. Jim tossed Fat Louie in like an oversized bag of wheat and gave the proper address.

TROTTER said, "I don't know what the hell you brought this guy to, for. I want him for hiding from me, but——!"

"Hiding from you hell," snapped Fat Louie, rubbing his jaw. "I walked out of here and got right in a poker game, and I can prove it."

"Then you didn't hear that Fargo was found blasted in Central Park?"

The fat man's astonishment was almost laughable—from one angle! Jim said, "Sit still and shut up, damn you. Listen, Trotter, remember how Manny was stripped, how he had nothing at all in his pockets?" Trotter nodded. "Fat Louie Scranton brought him home from the Casa Loma."

Fat Louie howled, "And since when did I become a lush roller?"

"Since about nine this evening, when you couldn't resist temptation.

You started out to be a good guy, to keep Manny out of a jam, to keep from having trouble in your place, for Manny was packing a gun. Right?"

"I was doing you a favor," said Scranton, spreading his palms, "and this is what I get for it!"

"So you took him back to the office, you and Fargo, and slipped him enough chloral to put him out. Then you went through him, for curiosity. And by God, you found your notes. For Manny backed a lot of clubs and shows and such, and the Casa Loma was among them! The temptation was too great. You rolled him completely and were ready to swear he didn't have anything when he came in."

"Prove it," snarled Scranton. "Prove that Manny backed me."

"I can't, of course, since your records burned so conveniently. I've got a reputation such as it is for getting to the bottom of things. You didn't want me coming around the Casa Loma tonight. You even phoned my garage to warn me off, fixed your doorman in case that didn't work. You were afraid if I came I'd learn you took Manny back to the office, afraid he might beef later on and I'd put two and two together, and find out where he had been rolled."

Fat Louie looked thoughtful. He nodded. "All right, I'll save you a lot of trouble. That's what happened. I brought Manny home, you know that, according to the cabbie. And left him alive, by God. I suppose I'm in Dutch for rolling him and for burning my records. He did back me, for seventy-five grand. I'm ready to make any kind of settlement with

the estate the law says make."

Trotter's mouth was agape at the suddenness of Scranton's admission. Men like Fat Louie fight to the last ditch, fight as long as they can raise a penny to pay a crooked lawyer.

"I still worried you, though, didn't I, Scranton? You were so afraid I'd dig up something that you waited outside and took three or four potshots at me when I left this house! The boys have got some of the slugs."

Perspiration was on Fat Louie's brow now. His voice was not so steady. "I never owned a gun in my life, damn you. I wouldn't know how to use one!"

"Don't forget the gun Manny was carrying! I have it in my pocket now, took it out of your own pocket! And don't cry about it being a plant, because I was careful to have a witness. The cab driver outside now saw you come out of the club, talk to me on the sidewalk and get kayoed. He saw me take the gun from you, and it's the gun Manny was carrying, it's probably registered to him. What were you afraid I'd find out, Scranton? What made you so scared of me you were willing to take a chance and wipe me out?"

There was no answer, only a sullen shaking of a fat head that caused heavy purple jowls to quiver and tremble.

"How much did Fargo want for his cut, Louie? Did he try to hold you up? Or was it that he simply knew too much?"

Fat Louie arose. It seemed as though every line of his body sagged and drooped, as if life itself had gone out of his eyes. He said, "Okay, okay. I know when I've had enough. I know a little about ballistics, too,

and the paraffin test and all that. I'm not talking anymore until I see my lawyer."

The phone was ringing shrilly in the anteroom. Trotter called, "For the love of Pete, somebody grab that damned phone." He wheeled back to the group. "All right, suppose you let me in on the secret, damn it, if a cop might intrude. What's all this about ballistics and paraffin and lawyers?"

"Not much. Only you know where I got the gun. Scranton had it. I'll give you odds the slugs from the door match the slugs in Fargo's body and that all of them come from this gun."

Trotter's face reddened, he began to bluster. "—and the dirty fat slug probably came back here and stuck a needle in Manny's eye, and maybe opened his safe, and maybe killed the housekeeper!"

He advanced toward Scranton, his fists clinched. "Hanh, what's that? All right, tell Anthony, don't tell me. It's him they want on the phone, not me."

Jim said, "Don't monkey with Scranton, Trotter. I'll give you a killer in a very few minutes."

Into the phone, he said, "Hello. Yes. Hey, hold on, don't get so excited. Now stop, take a breath and try all over again." There was a period of silence. Then, "Okay. You went back to Dolores' apartment, found Dolores knocked out and Marcia gone? Hang on, damn it, she's all right. I know where she is. You get on over here to Meredith's and bring Dolores. I'll have Marcia on hand. Hey, wait a minute. How about those checks?"

Tom said, "Checks? Oh, yeah. It was two oversized suitcases, belonging to that Doctor Crane that's related to—hello, hello!"

Jim Anthony had hung up.

CHAPTER XI

Trapped Rat



"SURE, sure, Mr. Anthony, I understand." The policeman who accompanied Jim Anthony to the fourth house down was young and a little awed by the company he was keeping. "I wait five minutes exactly, then walk up and ring the bell. When somebody comes—I mean a guy with a beard comes—I'm to ask if the Smith Brothers live here. Then after he says no and shuts the door I wait. If there's any shooting, I break in and come a running, if not I wait until something happens."

"Right. Absolutely right. And never mind asking why, just do as you've been told."

He put his hand on top of the iron fence and vaulted it easily. The room for which he looked, he knew, would be on the top floor, probably with windows like Meredith's, to take advantage of the north light. The fire escape was out of reach, but by climbing onto a windowsill, he managed to reach it. A few seconds later he crouched in the darkness and peered into a lighted studio. He cursed beneath his breath.

Nic Remus, the artist man of evil,

now wore a smock. A roughed-out figure of a woman stood on the stand before him, some twenty-four inches in height. He was working on it with chisel and mallet, utterly engrossed in his efforts and his art. It was the model that caused Jim to curse. The model, across the studio from the artist, was Marcia Higdon.

What lay between Nic Remus and Manny Meredith as artists Jim Anthony was never to learn. What twisted, perverted channel in both minds caused them so stridently to endeavor to outdo the other in carving a certain form and figure? Afterward he he was only able to shake his head and wonder at the queerness of artists.

She posed exactly as in those niched figurines or statuettes on the lower floor of the Meredith house; arms folded below her magnificent breast, head bowed in dejection. Soft light flowed down from overhead.

Jim gulped in the darkness. Here was Helen, whose face launched the thousand ships and burned the topless towers of Troy! Here were Deidre, and Iseult, Lilith in the Garden and Cleopatra in her scented barge on the bosom of the Nile! Here was Salome, tired from dancing for the head of the prophet.

And Nic Remus' tools flew miraculously as he transcribed this living loveliness into the cold serenity of the marble before him. Jim had almost forgotten why he was there. When Remus ceased work with a gesture of annoyance and hurried from the room, he remembered. It was the work of a minute to raise the window and step into the studio.

QUICKLY Marcia seized a robe, wrapped it about her. "He's mad, mad," she whispered, her eyes filled with fear. "He forced me to come with him, he hit poor Dolores and knocked her unconscious! What could I do? He promised me those affidavits if I would pose once more for him. But I'm——!" She paused, hearing the hurrying footsteps on the stair.

Jim snapped, "Get out of sight, get dressed if you can!"

He stepped quickly behind the door as she disappeared from view. Nic Remus entered, muttering to himself.

"No, no. I told him no, there is no one here by that name. Go away, I said, I am very busy. My name, I told him, is Pygmalion, and I am very busy, busy creating a Galatea. I'll prove to Manny that I am——!"

His voice ceased, he was staring at the empty model's dais. He passed his palm over his brow, then transferred the chisel itself to his left hand. Craftily he called, "So! You think you can hide from Nic? What do you think Nic will do with these letters."

His laughter was that of a madman, a man captured and ruined, caught up in the web of his own vices. A man overcome by evil. "I'll see that Gentry gets them! Wherever you are, come out, damn you!"

Anthony stepped out from behind the door. He had expected his sudden appearance at least to startle Remus. He was totally unprepared for the swiftness and speed with which the artist launched himself. As he leaped, his scream was that of a trapped animal. He dropped the mal-

let in midflight, but the sharp chisel was still in his right hand. It grazed Jim's cheek and he felt the warm flow of blood as Remus bore him backward.

He fastened his hands, somehow on the artist's wrist, but the man's body was muscle inspired by madness. Jim ducked his head grimly and took the blows rained on him with Remus' left hand, clung on to the wrist in his hand and dug his own fingers into the wrist muscles. Madness or no madness, the pressure was too great for Remus. He released the sharp instrument. Jim managed to throw him off and gain his own feet.

Afterward, when asked about the fight, Jim Anthony would merely shake his head grimly and shudder. Twice he felt hot breath on his face, felt teeth at his throat. And in the nick of time the policeman broke down the lower door and arrived. It was his sap rather than Jim Anthony's muscles that subdued the mad artist, and Jim was all too willing to give credit where credit was due.

Trotter was more than exasperated. His dyspepsia was bothering him again. He looked scowlingly about the circle. There was Marcia Higdon sitting close to Jim and Tom, Dolores sitting on the other side of her fiance. Fat Louie Scranton, looking a bit the worse for Trotter's exuberant fists, sat cuffed to a policeman. A stenographer sat at a small table taking everything down.

Trotter said to Jim, "Okay, okay, don't tell me what it was. Miss Higdon had something in her ex-husband's safe which she wanted. Everything happened exactly as you've ex-

plained. Nic Remus, the crazy man, came in after her at ten o'clock, after seeing her enter from the lunchroom across the street. She opened the safe and went back for a second look at the corpse, fainting. Remus spent a little time messing around. Where?"

"He went through the safe. Look, Trotter, she called Tom before opening that safe. It takes maybe ten minutes to come from the Casa Loma to this house. When Tom arrived, he found Remus going down the steps of the house. Where was Remus and what was he doing during those ten minutes?"

"All right, I'll play straight, man. Where was he?"

"Going through the open safe. He knew about this—er—this property belonging to Miss Higdon, and stole it himself. It required the ten minutes to search the safe. Now, I'm telling you this to explain why I went over to Remus', what the fight was about. Now I want to make a bargain with you. If I gave you a double killer, the party that drove the needle through Meredith's eye and poisoned Mrs. Siddons, would you agree to keep Marcia out of this, as far as the newspapers are concerned?"

Trotter regarded him owlshly. "Just what is this property worth?"

"A hundred million to Marcia Higdon, maybe more, and not a penny to anyone else. Is it a deal?"

Trotter nodded.

"I want a bunch of old newspapers," Jim told one of the cops. And, when he hesitated, "Damn it, any papers! I don't want to read them—I'm going to burn them."

When they were brought he told the popeyed policemen what they were to do and led the way down to the third floor. Cautiously, after arranging his wadded papers, he gave the word. Matches were applied to the papers; a window at the end of the hall was opened to fan the smoke and flames. He allowed it a moment or two to gain headway, then gave the signal.

A policeman knocked over a chair, yelled, "Fire! Fire!" He ran back and forth in the hallway. Another policeman ran down the stairs, only to turn and run upward. "Turn in an alarm, hurry!" screamed another. "Fire! Fire!"

Jim smiled. The bronze door opened a fraction of an inch. The seconds ticked on, then suddenly that bronze door was swung wide by a carpet slippersed toe, and a grotesque figure leaped into the flaming papers. It was Doctor Crane, or Uncle Ike, and he was staggering under an enormous load of his medical books, his precious books, which he was endeavoring to save.

Trotter caught him as he plunged blindly through the flames. Policemen stomped about putting them out. The books remained where they were fallen.

JIM grinned at the glowering little man. "Bring him back into the room," he instructed, "and bring the stack of books, too." Inside the room he went directly to the closet and lifted the play rope down from the shelf. Trotter pushed Doctor Crane ahead of him. He flopped down on the bed and stared at his feet disconsolately.

Jim said, "Note that it takes a good sized policeman to carry those books, Trotter. Which means that he may look skinny, but Ike Crane is a pretty strong man, all considered. Bear that in mind. It's sort of important."

Trotter took off his hat and scratched his head. "Well, Jim, I've seen you pull some funny ones out of the fire, but this one beats me!"

Jim paid no attention. Instead he said in a normal tone of voice, "How long have you been playing deaf, Crane?" There was no answer. Impatiently Jim snapped, "You know I can have you examined. Hell, man, it's all over. Don't make it tough on yourself. You heard the running feet and the voices through two doors, the inner of which is practically soundproofed, yet you were supposed to be under the influence of morphine, besides being deaf. Come on, how long have you been playing deaf, and playing like you were a little crazy?"

Crane looked up then. All the devils in hell danced in his eyes. His lips pulled back, he snarled, "What's it to you what I play or don't play, you interfering fool?"

Trotter said, in an awed tone, "By God!"

"I know what you did with your little bat and with your little rope, Crane," said Jim.

"And what if you do? Who gives a damn? I'm having a drink and to hell with you!"

His hand emerged from beneath the pillow, a flat pint bottle in his hand. He had the cork out and the bottle at his lips before Jim's hunch threw him forward. He seized the

bottle, managed to drag it away from the thin lips. But momentarily Ike Crane's eyes gleamed with triumph. The fingers that released the bottle were lifeless fingers.

Sick at heart, Jim smelled the brandy, said, "Potassium cyanide, of course. And we let him get away with it!"

He walked across the cell-like room to the solitary window, ran his hand along the top of the sill, where the two sections came together. His fingers were dust covered. He paused at the prim chiffonade, found the little sack of dust and the medical case.

"Come back to the studio," he said wearily. "There's nothing we can do here." On the way out he picked up the play rope.

"THE trouble was," he continued, "there were too many people with motives for killing Manny Meredith. There was his ex-wife, for whom he made life a torturous thing, there was my friend Tom Gentry, engaged to marry Marcia Higdon. There was a housekeeper, who was fanatical, who often said she was going to kill him to save his immortal soul. And Nic Remus who loved Marcia in his warped way, and who fought with Meredith over their abilities as sculptors. There was Fat Louie Scranton, who owed Meredith around a hundred thousand dollars. And there was Uncle Ike, who'd hung on for years by playing a deaf, enfeebled relative."

"Motive?" snapped Trotter.

"Two. Didn't it strike you peculiar that there were no clothes in Crane's room? But I'll come to that in a moment. We could eliminate

the housekeeper because she, too, was murdered. And this, of course, narrowed our field. Who would want to kill both Manny Meredith and his housekeeper. Add to this, who would know about potassium cyanide being so handy around the house?"

"Nic Remus would. He and Meredith loved the same woman and—!"

"I never could place Remus as a killer. A man of evil, yes. And with a twisted brain. He wanted more than anything else in the world to show Manny he was the greater sculptor. How could he show him, prove it to him, gloat over his discomfiture, if Manny was dead?"

Trotter merely shook his head.

"I started with the premise that something was wrong with Crane's room. I went back, and went through it, after he was supposedly under morphine as a sedative, after he had supposedly tried to kill himself. There was one suit of clothing in the closet. Checks were in it. You know that. Now when a man packs up and checks his stuff, it surely means he's going to leave. Why would a fellow like Crane leave a cushy home like this? Because he quarreled with Manny over something and was ordered out!

"Now, suppose Mrs. Siddons the housekeeper overheard that quarrel, but because it was one of many, she thought nothing of it. Afterward, after he had killed Manny, he got to worrying about it. So knowing about the potassium cyanide, knowing Mrs. Siddons' habit of taking a little night-cap—he took care of that. Then, when he *heard* the commotion, he pretended suicide with the rope in his closet. Do you follow me?"

"Not precisely," answered Trotter dryly. "He killed Manny because Manny asked him to move. He killed the old lady to keep her from reporting the request to move, as soon as she thought of it?" Jim nodded! "And maybe you can explain how he'd lock himself in his room and leave the key outside the door?"

"SURE," answered Jim calmly. "But you're overlooking something. I damned sure don't know why so many people think an heir must be younger than the person leaving a fortune. Meredith didn't have a will. I don't even know if Uncle Ike is his closest of kin, but even if there were a hundred others, a slice of the Meredith dough would keep an old man in luxury for the rest of his life. He had that for his second motive."

"And the key? Hey, wait! I take it he hit you himself in his room and took the checks from you, that he hit the cop outside the door?" Jim nodded. "How the hell could he when the ambulance doc knocked him out with a shot of morphine?"

"He was a doctor at one time. This is his bag there. He used it twice. As soon as the room was cleared the first time, after he played hanging to avoid suspicion or muddy the case, he gave himself a shot of some stimulant. He was wide awake when I searched his room. When I found the checks he went into action on me and on the cop when he came in. What was simpler then than to give himself a real shot of morphine so that his pulse would be about half normal when I came to?"

"And the dust on the bag? How could he open it?"

"There's dust in this sack, Trotter, found in his chifferobe. If he hadn't killed himself, this dust would have burned him. Let me get on, I'm tired. He'd planned this for some time, but the last quarrel was the payoff. Tonight he listened and peeped when they brought Manny in, passed out. Opportunity!

"He opened his window, leaned out with his trusty rope and patiently threw and threw until he managed to hook it over one of the window washer's hooks, he—now wait a minute! I'll prove it for you in a minute. Then he took his little bat and went out, *locking the door behind him*. The dirty work took place upstairs. The needle was an inspiration I suppose. He probably meant to use the bat. All he had to do next was slide down his little rope and reenter the room.

"The rope even had a metal hondo, or eye, in it to form the lasso. He would give it a bit of slack and flip it off the hook without difficulty. He closed his window, and sprinkled some more of his precious dust on it, to show it hadn't been opened."

"And you can prove it about the hook?"

"Absolutely. Here's the hook, well rusted—almost. Take it to your own chemist. Let him examine it microscopically with the aid of an ultraviolet lamp. He'll find the smooth places left by the noose, with even small bits of sisal clinging in the rough rust. On the sides he'll see where the metal hondo rubbed, leaving bits of brass. And I told you

the dust would have hanged him had he lived. The criminal always slips, Trotter, you know that. Logically, because Crane's room is painted dead white, the dust on the bag and on the sill would also be white, dust sifting from the rough walls. But it's ordinary *outside* dust! Black and brown with hardly a trace of that whiteness. Crane slipped up there. He wanted the fancy, added touch of the dust. So he got his dust from the basement. Poor guy."

FOUR people stood before a small fire in a grate of Penthouse A, atop the Waldorf-Anthony Hotel. The woman with the black hair said sadly, but levelly, "Tom, dear, there's something I must tell you, and I want Dolores and Jim to hear it too. It's —" she flushed painfully. "It's about a past period in my life that I wanted to bury. You may hate and

despise me for this, but it's the only way to shoot square." She hesitated.

Tom Gentry took her hand, his voice was husky. "New Orleans?" She nodded. He slid an arm about her shoulder. "Why do you think Remus and I had it in for each other? He told me all about it two months ago and I smacked him down. As far as I'm concerned, it's all a mess of lies."

She didn't speak. She had no need of speaking. She turned to him, and his arms were waiting.

Jim Anthony knelt before the fire. He had a handful of documents which he had taken from the pocket of Nic Remus' smock. One at a time he tossed them into the little blaze.

"What are you burning, Jim?" asked Dolores.

He grinned. "Nothing at all, dear. Just a handful of lies."

★ ★ ★ ★

**EVERY PENNY THAT YOU PUT INTO
DEFENSE STAMPS AND BONDS
NOT ONLY IS A SOUND
COMMERCIAL INVESTMENT,
BUT ALSO IS A MEANS
BY WHICH YOU BUY
FREEDOM AND SECURITY
FOR YOURSELF AND YOUR CHILDREN!**

★ ★ ★ ★



Blood

On

Their Hands

THE cabbie who always drove Joe Carson on his midnight run of the lower Manhattan police stations stopped as usual in Pearl

Street under the curve of the elevated, opposite the slanting downhill alley that is Oak Street. Joe patted the knee of the chestnut-haired



He snarled like a beast as the bar grazed his shoulder. his hand came up with a knife.

By C. A. M. DONNE

The police only laughed at her when she told of the submarine in New York City's East River, but Joe Carson had a nose for news. Even though it meant standing up his own sweetheart, he decided that the panic-stricken blonde was worth a little closer study

girl who had ridden with him from the editorial offices of the *Morning Bulletin*.

"This will only take a minute, Lois," he promised. "Bowery bums and drunken sailors are all they get here."

Lois Grant, who loved Joe so much

that she had been putting up with this sort of thing for almost a year, sighed.

"You'll have to get a civilized job when we're married. I'm not going to spend all my nights watching you work."

He squeezed her hand—the left

one, on which their engagement diamond sparkled—and opened the cab door. He strode hurriedly between the square green lamps that flanked the entrance to the Oak Street station, a tall and angular fellow, not yet thirty, with unruly dark hair surmounting a lean homely face.

Inside the station Lieutenant Riordan's frosty eyes peered down from the high desk. Out of the side of his mouth Riordan said to the cop on the switchboard, "No reporter with sense would come lookin' fer news in a precinct so peaceful ye can hear a jakie-bum hiccough a block away. He'd be down at the waterfront where the rats are blowin' up all them ships."

Riordan handed down half a dozen pink cards, and Joe riffled through them. A homeless man dead of alcoholism. A minor auto smash. Two drunks held for fighting.

Joe grunted, "The city could save money by closing up this joint——"

The door banged open. A girl stumbled in. Joe stared at her disheveled blonde hair, wild blue eyes and panting red mouth, and at the cheap frock stretched taut over a too-thin body. The girl was about twenty and she was pretty despite the terror in her face.

She went straight to the desk. She said, "You got to believe me this time! Tonight they're going to blow up one called the *Western Provinces!*"

Riordan's voice was tinged with indulgent sarcasm. "Max Linster again, Myra?"

"Max," she said, "and some others. They got a submarine."

"A submarine? Well, now! Where might it be?"

She sensed his skepticism and moaned, "Somewhere in the East River is all I know. You could make Max tell."

Riordan was a cynical cop, but not necessarily an unkind one. He leaned forward. "Go home, Myra. Quit botherin' us and I won't have the paddy wagon take ye to Bellevue."

"Honest, lieutenant, I'm tellin' the——"

"Mullens," said Riordan to the man at the switchboard, "get the wagon. Tell 'em we got a nut for observation."

The girl's wild eyes looked at the cop, who grinned. They turned hopelessly upon Joe, who for all his reportorial experience was a little bewildered.

"I'll go," she said dully. She opened the heavy door and slid through it.

Riordan swore. "These screwballs! We got a million phony tips about them ships. This dame came runnin' to us when the *Spindrift* and the *Glennon* was sunk, blamin' Max Linster, who runs a ship's outfitting shop. We checked and found he was okay, but Myra used to be his girl, and they had a fight and she wanted to play a dirty trick on him." He snorted. "A submarine in the East River!"

JOE fished in his pocket for a cigarette. "They have 'em at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. After all, she was talking about important stuff."

"Is it the police ye're givin' advice to, son? Well, ye may as well

know we'll send a detective to see Linster in the mornin', and tonight I'll ask the harbor authorities to keep an eye on the *Western Provinces*—which they'd be doin' anyhow. But Linster is a storekeeper, not a submarine skipper."

Joe shrugged. "And me, I'm not a cop." He added, "Thank God," and went outside and up the little hill to where the taxi and Lois waited.

Half a block away, in the darkness under the el, he saw a small gray figure hurrying. She kept looking over her shoulder and avoiding shadows. She was the only person visible in that direction, and as he watched her Joe remembered the appeal in her frightened eyes.

He leaned inside the cab and made his voice apologetic. "Lois, honey, I've got a tip on a story. How about going on home and waiting for me to call? I won't be over half an hour."

Her eyes were pale gold, studying his face. "Has your tip anything to do with that flossy-looking blonde who was in the station?"

"It might. Can I help it who figures in the news? If we're going to be married, I've got to keep working."

"All right," she said. "I'll wait while you chase your Bowery beauty. I'll wait half an hour, Joe Carson. Don't bother calling if you're later than that."

He kissed her, and the warmth of her response took the sternness out of her words. He felt the yielding softness of her young body, and hated to leave her. After all, the

chances were that Riordan was right and he'd only be wasting time.

But Joe Carson was a reporter and he had a hunch, and he believed in hunches.

The girl Myra was a block away, walking fast. Joe extended his long legs, eating up space. He had more than halved the distance between them when a man stepped from the doorway of a warehouse and halted her. Her scream was cut off suddenly, as if hands had closed over her windpipe. There was a struggle, then she and the man vanished into the doorway.

Joe began to run, on his toes, as quietly as possible. Excitement made his whole body tingle. Already he was sure that his hunch had been a right one.

The girl and the man had not entered the building. He heard scuffling as he neared the recessed doorway, a man's heavy breathing, and the man's savage voice: "Squeal on Max, will you? You dirty tramp _____"

Swinging into the doorway, Joe had a glimpse of a dark-clad form bent over the girl, who was sprawled upon the concrete. The man's hands were at her throat, squeezing, shaking her as a terrier shakes a rat.

The man's face lifted toward the reporter. His hands came away from the girl. Before he could make a decisive move, Joe's fist smashed against his jaw, and the man bounced against the door and collapsed.

The girl lay on her side, her skirt flung high. Joe dropped to his knees. His hand went inside the vee of her dress, feeling for a heartbeat. If she were dead. . .

But his anxious fingers caught the flutter of a pulse and an instant later she drew a shuddering breath.

The man stirred. Joe crouched, half expecting to face a gun or a knife, knowing a cold dread at the thought. But the man did not want to fight. He scrambled to his feet and sprinted up the sidewalk.

Joe stared after him, tempted to follow. But the man was fast, and anyway the girl was more important.

He lifted her to a sitting position. "Myra," he said.

HER eyes shot fear like a tangible force toward him. "Let me go," she whispered, trying to pull away.

"It's all right," he whispered. "The guy who tried to kill you won't stop running this side of the Bronx."

"They'll be back for me. I got to hide!"

Joe helped her up. "I know a place. Lean on me." He put an arm around her thin waist and looked up and down the street. It was deserted except for a taxi crossing a block away and an el train rumbling downtown.

They went through a cross street toward Park Row. There was a dingy saloon on the corner, run by Pete Fanner, one of Joe's many dubious acquaintances in that quarter. Pete had rooms for rent upstairs.

Joe led Myra through Pete's side door and along a corridor to another door that opened into the bar, where shabby men were drinking nickel beer and dime whisky.

"Pete!" he called.

A stocky man in an apron approached. "Hi, Joe. What can I do for you?"

"We want a room," Joe told him.

Pete grinned. "Take the front one on the second floor. It'll be a buck."

Joe gave him two bills. "Bring up half a pint of rye. Good rye, Pete—none of that rotgut."

He helped Myra up the creaking stairs. The door of the front room was open. He pulled the cord that lit the naked light bulb dangling from the ceiling and surveyed with distaste the sagging bed, the one chair, the washstand with its bowl and pitcher.

Myra sat on the edge of the bed, shivering. Joe sat in the chair and puffed nervously at a cigarette until Pete came with a pop bottle full of liquor, glasses and a pitcher of water. Pete cleared a space for those things on the washstand and departed wordlessly.

Spilling half the liquor into a glass, Joe gave it to the girl. "It'll take the jitters out of you."

She downed it without batting an eyelash.

Joe took a smaller drink, and it tasted like what he had ordered. He said, "Tell me about Linster."

"Are you a cop?"

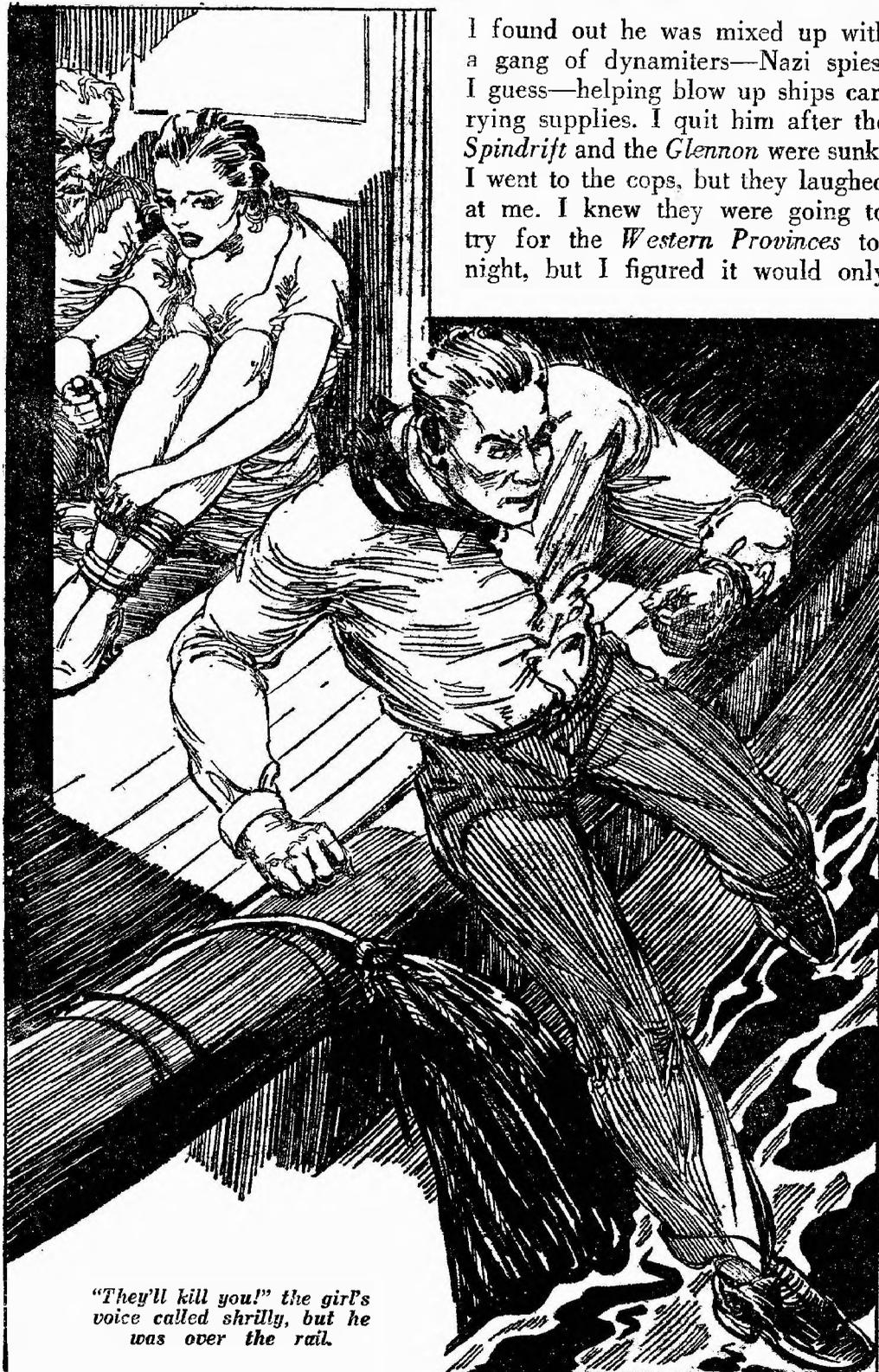
"A reporter. Call me Joe. If you tell the truth I'll see that the cops help you. If it's a good story, my paper will pay you some money."

"They'll kill me! Sam, that guy who tried it, works for Linster."

"You'll get protection. You can count on me."

She eyed him speculatively, making up her mind. "All right. I got nothing to lose. Can I have another shot?" He gave her what was left in the bottle and she tossed it off. "Linster used to be my boy friend.

I found out he was mixed up with a gang of dynamiters—Nazi spies, I guess—helping blow up ships carrying supplies. I quit him after the *Spindrift* and the *Glennon* were sunk. I went to the cops, but they laughed at me. I knew they were going to try for the *Western Provinces* tonight, but I figured it would only



"They'll kill you!" the girl's voice called shrilly, but he was over the rail.

get me in trouble if I went to the cops again. I hid in a cheap rooming house and damned near starved. But tonight I couldn't stand it any longer, thinking of the sailors that might be killed. I went to the cops, and you saw how they laughed at me. Then I ran into Sam, who must have been watching for me."

JOE asked, "How did you find out what was going on?"

"Max wasn't careful what he said around me. A man named Holmann—Captain Holmann, he called himself—visited Max in the store a lot and gave him money. Other people came there and I heard them talking. I didn't know how really important it was till those ships blew up. Then I told Max I wouldn't stand for murder or working against the government—that if he didn't get out of it I'd go to the law. He beat me and locked me in a room over the store, but I got out of a window."

Joe remembered the case of the *Spindrift*, dynamited at her dock in Jersey City. Investigators said later that, being a munitions ship, she was watched so closely that it should have been impossible for saboteurs to get near her. After that they redoubled their vigilance—but they could not prevent the dynamiting of the *Glennon* as she was passing the Statue of Liberty, bound for somewhere in England.

"What about the submarine you mentioned?"

"I heard them talking about it. They keep it somewhere along South Street, at a private dock, hidden under a tugboat."

His heart sank. All at once he found himself in full agreement with Lieutenant Riordan that Myra was a nut. No submarine could be hidden under a tug. Submarines couldn't navigate the channels of the East River under water anyway, but would have to keep to the surface. He should have known that from the beginning.

"Baby," he said, "you had me going for a minute. You ought to know better than dream up stories like that. Maybe you belong in Bellevue after all!"

She shrank back. "No! I tell you, I'm not lying!"

"But how could they hide a submarine——?"

"This is a special kind. It was made by an old man named Bard. They got hold of him somehow and——"

"Franz Bard!" he shouted. He leaned forward in his eagerness, gripping her bare knee where her short skirt had pulled up. "Myra, if you're sure of that, I apologize!"

The papers had been full of Franz Bard and his midget submarine two or three months ago. It was a freak craft carrying only three or four men, built to navigate waters in which other undersea craft could not venture. There were some who had predicted that it would revolutionize naval warfare.

But Bard had vanished, presumably lost at sea while testing his only working model. Naval officers had shrugged, taking it for granted that his failure to return had proved the impracticability of the craft. Already the newspapers had almost forgotten the old inventor.

"You believe me?" she asked.

"And how! I'm going to do something about it. Wait here while I make some phone calls and see some people."

Myra got up in alarm. "Don't leave me, Joe! I'm scared stiff to be alone while they're after me!"

He moved toward the door. "Just for a few minutes."

"No!" She threw her arms around his neck in a frantic effort to hold him. "I won't let you leave me!"

He looked into her face, fresh and pretty in spite of everything, and hesitated. He couldn't take her with him while he organized a raid on Linster's shop that would produce an exclusive story for the *Bulletin*—not while killers were watching for her—and on the other hand he couldn't have her getting hysterics in this room.

He put his arms around her. "It'll be all right." He felt her tense body quivering against him, and thought about Lois again.

"Stay with me, please, Joe!"

ABRUPTLY he was aware of something more than fear in her voice and manner. He looked into her blue eyes and saw smokey longing there. The poor kid had been scared and lonesome, he thought.

He tightened his embrace and felt the slim curves of her figure fit themselves to the angles of his frame. Her lips parted, and he closed his eyes and bent his head to kiss them. His heart pumped steaming thrills through his veins.

"I'll take care of you, Myra——"

The door flew open. Joe spun, balling his fists.

Lois Grant stood there, her lovely face pale beneath the burnished hair, her bosom rising and falling rapidly beneath the vest of her black satin frock.

"So," she said icily, "I should wait at home like a fool while you makes love to a Bowery tramp!"

"You don't understand!" he said desperately. "It's a——"

"A story. I know. A romantic story, you might call it—of the sordid type. I had the cab wait and saw you come out of that Pearl Street doorway with your arm around her. I followed and saw the light go on in this room." She smiled bitterly. "I didn't want to rush you, but I had to see it with my own eyes before I could believe it."

Her hand moved. The diamond engagement ring rolled on the thread-bare carpet.

"Wait!" Joe grabbed her arm. He couldn't let her go, thinking what she was thinking. He couldn't bear to lose her. He said, "Myra, tell her the truth!"

But Myra was sitting on the bed again, weeping.

"If you don't mind," Lois said, "I'll go home now."

A board creaked in the hallway. A voice said, "No, you won't. You won't go home for quite a while, sister." A dapper young man stood in the door, covering the interior of the room with an automatic pistol, and over his shoulder Joe saw a pale, dark-clad man whom he recognized as Sam, the man who had tried to strangle Myra.

On the bed Myra cringed, stricken with terror. She gasped, "Smokey—Sam—for God's sake don't kill me!"

Her voice rose to a shriek. "*Don't kill me!*"

THE dapper young man, whom she had called Smokey, came with lithe steps into the room. Joe's brain and body ached to spring upon him, to pound the smirk from his face. But Sam also had a pistol, and its black snout wavered between Joe and Lois and Joe could not risk the life of the girl he loved.

"*Don't—!*" shrieked Myra. But the flat of Smokey's gun slapped against her temple and she went limp, her legs sprawling beneath her tumbled skirt.

Joe said furiously, "What have you got against her?"

"Don't ask questions, guy," Smokey advised, "or you'll get a dose of the same. I'll bet Myra's been telling you fish stories about submarines. Well, you and your girl friend will find out more before the night's over, if you don't make me kill you first!"

"Leave her out of it. She doesn't know a thing."

"We couldn't think of leaving her out, pal. We wouldn't never found you if it hadn't been for her. Sam had to lam when you showed up and neither him nor me saw which way you and Myra went. But I was waiting up the street, and saw you get out of this other dame's taxi, so we followed it—and here we are."

"Oh, Joe!" Lois moaned, her golden eyes filled with shame. "Joe, can you ever forgive me?"

He could forgive her anything, but he could never forgive himself if he had led her to harm.

"It's all right, honey. I'll take care of things."

"Think so?" spoke Sam's rasping voice, behind Joe. "Here's a down payment on that punch I owe you."

Joe heard the quick intake of breath that presages violent physical effort. He started to turn, but the clubbed gun smashed down on the back of his skull and his legs turned to rubber. He fell forward into the blackness of insensibility with Lois's scream ringing in his ears, growing fainter. . .

THE return to consciousness was a long struggle, like fighting up from the bottom of the ocean with lungs threatening to burst at every stroke. At first Joe thought he was smothering. Then he realized he was half lying, half sitting, with his face against a soft body. He turned his head and caught a whiff of familiar perfume, and knew that his face had been pressed against Lois's shoulder, just above her breast.

He tried to put his arms around her, but they were bound behind him and lashed to a cleat. When he tried to move his feet he discovered that they were bound also. He heard low voices near at hand and opened his eyes to the yellow light of small electric bulbs. The smell of hot oil and bilgewater filled his nostrils, and the surface on which he lay trembled with the slow turning of machinery.

They were lying against the sides of the cabin of a moving tugboat—he and Lois and Myra and a white-haired old man in torn garments, whose face was covered with a ragged growth of beard. Lois and the old man were bound and gagged as he was, but Myra was still unconscious from the blow she had received.



His hands came away from the girl, but before he could get his balance, Joe had struck.

ed and her hands and feet were free. Sam and Smokey sat on the after rail of the wallowing craft, puffing cigarettes, peering from time to time through the open door of the cabin.

But the voices came from forward, where a short companionway led up into the wheelhouse. Three men were in there, one with feet braced behind the wheel, two seated on a transom.

Joe looked again at the old man, and a memory of news photographs came back to him. This emaciated prisoner, with the saddest features he had ever seen, was the famous Franz Bard—not a willing aide, but a victim of the dynamiters!

Lois moved beside Joe, and he turned to her. The handkerchief stuffed in her mouth blocked the words she would have spoken, but her eyes were eloquent. They were telling him that she blamed herself for this peril, that if she had trusted him they might have been safe.

It was not possible for a man to smile visibly with a bandage over his mouth, but Joe did the best he could. He nodded reassuringly. Not even the thought of death was harder for him to bear than the thought of the self-torture she was enduring.

Feet thudded in the companionway. A squat man wearing thick spectacles came into the cabin, followed by a tall straight man in dungarees and a deck officer's cap. The squat one, Joe decided, would be Max Linster, the outfitting merchant who had turned traitor, and the other must be the Captain Holmann of whom Myra had spoken.

Linster stared coldly at the reporter. "Ha, my snoopy friend!" he growled. "It is time you woke up. Tell me, by moving your head, whether you had time to report to the police what the stupid girl told you."

Joe could see no point in telling the truth. He nodded.

"Ha, I do not believe you!" Linster spat at him. "But no matter; none of you shall live long. Fortunately I was already prepared to close my store and move." He kicked at the sprawled form of Myra. "When this yellow-haired squealer wakes up I shall cut her heart out!"

Holmann grinned callously and followed Linster to the after deck.

Joe gave up tugging at his bonds. The ropes were hard and unyielding, his wrists sticky with blood. He was filled with cold despair. Only a miracle could save them, he was convinced, and he had ceased to believe in miracles a good many years ago.

He glanced at Myra, sprawled there pathetically in her sleazy dress. He pitied her far more than he did himself. There had been unmitigated cruelty in Linster's eyes and voice. When Myra awoke, it would be to a horrible death.

SUDDENLY he realized she was awake, and had been for some time. He surprised a flicker of her eyelids, a movement of one hand. He saw that the hand was not empty, but held a twelve-inch bar of iron which must have been on the deck near her.

He watched, fascinated, as she drew up her bare knees. Her eyes were open now, blazing with hatred, and they were fixed upon the broad back of Linster, standing just beyond the cabin door. She arose silently as a cat, while Joe's brain groped for the words of some prayer that might help her. She took a step forward and raised her arm. . .

"Look out, Linster!" Sam yelled.

Linster whirled. He ducked as Myra hurled the bar with all her slight strength. It struck his left shoulder and made him grunt with pain, but did not disable him.

He sprang at her, snarling like some wild beast. His right hand went to his belt and flashed up with a sailor's knife. The girl shrieked.

Lois shrieked too. Joe could hear the muffled sound in her throat, through the handkerchief that gagged her.

Joe shut his eyes against the ghastly spectacle of Linster, holding the girl by her yellow hair, plunging the six-inch blade into her bosom. He felt her body fall against him, felt her hot blood upon his legs.

"The little bum!" Linster snarled, gripping the streaming knife. "She'll never squeal on anybody else!"

Linster stood directly in front of Joe. The reporter's raging fury lent him strength and speed. He bent his knees and straightened them, driving his heels with all his might straight into the murderer's belly.

The fat man uttered a gasping scream. He shot backward while the knife clattered to the deck. He leaned against the farther wall of the cabin, retching.

Sam came into the cabin and smirked at Joe. Sam said, "Time for a second installment on that punch!" His foot came up and smashed against the side of Joe's head with stunning force, and stars and pinwheels flowered within Joe's brain.

EVERYTHING was a blurred jumble for a while after that—a

succession of flashes of light and blackness, in which meaningless voices and the sounds of hurrying feet intruded. It took long minutes for Carson to sense his surroundings again clearly, and when he did so Linster and Sam and Smokey had disappeared. Only Captain Holmann and the man in the wheelhouse seemed to be aboard with the prisoners.

Holmann stood before the old inventor, speaking with mock politeness:

"In behalf of our great cause I thank you, Franz Bard. If you were not such a fool—if you did not insist upon remaining loyal to a doomed democracy—you might gain honors and riches in the New Europe. Not only have you built an under-sea raider that has aided us greatly, but you were kind enough to make it available to us by dealing for fittings with our trusted agent Linster. We have sunk many ships and killed many men with your unwilling help, and shall sink and kill more after you are gone!"

The officer turned from the old man, who was weeping silently. He stared with smiling insolence at Joe.

"Good-by, my forceful young friend. In twenty minutes you and your so pretty sweetheart will be in hell. This vessel is loaded with dynamite, timed to explode at the proper moment. Hans will steer her close to the dock where the *Western Provinces* is about to sail with supplies for our enemies, and then Hans will swim to where we wait in our tiny submarine to pick him up. The ship and the tug will be blown to bits with all aboard. So will some of the docks and ships near her, and

such unlucky men as happen to be in the vicinity.”

Holmann's smile grew wider and thinner. "You might have caused us serious trouble had you learned of our existence a week ago. As it happens, we were prepared to move our base tonight and sacrifice the tug to destroy the munitions ship. Hiding a submarine, however small, beneath a tugboat in the river was a clumsy and dangerous device, and we only intended to use it until we could prepare a disused yacht harbor on Long Island. From this night on we shall be much more effective against allied shipping in these waters.”

The captain gave a sharp order to Hans, at the wheel, and left the cabin. Joe saw him go toward the port rail, heard him speak to someone overside. Then Joe breathed a sigh of relief and went to work feverishly.

ONLY a miracle could save them—but the beginning of a miracle had happened already! He had the bloodied dagger that had taken Myra's life. Half concealed beneath his outthrust legs, it had been unnoticed in the commotion of leaving the tug. He drew in his feet, hooking it toward him, until his numbed fingers could grasp it.

It was clumsy, arduous work. The keen blade sliced into his wrists often-er than into the tough manila fibers. Twenty minutes, Holmann had given them—and some of those precious minutes had been wasted in talk. Even if he freed himself, there would be an armed man in the wheelhouse to face. And there would be four or

more aboard the submarine, watching to see that all went well, prepared to torpedo both the tug and the *Western Provinces* if necessary.

Counting seconds by his heartbeats, he thought at least half an hour must have passed before his wrists came free from one another and from the cleat. He swept the knife to his ankles and cut the ropes there. He tore the gag from his mouth and snatched up the iron bar Myra had thrown at Linster.

He was at the foot of the companionway when the man Hans saw his reflection in the glass and turned with a muttered curse. Hans clawed at his belt where a knife-hilt showed, but fear made him clumsy. Before the blade was half out of its sheath, the metal bar descended upon Hans's skull and battered him to the deck, where he lay still.

Hastily, for time was life, Joe cut free the wrists of Lois and Franz Bard, not bothering with their ankles or their gags, leaving the knife between them so that they could finish the job themselves. He panted, "Steer her so she won't come near any other ships, Bard. Then grab lifebelts and go overboard. If I don't come back—good-by!”

He sprinted from the cabin. As he neared the rail Lois' shrill scream followed him:

"They'll kill you, Joe! Come back!”

The cry went out over the water. It reached the round metal tower that was settling toward the depths ten feet from the side of the tug. In the top of that tower a circular door was closing. It opened abruptly and Holmann's head peered out. Beside

the head appeared Holmann's arm and hand, pointing a Luger. The fellow's lips writhed in a tight grin.

Joe placed his foot on the low rail and leaped. The shot came while he was in the air and the slug burned his hip. Then his feet splashed into cold water and struck a slippery rounded deck beneath, and his left hand grasped the rim of the conning tower. He swung the metal bar.

Holmann's grin vanished; his skull collapsed beneath the cloth cap; the pistol made a small splash in the sea.

DRAGGING the dead man from the turret, heaving him into the harbor, Joe climbed down into the submarine. A wave went with him, spilling buckets of water into the hull. Someone below shouted, "Shut off the valves! The tower's open!" And Linster's heavy voice, echoing weirdly against metal walls, demanded, "Are you having trouble, Holmann?"

Standing at the bottom of the shaft, peering into a tapering tube barely six feet high in the center and less than fifteen feet long, Joe Carson laughed crazily.

"You're having trouble!" he yelled—and hurled himself at the three men in front of him.

A bullet plucked the shoulder of his coat. The noise of the pistol was deafening in that closed space, and the cry that came from Smokey seemed faint and muffled:

"Cut it out, Sam! Do you want to blow us all to hell?"

Smokey's left hand grabbed for Sam's automatic, and at the same time Smokey's right hand thrust a

knife toward Joe's chest. The iron bar swung again and the knife went spinning. Smokey sank to his knees, staring stupidly at a wrist that drooped queerly from its forearm.

"Who cares what happens?" Sam shouted, mad with fear. He triggered again. The bullet went wild, plowing into the floor. Sparks blazed where it had struck and the air was filled with the smell of acid spilled from batteries.

Joe's knuckles found Sam's jaw then, hard-driven with the memory of Sam's last kick. The man who had tried to strangle Myra went backward precipitately, his skull striking the metal wheel that controlled the valves. Sam collapsed in a still heap. Whirling, Joe faced a cowering Linster, whose pudgy hands fumbled at an empty knife sheath at his waist. Linster gasped, "Please—I surrender——"

"Like hell you do!" Joe roared. He smashed his fists, right and left, into Linster's face. "You rotten traitor! You murdering skunk!" The thought of the dripping knife plunging into Myra's breast blotted all else from Joe's brain, so that he did not realize he was still punching after Linster's features had become gory pulp, and Linster had slumped in a senseless huddle against the curving wall.

Nor did Joe realize that he was coughing and choking until a hand grasped his shoulder and shook him. He looked blearily into the haggard face of Franz Bard.

"Chlorine gas!" Bard was shouting in his ear. "Sea water in the

(Continued on page 127)

Death Straight

IN THE deep living room chair, of leather, sat Nathaniel Prince with his slender legs extended and neatly crossed at the ankles on a rectangular leather ottoman. In his lap was a book which he was not reading, though he appeared to be absorbed in it. He had read it on his last trip up here to the country place and thought it was exceptionally poor. But he liked the feel of paper between his fingers when he was thinking, and he turned the pages caressingly.

Especially he liked the soothing response of banknote paper, and he could not afford to pay Angelica the amount she said she "could use." She indicated blackmail and was very sophisticated about it, the wickedest girl Nat Prince had ever known, and uncommonly shrewd for one so young. He had always been afraid of her because she was just a trifle smarter than he was, in her feminine way, but he had never let her realize it. He was crooked, too.

He would have bargained with her and cut her demand of a hundred thousand dollars down to a reasonable sum, but he couldn't lay his hands on an even ten thousand now. It was all tied up.

They never raised their voices when they quarreled, and were about equally matched in vocabulary and the amount of hate they could express in words. The battle they had just had nearly exhausted Nathaniel's resources in the language. In

the chamber off the living room she was striding up and down like a caged panther. That was the trouble. She couldn't go anywhere, couldn't have fun in the city like him because they were hunted in five states for various swindling and blackmail operations. Sooner or later it would have been fatal if they appeared in public together, but he was safe alone. She had to hide out indefinitely, for a unique reason.

Nathaniel slapped the book shut, planted his feet on the rug, and raised his elegantly attired fifty year old form to the perpendicular.

"Where are you going now?" Angelica nagged from the doorway, in her clear, peremptory voice.

"To the kitchen for a couple of fingers of Scotch, my little bowlegged chickadee," he responded. "Do you want some, or will you have something else like ant poison?"

She was not bowlegged, but vanity is easily pricked even by a lie. Her legs were long and straight, and touched properly at the thick of the thigh, the knee, calf, and ankle.

"I imagine you've been wasting your time scheming to get rid of me," she guessed correctly. "Remember I'm a damned sight stronger than you are, if you want to try strangling me."

Nathaniel looked at his hands. They were long and lean and sinewy, quite able to wring her smooth neck, but he had decided upon another means.

Down

By R. T.
MAYNARD

She was the wickedest and loveliest girl he had ever known, but he took none of that into consideration when he marked her for death



"You're younger, but not much stronger," he commented. "Do you want a drink or not, Your Royal Witchiness?"

"Yes, you old weevil." She watched him head for the kitchen, and appropriated his chair.

*At that moment Usher
came in with a gun.*

OUT in the kitchen Nathaniel made glasses clink, got ice out and produced the general clatter of preparing a tray. His elderly figure was graceful, his face smooth, and the complete lack of gray in his hair invited aging maidens to assure him that he did not look forty. His wardrobe was imported, with no exception, and costly; in this case his habiliments consisted of narrow brown shoes on small feet, slacks, gabardine shirt and fine woolen sweater. With a debonair manner he selected a knife from a table drawer of kitchen implements, and expertly tucked it under a sleeve of the sweater along the inside of the wrist. It didn't show and it was easily held in place.

The tool was an ordinary paring knife in shape, but the steel was the finest made. Using a common dime-store sharpening device first, then an oilstone, he had improved the blade to a needle point and refined both edges to a nickless wickedness with which a man could give himself a first class shave.

There were no creaks in Nathaniel's joints. He was familiar with the feat of grabbing a handful of box-cars in the dark of night; behind him were years of exercise, of beating it through black alleys to Angelica in a waiting car, scuttling down fire escapes and other needful gymnastics when the chase drew nigh, which found him still in excellent physical and mental fettle. He could move with the stealth or liquid velocity of a cat, and now that his mind was made up he lacked only the opportunity. If the opportunity, such as stabbing her in the back while kissing

her, did not present itself, one could be manufactured surely.

Out of the kitchen he came bearing the tray, and good will in his thin, aristocratic smile. He made the drinks with a bartender's skill and toasted, "No hard feelings."

"All right; no hard feelings," she agreed, and sighed. "But, my God Nat, how long do you think I can stand being cooped up here?"

"It will have to be a while longer," he stated, clearing his throat and speaking professorially. "It's a scared market with present conditions. If I get out before the upswing, we're goners."

"How about *The Street*, that marvelous financial magazine of yours?"

"It's making just enough money for the margin my broker wants."

"The financial wizard," she commented. "Why don't you follow the advice you give others and buy sound issues instead of gambling on the long-shots? We'd be rich by now."

"We would, indeed," he said regretfully, evading blame for that gambler's flaw of playing the other man's game.

He inspected Angelica's figure openly as she lay at ease in the big chair, and she was indifferent, perhaps just a little amused about his interest. Her figure was tomboyish in its attractiveness, compact in fashioning and without any excessive softness in curvature anywhere. She had sweet lips, and hair so black that in the shine of it were accents of elusive blue. At twenty-three she was a witch, and wise. Perhaps she had been wicked from birth, but she hadn't been caught at being bad until she was seventeen, and she had es-

caped from the reformatory within three weeks, never to be caught again.

Though theirs was mostly a business relationship, Nathaniel exercised certain inevitable rights obtained in long association. In a couple of casual steps he sat down on the low arm of the chair and slipped his left arm around her. The left, because through the right sleeve she would have felt the hard shape of the knife.

He made the advance with slow detachment, and with something like affection she touched the back of his hand. He was good, never offensive; the way of his approach always made her heart beat faster, as the awkwardness and schoolboy uncertainty of a man her own age never could.

"I CAN'T think," he said, "of any new ways of telling you what a splendid figure you have." He couldn't do it now. He couldn't draw the knife and use it quickly enough, because she would be quicker.

She was wearing her favorite pajamas of loose little jacket and trousers of skirtlike fullness, in the finest pure-silk crepe. The material was a print in bands of smoky greens in which her lithe body was contained as though merely in shadows. It was not a garment to be worn by a hostess serving high tea in sunlight. She shrugged deliciously, and smoothed the banded crepe preoccupiedly.

"You know, Nat," she reflected, "I've liked you since the time that cop chased me around the corner and you threw open the door of your car just as though you were waiting for me all the time. And you won't be an old man for twenty years yet."

"No, I'll never be an old man, any more than you'll let yourself turn into an old lady."

"So it turned me white inside when you said a little while ago that we'd have to break up the partnership. That's why I talked to you the way I did. Nat, I'm going cuckoo on this farm."

"Honeybee, we can't skip the country without dough."

"Why the hell," she groaned, "didn't you buy the stocks you recommended to those old women you got the money from?"

"I didn't do it, that's all." Cheerfully he added, "But we're going to shake down the old apple tree this year yet, and retire on an island."

"I wonder how many times I've heard that."

"We've got the law of averages on our side."

HE MADE more drinks, and in holding liquor it was a match between her youthful vitality and the capacity which he had extended through the years. With the second drink he slipped from the arm of the chair down into the seat with her, and the chair was built on a scale to accommodate both of them. Because of the knife he kept his right hand occupied with his drink. They had been at each other's throats so furiously a few minutes before that he couldn't have guessed things would have calmed down so easily, and he cursed himself for not leaving the knife in the kitchen. It was a hindrance; with his arm hanging, he could reach the handle only with his little finger, and couldn't work it loose to slip it under the chair. He

had to kiss her in one-armed fashion and he didn't like it at all, but the restraint seemed gallant to her.

At least he had erased the mistake of telling her that they had to part company. He hadn't known that that was what she dreaded, and what made her react so violently in their hottest quarrel of all. He knew that she was in love with him, but not to such an extent, and anyhow his own chief interest was in preserving his much-sought-after hide.

There had been another item in the newspapers; an anonymous person had phoned the police and reported that the wanted swindler had been observed at lunch with his young assistant in a Broadway restaurant. The report was false, but what bothered Nathaniel was the fact that the restaurant named was only a block from the office of his excellent magazine of finance.

If it was coincidence, it was not palatable. What made such an item newsworthy was not entirely the fact that Nathaniel had cleared upwards of a million dollars in his indefatigable crookedness in big and lesser cities spread with meticulous calculation in time and distance between the Atlantic and Pacific littorals. It was the odd fact concerning his companion in mulcting suckers, who consisted mostly of rich old women who desired to skim still more fat off the land at the eventual expense of the common people.

Nathaniel's conscience was atrophied with his experience in suckering those cultured or illiterate, fat, or thin, kittenish or solemn, greedy old dames. What made Angelica Meade unique was her hands. She

lined up the customers, joining bridge clubs and civic project and Thursday Luncheons to feel out the wealthy hags of the community. She was young and alert, and was invariably taken unto bosoms like a daughter. She could cry at will about an imaginary tragedy in her love-life, and not once had her tears failed to get her smothered in the soft beef of a shocked matron.

About her hands. They were beautiful, like those of an unforgettable mistress. She had shapely, tapering fingers not quite so long as Nathaniel's, creamy from using lotion with religious regularity. They were kept. And she had no fingerprints. According to criminal statistics there is only one person in an approximate million like her. In jail and at the reformatory they had applied her fingertips to a plate smeared with sticky black printer's ink and rolled her fingerprints one after another, both hands, in the labeled squares of the fingerprint card and recorded nothing but elliptical, guiltless smudges. She was the millionth girl.

It was freakish luck for Nat Prince. He used her for a front in his ventures, seldom showing himself. As they traveled from city to city she did most of the office-work, and he wore gloves.

But her singular immunity from identification by the Bertillon men had become a boomerang. It was well known now that the girl who worked with Nathaniel Prince did not have to worry about handling paper used in correspondence, or wiping off doorknobs with a handkerchief, nor making telephone calls, nor handling objects indiscriminately for the bene-

fit of the technical boys with the powders and camel's-hair brushes who wanted to cop a peek at the artistic loops and whorls which, pore by pore in a print, can be expected to route an individual up the river for many years, or oftentimes to the discomfort of the electric chair.

The anonymous person, male or female, had said to the police, "I'm a private detective, never mind from where. I swiped this cocktail glass from the restaurant and printed it, and there weren't any prints. She's the girl working with him. That skunk has been robbing widows and motherly old ladies all across the country, and if I had a gun, I'd have shot him for all the misery he's caused. Why the hell don't you arrest him?"

Angelica said abruptly, "I'm going to bed."

"Got to stay up a little while and do some papers," he said.

He watched her as she went to the bedroom. He could expect her to fall asleep within five minutes, as usual, and with the load she was carrying she would sleep like the dead. He waited ten minutes, put it off ten minutes more, then entered the bedroom with the knife in his hand.

HE LEANED over her, not touching the bed. Her lips were parted and her eyelids gleamed. He smoothed the silk jacket over her breast, and under the curve of it aimed the knife.

It was the prick of the point that awakened her with a brief cry of fear, and her wild upstirring that buried the knife to the handle rather than his thrust. Her head flopped

back on the pillow and her eyes remained open. He left the knife in because he wanted as little bleeding as possible. It was so easy. He tingled, remembering how the knife had slid in, missing bone, as smoothly as though she had been soft butter.

Down the basement was a bucketful of rusty automobile chains. He took them outside in the yard after laying her on the grass and wound them around her ankles, waist, and neck.

What little blood there was only soaked her jacket. With an arm under her knees and around her back he hiked down a shoulder of lawn to the artificial lake created by the former owner, and followed the shore to a crude concrete dam. In the middle of the dam was cut a notch through which spring-water flowed and fell fifteen feet to splash among a jumble of rocks.

He walked carefully out on the dam to the notch, lowered the limp body carefully into the water. Beyond the grating of his feet as his shoes turned on the concrete there was no giveaway sound above the steady fresh noise of the waterfall. When he let go, the weighted body went down fast with the knife still in the breast. The knife would be a suspicious tool to find in the kitchen.

He returned to the house and automatically made himself another drink. Now there were sounds in the old house which he had never heard before, the click of phantom locks, the pacing of light, invisible feet. He toured the premises with his drink, not so much to make sure that he was alone but to ascertain how much work remained to be done. In sever-

ing his connection with the past he had to be certain that his new life would begin without danger.

It was a one-story house really, not counting the slant-ceilinged store-rooms upstairs, and built of solid, hand-hewn oak timbers. Throughout the place, everywhere in the downstairs rooms, was evidence of a woman's occupancy. All of that evidence had to be removed. There were drawers of clothing, underthings, shoes, cosmetics, the whole catalogue of a girl's effects. One thing which he didn't have to worry about, he reflected grimly, was the otherwise exhausting and impossible job of removing fingerprints from everything she might have touched. But with all her things on the place the absence of such fingerprints was enough to identify him and convict him.

It was a long job ahead, and it would have to wait till morning. He went to bed, and fell asleep smelling her fragrance in the air and wondering how long it would take for *that* to disappear.

The mad, scampering footfalls of rain on the roof awakened him in a clammy sweat within the hour, and he listened open-eyed to the drumming of the heavy drops. In the darkness, in the wet air, Angelica's provocative scent was stronger, and he got out of bed.

Without turning on a light he went through the kitchen to the back door, unlocked it and looked out. There were no lights of any sort anywhere, and a man standing two feet away in the downpour could remain unseen.

BAREFOOT, in pajamas, Nathaniel took a torch from the kitchen

table and used it to light his path to the garage. In the protection of trees and location among knolls, the light could not be seen even from the road. The nearest habitation was three-quarters of a mile down the road. The town of Kindy was six miles off. Because of its isolation and other advantages, Nat had bought the Steiner farm here in Steiner's gulch. The narrow, rocky road running past the house was merely a connection between the eastward and northward highways leading out of Kindy and was used by few cars because as a shortcut it was hazardous. In rain there would be no traffic by the natives, who knew about exposed crowns of slippery shale and slate. Nathaniel got a spade from the garage and went down to the dam.

He had supposed something. The handle of the knife was wood and might pull free and float. It would go over the dam, down the brook to the lower road and into Bannister's Pond. In the laboratory, blood washed off in the best soap and water could be still found on a blade. There was something else, too, which made him wonder if his wits were dulling with age.

Angelica was not necessarily lying in fifteen feet of water. It might be only ten or twelve feet, because the water brought down muck from the hills and was caught here at the first dam. Down below, Dad Bannister had to do the job only in two or three years, but at Steiner's the lake required dredging every year by the right kind of tenant. Nathaniel had never bothered about that obnoxious duty because it was too heavy for one man, himself, and he didn't want

any strangers on the place. The Kindy natives were typical small-town-ers, nosy, observant.

There would be hell to pay if anyone noticed when he left for the city and came up to sneak a swim in his absence. The lake here was twice as big as Bannister's, and furthermore this was off the road and there was no need of a bathing suit. The water wasn't entirely clear, but a pair of sharp eyes might discern Angelica looking back at him if she wasn't deep enough.

The lake could be emptied with very little trouble. In the face of the dam above the rocks was a rectangular opening, and in it a gate which could be raised or screwed down fast by means of a spoked wheel alongside. The apparatus had always leaked, which was neither here nor there.

Nathaniel stood the spade against the concrete and took hold of the wheel like a sailor. The gears were rusted and he worried for a while that the gate was jammed. He didn't want to do it the hard way, take a dip in the icy water.

The wheel turned, grinding. First a jet shot through the ribbon of falling water, then a broad tongue of mud pooped out and was followed by a gush of water which cleared the rocks in a leap as he screwed the gate up as high as it would go. He slipped on the rocks and nearly fell, startled out of his wits by something flashing and silvery which was expelled by the pounding water. It was a good-sized fish. Probably not the only one which would increase the population at Bannister's place, since Nat was no fisherman and didn't allow any fishing at Steiner's. With all

the fill which had collected, the lake was neither large enough nor deep enough to take long to empty. Nor would it take long to empty. Nor would it take very long to fill in again if the rain kept up.

Sure enough; Angelica lay on her back wrapped in chains on a bed of spongy muck only ten feet below the notch in the dam. He scooped a grave through two feet of slippery black mud and a foot of stony sand and rolled Angelica into the pit. She landed face up again and looked at him with sorrowful reproach. Her favorite pajamas were glued to her, and her figure made him sigh. He shoveled her in, and with dispatch climbed up and around to lower the gate again.

When he regained the bank, a stab of the torch showed the grave already covered with a spreading pool of water.

He was sopping wet, and his pajamas hampered him like ropes. Rain in the grass quickly washed the mud from his feet as he mounted the slope and returned to the house. He wrung out the pajamas and got dry, changed to a new suit, and went to bed. He slept like a baby.

THE doorbell ringing with alarm-clock insistence, awakened him to a sunny day. Unsteady with a slight hangover, he opened the door and blinked at a young man who smiled at him with singularly offensive cheerfulness.

The kid had a black book in his hand, and in the crook of his arm was a sample-case opened to display of lingerie. Panties, brassieres, sheer

silk stockings, a satin slip with a yoke of lace.

"Lady of the house in?" inquired this nuisance with beguiling youthfulness.

"No," said Nathaniel. "She——" He checked himself, but it was too late. In a less antagonistic way he said, "She doesn't happen to be."

"Too bad." The boy clucked. "As you can see, this stuff wouldn't interest you very much. Would your wife be down in the city, perhaps?"

"She——" He swallowed, checking himself again. He had been about to say that he was a bachelor. He said, "Yes, she's down in the city. Sorry."

"That's all right. My name's Usher, Clement Usher. I'll be working Kindy for a while yet, and maybe I can find Mrs. Prince in the next time I drop around."

"Good-bye," Prince bade him. He closed the door and stood looking at it, waking up fast. Usher, Usher. Outside of Poe, he had heard that name somewhere before, a long while ago. That had been, yes, way out in Milwaukee where he and Angelica were rooking the local crop of women with money.

Usher was a private investigator whom one of his victims had imported from New York to investigate his credentials. Old Mrs. Tetlow. Angelica had got wind of it, and they had quietly folded the tent before the detective arrived. It was the same man. The cold gray-green eyes in that kid's head didn't jibe with his kid-dish countenance and Cheshire-cat grin.

Prince had been tricked into admitting that there was a woman in

the house while he was still soggy with sleep. He was now in the unique position of having to supply a house with fingerprints. Anyone's, so long as they were feminine. It wouldn't do any good to get rid of Angelica's effects now.

The fear that took his heart in a knotty grip let go. There was no real harm done yet, but he had to get the jump on that detective.

While he shaved, bathed, and dressed he listed the names of available girls in his mind, and realized that he knew damned few. He looked out the bathroom window and saw that the lake had filled during the night and water was again going through the notch in the dam.

He locked the house securely, leaving no windows unlatched, and got his car out of the garage. He had his choice of direction on the road and took the high road since he had to go through Kindy anyhow, and since Usher had gone down to the low road. If he stopped at Bannister's *or was stopping there*, he might take it into his head to return up the hill for a second call and try a bit of burgling and fingerprinting if the doorbell wasn't answered. Detectives did that, Prince knew from sad experience.

He had to get hold of a girl. The need was so simply taken care of that he shook his head in disgust with himself.

FOR a good driver, Kindy was an hour and twenty minutes out of Manhattan, through Tuxedo and over mountains. From the George Washington Bridge to his Broadway office downtown was the most exasperating

and delaying part of the trip, even if the West Side Parkway and express highway was booming-fast for a city so jam-packed with traffic.

There were two doors, and only two rooms in *The Street's* address on the fifth floor of the Broadway building. Prince used one door, and his secretary, Shirley Lyon, used the other. He seldom saw her, because he did not like to see anyone often enough for his face to be remembered, and it was quite true that she had only the vaguest idea of what her employer looked like. When she had been hired, he was at his desk with his back to a broad window through which came bright sunlight. That was an old and maddening trick, putting a jobhunter at the worst possible disadvantage. It was a little cruel in Shirley Lyon's case because of her eyes.

After staring bravely into the glaring sunlight that time, she had had to lean against the wall when she got outside in the corridor until she recovered from nausea. But she had the job, and for months she ran the office with superlative efficiency, receiving manuscripts, paying rent, and developing an understanding of the market which a banker would have envied. At first the monotony and loneliness of it—Prince was in the city only two days a week—made her desperate. But she became intrigued with what the flux of mere names and numerals meant. And in fertile ground grew a lusty curiosity as to why a man of Prince's great insight wasn't a Wall Street Croesus. The high batting average of the magazine put it in a class by itself.

The circulation had climbed stead-

ily, and it was read like gospel by very brainy men who wondered whether a guesser was having a run of luck and cursed themselves for letting chances slip away while they pondered Prince's observations. The only conclusion at which Shirley could arrive was that Mr. Prince was constitutionally incapable of following his own advice.

Her eyes were pitifully bad, but the myopia which developed from a siege of scarlet fever when she was in grade school had been arrested. The lenses of her glasses had to be embarrassingly thick. She was as vain as any girl of twenty-five with an exceptionally well rounded figure, could be, but without the glasses her hand would be a blur only ten inches from her face. Motion pictures and the theater gave her violent headaches, and she often went sleepless with melancholy, and cried alone, because there was so damned little fun to be had.

She raised her head listening, then started typing rapidly. Mr. Prince wasn't due in town until tomorrow morning, but the door to the adjoining office had been opened and closed, and there were footsteps.

With deft hands she fixed her coiled blonde hair, looked at her eminently kissable lips in her compact-mirror. She pulled her stockings up tighter, suddenly starting typing again because the communicating door was opened behind her.

"Good morning," said Mr. Prince.

"Good morning," she answered; she continued her typing because she was shy, and because a man of Prince's hard-to-reach mysteriousness did not let a girl know where

she stood, nor whether the job she was doing was satisfactory or hopeless.

The communicating door closed.

ANOTHER person who was wondering about Nathaniel Prince was Clement Usher, who was by no means as cherubically young as he looked. He had a mousetrap mind, which at a breath snapped on a suspicion and broke its neck. In the morning of the day on which he got his first look at Prince he had composed a long report to his employer, Mrs. Tetlow of Milwaukee, on developments in his long search for the pair who had swindled her out of some twenty thousand dollars. The old lady didn't miss that amount of money, but some of her friends did and she was a withered old gal of principle. She trusted Usher as to his expense accounts after a hawk-eyed conversation with him, and in return he kept the old harridan informed. She had kept him on a damned fat salary for months and months, and it was incredible to him that she was so patient. Even when he wrote that the hunt was hopeless and he was taking time off for the relief of solving another case she ignored him and kept sending his regular check.

The man he was looking for had used the various names of Paul Nathan, Norman Powers, Nathan Pell, and so on, keeping the initials in the majority of cases. The swindler had rambled and robbed across the entire continent. Usher respected him simply on the grounds that he couldn't find him.

Of the man he had no description at all save that he was young-old,

built approximately on Usher's scale. Of the girl he had a photographic likeness in his mind. That was a vivacious, young, dark-haired witch, a consummate actress with worshipful big eyes and the talent of a handsome, stray child for worming herself into motherly old ladies' hearts. That poisonous, conscienceless girl was a clue, and he had speculated often about her. She liked and had used names like Magda, Helene, Loretta, Gloria, Francesca, and he wondered what her real name was. The oddity about her was that she had no fingerprints, which was an eyebrow-raising piece of evidence to go on.

He had run across the name of Nathaniel Prince, and here again was a man engaged in a scheme connected with the market. The trouble was, the magazine was good. Damned good, sound as Manhattan bedrock in its recommendations, and such a condition was not allowable. If Prince was the man, he should be engaged in ransacking suckerdome for hunks of cash, and there was no evidence of it.

The one lead he had was that he could discover nothing whatever about Prince's antecedents. He had made an anonymous telephone call to the New York police just to see what would happen. He hung around the offices of *The Street*, and wondered whether it was accident or design—Prince's heading straight up country for Kindy. Whereafter Clem Usher bought an assortment of gossamer underthings (which purchase he explained to Mrs. Tetlow without any expectation that she would believe it) and took a shot at a target.

HE HAD seen no sign of a girl of Angelica Meade's description. The only girl in evidence was that receptionist in the magazine's office, the grave-eyed, heart stopping blonde Miss Lyon. He had failed in five attempts to take her to lunch. The town was full of girls, and invariably when a man saw one who made him feel frustrated, he couldn't get anywhere with her.

Mrs. Tetlow of Milwaukee might have muttered in her beard if she had seen the time-biding Usher sitting in the middle of Bannister's pond this afternoon, in a flat-bottomed boat, with a bamboo fishpole sticking up out of his hands. At the rump of the boat there was a stir in the water which was calm elsewhere under the hot afternoon sun. On a tail of rope with a dog's-stick at the end three edible fish were strung through the gills and wagging in their predicament.

Clem didn't like to advertise his preferences, and waited until an oncoming car had passed at murderous speed along the lower highway bounding the pond. There were no dust-clouds, thanks to the overnight rain. From his hip pocket he drew a bottle, uncorked it and let two fingers of the liquid go down his throat. His eyes bugged; hurriedly he stabbed the cork back into the bottle, dropped it, and grabbed the pole with both hands to play the weight which was stretching the line tight.

There was no fight, and he sagged disgustedly, strangling on the hastily swallowed whiskey. The hook had snagged on the mud-filled skull of a horse or something just as useless. Anyhow it was heavy and certainly

not a fish with any determination to remain uncaught. He reeled the waterlogged weight in with patience, with scarcely any curiosity about what it was.

EMERGING from his private office and letting the communicating door go sluggishly shut behind him, Nathaniel Prince eyed the golden curls which coroneted Shirley's head. The pink tip of an ear budded through the 24K golden hair. She was typing at top speed, answering a letter. He sneaked up behind her unheard, and with a sudden gesture yanked her glasses off and dropped them on the rug. She made an about-face as she left the chair and stared unseeingly at him.

Prince took her in his arms, and she struggled violently until he said, "It's quite all right, my dear."

She was scared because she had slapped him. She relaxed and said, "Mr. Prince, I'm sorry; you scared me."

"I don't blame you." He chuckled. "I shouldn't have done it, but it's a beautiful day and things are going well. Don't you think so?"

"Oh, yes, indeed, Mr. Prince!"

He didn't answer, and her heart was pounding; his embrace tightened, squeezing her against the hard musculature of his chest and he moved a sinewy hand down the curve of her back. His cool old lips were on hers, as startling as though she had heard an explosion. Spontaneously, out of sheer hunger for love, she kissed him back and hugged her arms around him, thrusting against him the warm curvatures of her body.

"It looks as though you're fired," he said, chuckling.

There was no life in her hands, and she freed herself, backing away stunned until the desk was hard against her legs. She couldn't see him. All he was—she stared at a smiling blur and wished that she had eaten a quick breakfast, and felt sick. She had no idea how lovely she was with her parted lips and scared eyes. She had done something wrong, or wasn't good, or she was being played with. She began to get angry in defense. She groped for her glasses on the carpet.

Prince took her under the armpits and brought her up. He held her gently and said, "I didn't mean to frighten you. You've done a wonderful job and I want to keep you. All I meant was that I've just canned a girl and I want you to take her place at a ten dollar raise. Up at my country place. As secretary. You know I do most of the work up there."

"Oh." She sagged against him in relief. "I'd love it." She felt dizzy without her glasses and she stirred, but he wouldn't let her go, and she was flattered. She shook her head to shift the molten gold of the curls on her neck, and smiled dazzlingly and blindly. She couldn't see him at all.

Glass crunched underfoot and Prince ejaculated, "Damn! If I haven't broken your glasses, my dear!"

IT GAVE Shirley a queer feeling, taking instructions from Prince in the house near Kindy. It was as though she were being coached for a part, and now and then she felt as

though she were handling a dead girl's things.

All the cosmetics—she opened and had to try everything on his insistence that he wanted to know "whether she liked the make." She handled things in the kitchen, touched furniture, opened doors while he toured her inexorably all over the place.

It was evening now and he appeared to be satisfied that he had acquainted her thoroughly with her new quarters. She didn't drink much, but he insisted on that too, and now she felt abnormally gay with a couple of stiff Scotches in her tummy.

Prince had broken her glasses deliberately, on impulse. His idea was that with her execrable eyesight she would make a damned poor witness as to where she had been.

Watching her in her imprisonment of semi-blindness, he wondered whether all the trouble would be necessary. Shirley was alone, and if she vanished, she wouldn't be missed. The pond was big enough to hold two.

The compulsion of an idea drew him to his feet, and he enjoyed the curious perspective of regarding himself and the girl as performing on a distant stage. She was not frightened at first, because she expected that she would have to allow certain liberties in order to keep her job. But his hands were so strong, and he was hurting her.

The limit had been exceeded, and she said sharply, "Don't! This isn't fun any more!"

"It happens to be fun for me." He laughed, twisting her wrists so that she cried out in pain, thrashed her

long legs and drove her knees trying to hurt him.

"That'll be all of that," Clement Usher said from the kitchen doorway.

Prince jumped to his feet, leaving Shirley gasping on the sofa. He demanded, "What the hell's the idea?"

Usher had a gun in his hand, and he kept it pointed at Nathaniel. He said, "I just thought I'd come up and ask how the fishing is in your pond."

"Get out of here and make it fast," Prince threatened, "or you'll be answering questions from the police."

"No, that's what you're going to be doing," Clem corrected him. "I've called them and they're on the way. You seem to have murdered your girl-friend."

"Don't be preposterous! This is my secretary right here."

"I mean the other one, the youngster at the bottom of your pond."

Prince bluffed, "I don't know what what you're talking about!"

"Dad Bannister down the hill has been nursing a grudge against you," said Clem irrelevantly. "His pond

was fished out, and he thought if you didn't have the common decency to allow fishing up here, you could at least dredge out your lake and let some fish get down below. Catch on?"

"What are you babbling about?"

"Why, I caught a half dozen fish this afternoon in no time at all. I didn't think anything about it, and then I caught a big snapping turtle. Dad figured on having some turtle stew, and when we opened the snapper up we found he'd just had himself a meal."

From his pocket he fished a handkerchief wrapped about two gruesome objects. The ring finger and little finger of a girl's hand, as bloodless as ivory.

"Ah," said Nathaniel. "I see."

Heavy fists pounded at the door. That would be the police; Usher could take his eyes off Nathaniel and devote his attention to Shirley. Angelica might have been the millionth girl in the matter of fingerprints, but Shirley was a girl in a million herself. There was a good chance that he could wangle that luncheon date with her yet.

Maybe You Can't Fly

A DIVE-BOMBER...

BUT YOU CAN HELP BUY ONE!

DEFENSE BONDS AT HOME

SAVE LIVES IN OUR ARMED FORCES!

AUTOPSY

THE man with his feet on the desk-top was neither a big man nor a small one; but he was well knit. He looked quite capable. There was a lean hardness about his gray eyes and tanned face. He wore a neat gray suit, and along with just a touch of gray at the temples, it gave him a distinctive appearance. One might think that he was a broker.

He was not. His name was J. Pemberton McCarthy and he was one of the greatest private sleuths in New York—when he wasn't tied up with a blonde, or a redhead, or perhaps a brunette. "Candid" McCarthy, they called him, for he had photographic eyes and one of the keenest memories known to any private dick. A single glance at any scene or incident and he could remember the situation for days, even months afterward.

He was saying into the mouthpiece now: "The hell you say, Atkinson. I've got a date with Mabel and besides, this is Saturday. Don't you insurance birds ever stop working?" Then McCarthy groaned, sighed, settled his lean frame lower in the swivel chair and listened to the sharp, crackling voice on the wire. The voice snapped:

"But *this* is important, Candid.

This client has been robbed of the Death Diamond. We stand to lose fifty grand in insurance which covers that unholy piece of ice. You're to meet this client, act as her bodyguard, come to my office within an hour. We'll discuss the situation then. Her life has been threatened."

McCarthy moaned, "So what the hell, I'm a dick, not a wet nurse to old biddies who can't——"

"The name," E. W. Atkinson, president of the largest jewelry protective organization in New York, said, "is Ann Deering, of Elm Drive——"

Candid McCarthy was suddenly half out of the chair. "*What?*" he exploded. "Ann Deering? Well, why in hell didn't you *say* so?"

"I just did!" came the bland reply.

Candid was already looking around the office, trying to remember where he'd last flung his hat. "E. W." he purred into the mouthpiece, "this is indeed a pleasure. Inform Miss Ann Deering that I shall pick her up within fifteen minutes at her home." He slapped down the receiver, bounced from the chair and immediately started building up mind pictures of that lovely client of National Protective. He had met Ann Deering only once.

But his camera-like mind prac-

He was a detective who liked to be prepared and the files he kept were unbelievably complete. But when he found himself in a coffin, as good as dead, he realized he must depend this time on nothing but his wits—and his adorable little secretary!

By RANDOLPH BARR



*Her voice was a half scream.
"He's an undertaker," she cried,
"and his address is—" The
line went dead.*

tically placed her enticing, willowy form right before him now in the office room. Long legs . . . slender waist . . . curves that were a symphony of loveliness.

NNATIONAL PROTECTIVE paid this ace sleuth handsome fees for tracking down jewel thieves and crooks. J. Pemberton McCarthy hated rats—human variety.

But being bodyguard to a lovely wren such as Ann Deering was something else again. *Bodyguard*, and how! A sublime grin crossed his quiet good looking face. "Oh, boy——" Candid started to say.

But the blonde bit of temptingness standing in the connecting doorway behind the slender sleuth purred: "Relax, Master Mind. From that expression in your eye, I'd say you're getting your blood pressure worked up."

Candid's assistant came into the room, and anyone with eyes for beauty could see that she had everything. Petite, she was lithely curved right down to her small, trim ankles. She wore a skirt split at one side past the knee, and a wispy bit of powder-blue shirt-waist no heavier than revealing cellophane. Tucking back a bit of curly, blonde hair as her blue eyes twinkled, the girl continued:

"So you're going to play bodyguard to Ann Deering——"

"Aw, hell!" McCarthy grinned, making a playful swing at the blond's trim figure. "It's all in the day's work. Besides, we could do with some cash and I understand this wren has it——"

"Yeah," Candid's assistant said dryly, "you love your work!" She sighed, reached for his crumpled fedora, which rested at an angle atop a filing cabinet, and said:

"Okay, Sherlock, amscray. Of course you and me had a date for tonight, but business comes first." Her blue eyes flashed dangerously. "But be sure it *is* business!" She came close to Candid, moving her lithe, neat form close to his own. She put the fedora on Candid's head,

let her small hand slide caressingly over his face and down to his square chin.

She hit his jaw gently with a dainty fist. "You big lug," she said, grinning. "Far be it from me to complain——"

Candid McCarthy's strong hands had suddenly cupped her small chin and tilted it upward. He shut off her rapid patter of words with a kiss, asked: "Are you, sweetness?"

The blonde's name was Mabel Kay but Candid seldom called her that. He had a dozen pet names for her instead. She replied now:

"What do *you* think, Master Mind? Besides, you know where to find me!" She gave the detective a push toward the hall door. "I think you said you'd be there in fifteen minutes?"

But McCarthy didn't budge. Instead, strong arms went around his assistant's shapely back and he crushed her willowy figure tight against his own, so close that he could even feel the excited beating of her little heart against his. His arms tightened and the girl came to her toes, lovely blonde head tilting backwards as Candid's firm mouth covered her own. She closed her eyes for a moment languidly.

She caught herself then and pushed Candid back from her. She said tremblingly, "Good heavens—it's four p.m. And I've got work to do, mister. I was filing all those letters on the Stinson case——"

Gray-eyed Candid McCarthy grinned, released her and straightened the hat on his head. He started for the door.

"Okay," he said. "I'll call you

as soon as I'm free. You lock up this joint, eh?"

He took another step toward the door, then swung around, adding, "I see that you've changed your brand of powder, gorgeous. You got stung. It has coarse grains in it and doesn't do your complexion justice. Also, that new waist you're wearing has the slightest defect in it near the bottom of the V neck. Don't let sales clerks sting you like that!"

He went out.

Mabel turned toward a wall mirror, examined her face critically, leaning close to the mirror to do so. She raised up on her toes and studied the dainty material of her new shirt-waist, and gasped when she saw the slightest flaw in the threads near the open neck—a V opening that was now pulled apart and exposing soft, delicate ivory-white flesh. Her pretty cheeks reddened and she spun toward the now closed hall door.

"You—you——" she said hoarsely. Then, more quietly, "Good Lord, that man sees everything!"

CANDID McCARTHY wheeled his old roadster up to the curb on the outskirts of town. It was a deserted side road along the Hudson, near Riverdale. A single, old rambling house reposed beneath great elms and the detective saw a gardener working somewhat listlessly around the wide lawn.

It struck him that the estate of old Harvey Deering was somewhat run down. Ann Deering's father had died a year ago, and some said the old boy had left his lovely daughter fairly well fixed. Candid wouldn't know about that. But he was acutely

certain of something else. The old gent had certainly endowed his daughter with every physical necessity.

McCarthy realized this now as he watched her coming down the curving walk. He was out of the car and she waved her hand, recognizing him. She paused for a moment, speaking to the gardener.

She was wearing a light coat, open, and a sleazy dress that did things to her figure—and to the detective. Trim heels tap-tapped on the walk, her stride imparting a gentle sway to her hips. He had no time to admire more of her gorgeous form for she was suddenly close to him, holding out her hand, smiling out of brown eyes.

"I think we've met before," she murmured. She had a soft voice and a manner of talking that made McCarthy feel that he was the last man on earth—and for her alone. It was something in the expression of her eyes and the way her words trailed each other.

He said: "Yes, Candid McCarthy at your service, miss!" and helped her into the car.

It was almost dusk.

He went around and slid in behind the wheel. She moved closer and for a moment, as her arm gently rubbed against his own, he had the impression that she was trembling. There was also something in the depths of her brown eyes that he could not quite fathom. She said abruptly:

"I'm terribly frightened — too frightened even to go into the National Protective offices and talk over the theft of this—this Death Dia-

mond. I suppose you've heard of it?" Her hand rested upon McCarthy's arm. He nodded.

"Yes. Your dad acquired it some years ago. There was supposed to be a trail of disaster for all those who possessed it. But I don't recall that he ever had any bad luck with it—"

"No," Ann Deering cut in. "He didn't. Then, the other night, someone broke into my home here and stole it from the library safe. I've had several warning phone calls, from persons unknown, threatening me with all sorts of horrible things if I reported its loss—"

A rounded, silk-covered knee gleamed near his. It was a nice knee; the skirt had crept up above it when she had climbed into the car. Candid put his eyes on the road and said: "Then relax, lady. You are now in the hands of the best, all-around body-guard in the city—"

She repeated, "Oh, I wish I weren't so childish! But just the thought of leaving the house—"

She broke off, staring wildly through the windshield. Then her arms flew about McCarthy's shoulders and she screamed: "Oh my God—look!"

IT WAS a large, heavy sedan, riding without lights in the evening dusk. It was making about forty and that wasn't excessive on this seldom-used side street. Only it was heading directly toward the dick's car and there was something dark and ugly looking protruding from a rolled-down side window of the sedan.

Candid yelled a single word: "Duck!"

And then he had thrown his arms

around Ann Deering's warm, shapely waist and was dragging her down with him into the roomy interior of the front seat. There was plenty of leg room beneath the dash and he forced the girl's body into the space.

Silk-clad knees brushed Candid's knuckles as he threw his lean body protectingly over her own. Even in that moment of oncoming disaster, his photographic mind retained a picture of those shapely legs and a dainty pink rose bud that adorned an elastic garter.

In the next heartbeat of time, a gun thundered from the hurtling sedan. McCarthy prayed, holding himself shieldingly over the girl. For that old battered-looking roadster of his was built of sheet metal and a bulletproof windshield. This wasn't the first time killer's guns had sought him out. He was certain that the car body would still withstand pistol slugs, but if those gents happened to have a chatter gun—a Tommy—

But the reverberating gunfire told him they didn't. It sounded like .38's shattering the stillness of the early night. Then the car thundered past and the firing ceased.

Instantly, Candid McCarthy released the girl's throbbing form, pulled her up into the seat beside him and was jamming his toe down on the starter. He sent the powerful roadster roaring down the street in second.

And behind them, some distance down the street, the heavy sedan was careening around in the street. The would-be killers had seen McCarthy's car start up. They were re-

In that next heartbeat of time
gun threw lead at them as the
car hurtled closer.



turning to complete their gruesome job.

And with this lovely, dark eyed girl beside him, McCarthy knew that there was no time to go for his own

gat, fling himself from the bus and try to burn down a couple of his pursuers. He had the girl's life—National Protective's *client*—to think of.

The thing to do was to get back

into the city limits, attract a cop prowler car. There was a toll bridge on the Henry Hudson Parkway, just before they'd hit Riverside Drive. A cop's booth was located there.

With Ann Deering leaning helplessly on his arm, clutching at him with trembling fingers, he slammed the roadster around the next corner, circled the block and hit the parkway doing sixty. Slowly, they pulled away from the dark sedan.

And as Candid's foot went down all the way on the gas, he breathed freely and had time to realize anew that this girl beside him was a honey. Wind whipping through the open window swirled the black silk dress up about her stockinged legs. Her bosom quivered with excitement; the light coat pulled free of the clinging dress.

Minutes later he slowed for the toll gate entrance, fishing in his pocket for a dime. His gaze held the rear-view mirror for a moment. There wasn't a car in sight. Quietly, to Ann Deering, he said:

"No use squawking now. They've ducked. I didn't even see their license plates. But I did get a flash of a face that is somehow familiar. We're due at Atkinson's office, and to set up a holler here would mean a lot of questioning."

The girl murmured, "Yes, that's right," and snuggled closer beneath his arm. In the fifteen minute drive which followed, Candid McCarthy learned a whole lot about Ann Deering. Nice things. Like the fact that the sleek gown was not telling any lies as to the perfect form which it revealed.

Also, that she had sensitive, curv-

ed lips; flaring, delicate nostrils; that the slim fingers resting on his arm were tenderly caressing. . . .

TOGETHER, they entered the offices of National Protective. And McCarthy, following Ann Deering's nice figure, was thinking: "She's got everything. And I'm her bodyguard. Sweet hell!"

A reception clerk was just preparing to leave, giving her little nose one last dab of powder. She recognized Candid and announced: "The chief just stepped out, Mister McCarthy. He said for you to wait inside."

Candid grinned at the girl who was getting ready to depart. Waiting with pretty Ann Deering would indeed be a pleasure.

It was a comfortably furnished office, the inner one, more like a den than a business place. Atkinson believed in treating his clients properly.

Candid nodded toward a deep, comfortable divan and said: "The old boy keeps some good rye here some place. Maybe you could stand a snort?"

Ann Deering smiled. "And how!" She dropped onto the deep cushioned divan. She crossed shapely legs and relaxed against the cushions sighing. She started to smooth out a stocking which had the slightest wrinkle, and the action brought her silk dress up over her knees.

Candid reluctantly turned away to find liquor and glasses. He came back with them in his hands. The girl made no attempt to cover her knees. He sat down close beside her, and he was acutely aware of a deli-

cate haunting perfume which she used. Handing her a drink, he smiled.

"I'm going to like this bodyguard business swell, Ann."

She tossed off the drink like a veteran, gave Candid a personal, for-you-alone smile and replied, "Are you?"

His arm went around her waist then, his right hand, close up beneath her own right arm, drawing her closer. She leaned against him tightly, soft dark hair gently brushing his hot cheeks. She murmured: "Well, for a start, you haven't done bad. You just saved my life. That deserves a——"

She turned her face and their lips were close together. Candid's arm tightened: He prompted: "Well—what?"

Soft, curving, moist lips came closer and she sighed: "Guess!"

He didn't have to.

His mouth closed over her own hungrily and he drew her up tightly against his strong chest. She bent her head back beneath the steady, hard pressure of his lips, and the action brought their forms into a close fitting embrace. It was then that Candid felt something small, hard, beneath the bodice of her dress boring into his chest. He stiffened slightly and raised up.

He stated: "It's funny, Ann, why anyone should want to kill you. You say you've been robbed of that unlucky stone. At least, that's what Atkinson of National Protective reports. All right, then. If crooks have taken the Death Diamond, why should they still want to harm you. Their logical course would be to get as far away as possible——"

He shot the words at her rapidly in a hard voice. Ann Deering pushed away from him and her dark eyes flashed. She exclaimed: "Why—why, what do you mean?"

"I mean that you still have that diamond. *Here in the lining of your dress!* His fingers started to reach beneath the open neck of the silk material, touching warm skin. . . .

The door to the outer office opened then and the young clerk's head popped into view. She flushed slightly, then announced, "Sorry, Mister McCarthy. But there's someone here insisting he must see Miss Deering."

McCarthy was unprepared for the next occurrence. A heavy set man with battered ears and a flat nose pushed the office girl into the room. She tried to jump to one side, but a second man caught her. This arrival was tall, straight, wearing a black suit. He had a long, funeral looking face and dull eyes. He said to his burly partner as he nodded toward Ann Deering, "That's her, Butch."

Ann Deering clutched her breast and exclaimed, "Thomas! You——" Candid McCarthy went into instant action.

For he had noticed the two men carried guns.

The shapely office girl, breast quivering with excitement, had momentarily prevented the men from covering Candid, blocking them as she stepped through the doorway. In that hair-breath of time, McCarthy had leaped.

Now his fist had caught the funereal-looking one on the tip of the jaw and sent him staggering a half

dozen steps along the wall. The gun bounced from the man's hand.

The burly, flat nosed thug swung on Candid, clubbing his gat, cursing: "Damn you, McCarthy. We heard you were handlin' this case. An' you ain't spoilin' *this* set-up—I'll take you apart."

Crack!

Candid's balled fist connected with the bruiser's jaw like cement plumping into clay. He followed the blow up with vicious rights, twisting the gun from the thug's hands with his own left. The man let out a bull roar, got his head down into his thick shoulders and came charging like a hudge ox.

Candid merely grinned, leaped lithely aside and snapped a fast one off the thug's nose. McCarthy's build was deceiving; he didn't look like a big man, nor a small one. But beneath his neat-fitting suit there was packed a hundred and seventy-five pounds of fighting fury. He used it now, calling out to the office girl, "Keep clear, babe. This will only take a moment."

Candid had no time to get at a gun; and his chief job was seeing that the men did not scoop up those he had knocked from their hands. But the tall, gloomy faced one had jumped toward Ann Deering. Candid had one fleeting glimpse of him ripping at the front of Ann's black silk dress; one quick flash of white skin.

Then Ann Deering twisted away from her assailant and raced toward a partly open door across the room. Candid knew this was a small wash-room and lavatory. The girl's hand swept toward her mouth as she ran.

He saw this action in one photo-

graphic blink of his trained eyes; then, the burly man was upon him again. Deceivingly, drawing the man in for a killing blow, Candid backed toward the outer office doorway. One more second now, and he would deliver the smashing hook that would put the fellow to sleep for hours. Now!

But McCarthy never finished the swing. For he hadn't heard the foot-step behind him. A third man had entered and was swinging a blackjack even as Candid's fist started that knockout swing.

Blam!

It felt like a truck backing up against his skull. It backed up, rolled right over it and Candid was driven down into oblivion. The last thing he thought of was a dark-eyed, long-limbed woman who wore cute rose buds on her garters. He had intended—until he learned that she was herself a thief—getting one of those rose buds for a souvenir. . . .

CANDID woke up with a throbbing skull and the taste of raw whisky in his mouth. He didn't mind the whisky.

He sat up, saw bright-eyed, efficient E. W. Atkinson bending over him. The boss of National Protective gave a sigh of relief, started to cork the pint of liquor. He said: "What the devil's going on here, Candid? I return and find May in a faint; you with your head looking like someone bounced a ball bat off it; and——"

Candid got to his feet, shook his head for a moment and took the whisky bottle from his chief's hand.



He never even heard the footsteps of the man who came up from behind with the blackjack.

He said: "Thanks. I might need more of this."

He looked around, saw the office girl out cold on the divan. He asked: "Where is she?" and started toward the washroom doorway.

Atkinson, dressed immaculately in a dark business suit, sparse hair slicked over a head that was almost bald, followed. He asked, "Who? I told you May must have fainted—"

"No," Candid put in. "I mean Ann Deering, the gal who says she was robbed of a fifty-grand stone! She

was here, you know."

Atkinson wailed, "Oh, my God!"

Candid peered into the small washroom, turned back to his employer and spread out his hand. He announced: "She's gone!"

Again Atkinson groaned. Briefly, Candid explained what had happened. Then he jumped toward the desk phone and put in a call for his own office. He took the pint whisky bottle from his pocket, took a swig and set it on the desk before him. While he waited for his connection, he order-

ed, "Now talk fast." He glanced at the still figure of the office girl. "She'll keep okay. The Deering dame called one of the men who kidnaped her 'Thomas'. It's someone she knows. I've seen the man before."

Candid's fist suddenly rapped the desk-top. "And now I know that other mug. Flat nose; thick ears. He was in that sedan with the gunmen. I only had a fleeting look at him. His name is Butcher Smith and he's a former small-time crook, supposedly gone straight."

McCarthy looked at Atkinson. The insurance executive's bright eyes were snapping. "The Deering girl wasn't as wealthy as we thought," he stated. "Just learned that late this afternoon. She has three or four uncles. Two of them are named Thomas. One's a dentist; the other is Thomas Moore, an undertaker here on the outskirts of town——"

Candid cried, "Hold it! That's the guy. Long, somber face and looks like a corpse himself. I remember him now. I——"

A sweet voice said "Hello?" in the telephone receiver. It was Mabel. Candid said, "Listen, Heart-throb, look in the file and find out if we have Butcher Smith's last known address. He's been out of the clink about two years now. Find out, if you can, who his companions are."

Candid McCarthy kept one of the most complete crime files of any private sleuth in the business. His camera-like eyes, his uncanny memory, gave him details for his files that not even city police had.

Mabel did not leave the phone. She kept right on talking, and it was then he caught the tautness in her

sweet voice. She was saying: "Look, Candid. There's a man here. He wanted to see you. Says you're to lay off the Ann Deering case—or else!"

Then, in a rapid-fire rush of words, as though Mabel were shouting them before whoever was with her could stop her, she half screamed: "He's Lefty Martin, Candid. Been working for a man named Moore . . . undertaker out on . . . Oh! . . ."

The line went dead.

Candid came out of the chair, got the operator on the line again, demanded a reconnection. In a moment, the operator reported that there was no answer. Candid dropped the phone, was halfway toward the hall doorway before Atkinson got words out of his mouth. "What—where——?"

McCarthy took the undertaker's address. "You call the cops and get them out there in about half an hour, Atkinson. Give me a start on this first. They've got my partner and your client, Ann Deering. This isn't only insurance swindling—it's murder!" He went out.

TEN minutes later, Candid's battered roadster had wheeled him to the edge of town, to the road where Moore's undertaking parlor was located.

He had tried his office again and received no answer. He knew that a fast trip there would be useless. The man named "Lefty" Martin, who had been covering Mabel when she received her partner's call, would have long since gotten her out of there. Mentioning that crook's name, and the place where he was supposed to work, was as good as signing her

own death warrant. But Candid had a hunch the crook would take her back to the hangout, which McCarthy now knew was the undertaking parlor.

Yet, to be certain, he called a private detective friend and asked him to investigate any trouble at his office.

A fraction of a mile away from the establishment, Candid parked his car in a tree-shadowed side road and went forward in gloom. It had been dark for an hour now. He was thankful for that.

He reached a high wire fence bordering the gloomy-looking grounds. He found a broken spot in the wire, crawled through on his belly and stalked toward a darkened house carefully. He saw a gravel driveway and garages in the rear. But no sign of anyone about the place.

He circled the house twice and then he saw the slanting basement doors, almost concealed by shrubs. He raised one of the doors carefully, noting that the hinges were oiled and that it did not squeak. Then he heard the faint voices. Men were talking somewhere there in the basement.

Candid let himself in, found a hallway. The place was built off into a series of rooms. The voices came from one at the end of the hallway through which he was feeling his way. A thin blade of light angled from beneath a door.

He heard a man speaking. It was the voice of Ann Deering's uncle, the undertaker Moore, and it was as somber as his long expressionless face: "She swallowed that diamond. Got some wax from her purse around it before I could get into that wash-

room, and swallowed it. You know what we have to do, don't you?"

There was a guttural reply and Candid's heart stopped for a second. That remark—you know what we have to do!

HE DREW his gun, slammed open the door and went into the room fast. He drew up with a jerk three steps inside the laboratory-like place. Photographic eyes took in new castles about the room, the three hard-faced men standing close beside Thomas Moore. But it was the form of the beautiful girl at their feet that froze Candid McCarthy's blood. She had been stripped almost naked. She was even lovelier than he had imagined. But now there was a mar to that beauty. A knife had been plunged through the girl's breast.

Candid cursed. "You damn lousy swine——"

Moore held up his hand. He said icily, "Think before you pull that trigger, McCarthy. There's something you might like to know. *What in hell're you waiting for, Butcher?*"

Too late, Candid knew the ruse of the man's words. Butcher Smith had been behind that hall door which he had just flung open. Candid started to whirl, and the bruiser's fist caught him behind the ear.

He went to his knees, his gun flying across the room. He started to his feet and a heavy foot slammed him back to his face against the cement floor. The other thugs jumped forward and in a moment powerful arms were holding the wiry dick.

Just then the hall door opened again and a thin, ratty-looking man

bounced into the room. He stared around, saw Candid, then Moore, the undertaker.

He half shouted, "This guy's partner, chief! The dame you sent me to see! She hadda blackjack in her desk and bounced it off my skull. She got away——"

Moore's long face twisted with rage. But suddenly it tightened and he held up his hand. "Listen!"

A truck was rumbling into the driveway beside the house. The man who had just entered explained: "A load of caskets, chief. I passed the truck on the way out——"

"All right," Moore cut in. "Into one of these caskets with him." He glared at the private sleuth. "One move out of you, fella, and a dozen slugs go through this box. This truck driver ain't going to suspect a thing."

Candid was dumped into one of the empty caskets. He knew that at least four guns were trained on him as someone went to meet the driver with the shipment of new caskets.

It was hot, stifling, in the silk-lined casket. Just being in it sent a creepy chill through McCarthy. He thought of his lovely assistant, Mabel. Where was she?

He heard the caskets being carried in and the men talking carelessly. And all the time he knew that they were still covering him from the outside, probably under cover of coat pockets.

After awhile, he heard a door close. There was a moment of silence, then the casket lid opened. Perspiring, gasping in fresh air, Candid sat up and stared at the menacing gats. Then at the spot where he had last seen Ann Deering's shapely

form. It was gone. But he saw something else too, and he knew he had to hold their attention on himself.

He said tensely to the men around him, "I figure it now. She was almost broke and got the smart idea of insuring that stone and then having it stolen."

He glared at the tall Moore. "You were in on the deal, only she decided to keep all the insurance for herself. She called me in for a bodyguard—knowing that you mugs wouldn't let her get away with it so easy."

Moore laughed harshly. "And because you're such a smart guy you die! How do you like that, snoop?"

Candid kept looking at the leader calmly. But eyes that saw everything saw something else. None knew that Candid was taking in something beyond and behind them. He kept talking, stalling for time.

WHAT McCarthy saw was a pile of new caskets. One on the floor was a heavy, zinc casket for special contagious cases. The cover of this one was opening slowly. It went up a trifle, then lowered again. Whatever was pushing it from inside was finding the lid heavy. Then Candid saw the gun muzzle protruding over the edge of the casket. He yelled: "Let 'em have it, copper!" But he knew it was no cop.

Candid ducked down as the blast of gunfire racketed across the room. And he listened happily to something else—prowl car sirens screaming into the near-by driveway—and a moment later to the thud of racing feet.

It was Butcher Smith who scream-

ed: "Cops. Stop 'em!" He led his partners in a race toward the door to the hallway. Then hell broke loose.

The crooks went out into the hallway, firing blindly, cursing, trying to block the entrance of the city police. But in a moment Candid heard the yammer of a riot gun, then choking coughs from the killers who had raced out to meet the coppers. Tear gas!

Candid slipped out of the casket and went across the intervening space to the new zinc casket whose lid had been pushed up. It had slammed closed now, trapping a smoking gun muzzle beneath its edge. Tear gas was already floating into the room and the crooks were backing in away from it.

Candid threw up the heavy lid, had one quick glance of his partner Mabel's sweet shape huddled in the coffin—and then he was inside with her. He exclaimed: "Darling, you hurt?"

Wedge against him like a boxed sardine, his partner said shakily, "No. I bribed that truck driver to let me ride in here in this zinc-lined Pullman. Hold me tight, partner, I'm scared stiff!"

Candid wriggled around, managed to get an arm around her. Squeezing her to him, he said, "Don't talk, babe. Tear gas outside. Hold your breath as much as you can. Listen!"

Gunfire was smashing around outside the protective casket. There were groans, curses, then an abrupt silence. A heavy, authoritative voice started snapping orders.

CANDID raised the coffin lid and grinned out at a dozen blue-coat-

ed figures. He recognized a sergeant and said, grinning, "Fancy meeting you here, Murphy."

Briefly, he told about the crooks' racket and the murdered Ann Deering.

The sergeant said he had got the rest from Candid's employer, when Atkinson had called in asking for cooperation. He gawked at Mabel, wedged beside McCarthy. His sharp eyes said louder than words that this was a bit of blue-eyed, blonde loveliness that was prettier than anything he had ever seen.

The sergeant was explaining, "The rest of the boys are loading the mugs that ain't dead into the cars outside——"

He looked around as a shout of dismay came from across the room. A casket lid had been lifted, and the corpse of Ann Deering was revealed. Candid, still sitting up in the casket beside his partner, said, "She's worth fifty grand, serge. Swallowed a sparkler worth that. We'll have to have an autopsy."

The other cops crowded around, gasping at the beauty of that gorgeous figure so still in death. But Candid, left alone for the moment, turned to his partner and grinned. His fingers drew together her powder-blue blouse where it was pulled open at the neck. His fingers touched the warmth of her flesh and a thrill ran through him. He tried to get straightened out in the cramped quarters. He said:

"Partner, you look pretty as hell in a casket! But——"

"It's a little *too* comfortable!"

Everlasting

STAN VALLEE crouched in his darkened room and peered with lively curiosity beneath the lowered blind. It was the third night in a row he had crouched there, trying to figure out why Parkhurst Winter, the tightest multimillionaire in New York, should hire him, the highest-priced private detective on Broadway, just to watch a pretty girl undress for the night—especially since Winter was himself reputedly enthusiastic about such fascinating sights.

Not that Vallee didn't find the work interesting! Vera Selden, whose shapely silhouette was sharply visible against the drawn shade of the window across the court, was perhaps the most interesting redhead he knew about. Well-behaved, too, even though she was one of the big town's first string glamour girls, with a starring spot in the swankiest show of the season. Neither scandal nor idle gossip had yet connected her with any man other than Winter.

"I'm afraid something might happen to her," Winter had told Vallee—and the detective hadn't believed him for a second. Winter might be jealous, although apparently he had no grounds for jealousy, but he would never be afraid of anything that might happen to someone else. He was that kind of guy.

Even in silhouette Vera Selden was easy to look at, Vallee assured himself, marking the steps of the disrobing process. Muscles rippled lithely as the knees were lifted, one after the other, so that shadowhands could strip off the filmy stockings.

BUT at that moment, another shadow fell vaguely across the window and grew clearer, coming into focus between the lamp and the blind. Vallee exhaled smoke gustily and swore under his breath. It was the shadow of a man, tall and gaunt—not Parkhurst Winter, who was stocky and flabby. And evidently he was no unwelcome visitor, for her shadow held out slender arms to him and they strained together.

The detective was startled and a little hurt. He'd taken the trouble to check on Vera's reputation and had decided he admired her a lot—not just because she was pretty, but because she had seemed to be clean and decent. And now, when she was supposed to be Winter's girl, she was willingly nestling in another man's arms!

Of course, it might be love. Vallee always made allowances for accidents of that kind, because he approved of love, even while he shunned it. . . .

When two persons see the same woman being killed in two different rooms at the same time, there has to be an answer. Stan's only error was that he forgot that some women can be trusted only so far . . .

Justice

By MAX
NEILSON

*When he stabbed her, their silhouettes
were thrown clearly on the window shade.*



Certainly there was emotion in the fervent embrace. Vallee could almost see the girl's body stiffen as it pressed close to the man. Their mouths met and clung. It was more than mere friendship, all right——

Then one of the man's arms moved outward behind the girl's back and a different kind of thrill zipped along Vallee's spine. For the man's hand held a thin, pointed object that could not be anything else than a long knife, and it was poised for a killing thrust.

Vallee wanted to cry a warning, but there wasn't time. Before he could get his mouth open the hand tightened against the girl's back and the shadow of the blade disappeared—to the hilt!

The girl's shadow jerked convulsively and shuddered. It swayed backward, away from the man. He eased its fall with one arm and turned away from the window. The light behind the shade went out.

Pausing only long enough to snatch his automatic from the drawer of the dresser, Vallee darted out of the apartment and along the hallway, spurred by white-hot rage at the brutality of the thing.

AT THE far side of the court the knob on the door of Vera Selden's apartment would not turn, but it rattled loudly in his grip. He added to the racket by battering the toes of his glistening oxfords against the lower panel of the door and holding his thumb against the bell-push. When a full minute of this brought no response, he stepped back, intending to pound his shoulder against the door until it burst.

As he poised for the initial lunge, a soft voice inside the apartment called: "Who is it?"

Vallee choked on profane words. He yelled: "Open it up or I'll shoot off the lock!" He reached into his coat pocket for his automatic.

The lock clicked and the door opened just far enough for an oval face, set with anxious dark eyes and topped by smooth raven hair, to peer out. It was the face of Stella, the maid, with whom Vallee had already struck up a nodding acquaintance. She said: "Mr. Vallee! Have you been drinking?"

HE DIDN'T wait to discuss that. He shoved the door back so abruptly that its edge struck the maid and threw her off balance. She cried: "Oh!" staggered back into a chair and sat down so rapidly that her legs flew up and he had a brief glimpse of creamy flesh above silk stocking tops. Just a glimpse—and then he dashed for the door to the bedroom, where the shadow-drama had taken place. He found the light switch, snapped it and stared at the bed with its frilly spread, the dressing table with its triple mirrors, the unlittered carpet. There was no corpse in the bedroom, no sign of blood or struggle, no trace of the clothing the girl had removed—nothing at all to prove the reality of what he had seen. He looked into the two closets of the chamber, but they contained only coats and gowns, hat boxes and dozens of pairs of shoes and slippers on shelves. He opened the connecting door to the bathroom and found it innocently tidy.

Stella had followed him, her brown eyes wide and questioning.

"Where's Vera—Miss Selden?" Vallee demanded.

"She went out about an hour ago," the girl said promptly. "To one of the other apartments, I guess. She didn't take a hat or coat."

"Who was in here just now?"

Stella looked blank. "Nobody. I was in my own room, reading, when you came in. No one else has been here."

"You're lying! I was watching out of my window and saw shadows on this curtain. There were two persons—a man and a woman."

"You must have been watching some other window."

He lifted the shade and looked out.

The window of his own apartment was directly opposite. There had been no mistake.

The thick nap of the rug under the window was spotless. There were not even the scuffed marks one would expect to find if a person had stood there recently—the kind of marks his own feet and Stella's were making, that would last ten or fifteen minutes, until the elasticity of the fabric eliminated them. And yet it did not seem possible that a man could have stabbed a woman and left no trace at all.

Of course, he might have held a cloth ready to staunch the flow of blood. He might have carried his limp victim from the place. But how could a man carry a dead woman through corridors and in stairways or elevators in a fashionable apartment house without discovery?

If anyone knew the answer, it would be this self-possessed little

maid. Vallee regarded her speculatively. He was young and tall and not bad-looking, and if he gave her a play . . .

HE GRINNED experimentally. "At least," he said, "there's no one here to bother us. It's nice to see you alone."

She wrinkled her uptilted nose. "A lot of men want to see me alone—when they're drinking," she replied. "But it isn't flattering when they've had so much they begin seeing things and smashing doors."

Vallee went close to her and breathed in her face. "Not a drop," he said. He put his hands on her shoulders, let them slide to her trim waist. He added: "You're easy to look at."

She gave a little twisting wriggle, as though making an effort to shake off his hands—a decidedly half-hearted effort, which only worked her warm figure closer against him. "Do you say that many times a day?" she asked archly.

"Only when I mean it." Without moving his hands he drew her closer to him. He hadn't been sure how much coaxing she might need, but already there were warm lights back of her eyes and a trace of eagerness in her feigned reluctance. He sank into the chair she had stumbled against and drew her into his lap; he put his arms around her shoulders. "I've often seen you through the window," he said.

"If I'd known you were a Peeping Tom——!" She did not finish, but a warm flush crept into her face. He tightened his arm around her shoulders and let his eyes drop to

the curves of her deliciously modeled figure, to the neckline of her costume.

She said: "Oh!" again, much as she had said it when the door struck her. She presented carmine lips, velvet-soft and moist. He crushed them furiously in an avid kiss that made his own breath catch and his blood race. They were both gasping when their mouths parted.

The hammering of Vallee's pulse shook him from head to toe. The scorching anger had vanished from his brain and he seemed to be lost in a pink, steamy mist that clouded his reason. He had forgotten that he came in quest of information; he was aware only of the moist sweetness of this girl's urgent lips, of the yielding pliancy of her eager young form. . . .

PURELY by chance, he glanced toward the window. Beneath the shade he had lifted he could see the window of his own bedroom. Suddenly the emotions aroused by Stella vanished.

His own apartment had been unlighted, so that his interest in things outside would not be suspected. When he had dashed out in quest of a corpse and a murderer, he had not switched on any lights.

Yet now the window was brilliant!

Heedless of Stella's astonished questions, he leaped to his feet, hardly paused to keep her from tumbling to the floor. A second time he ran at top speed through the corridors. He flung open his own door and stepped into a glare of lamps, in the living room and the bedroom, the door of which was ajar.

An ugly voice growled: "Reach high, Vallee!" The voice came from

behind a .38 calibre Police Special, whose black muzzle was focused sickeningly on the pit of his stomach. The fist that held the gun was attached to Sergeant Jack Schwartz of the Broadway Squad, whom Vallee had once punched in the nose; and Schwartz's beefy, blue-jowled face was grimly challenging, as though he hoped Vallee would be crazy enough to ignore the command.

Back of Schwartz, grinning bleakly, stood Pete Eichert, private dick—the one person on earth who hated Vallee more than Schwartz did. Eichert's close-set eyes glittered with malicious triumph and his right hand hovered near the lapel of his coat.

Vallee was suddenly madder than he ever had been in his life, but he had sense enough to raise his arms, just the same. He glared at the pair of them. "What's the joke?" he rasped.

Eichert answered, drawling each word with leisurely mockery. "It's on you this time. You're pinched for murdering Vera Selden!"

Eichert stepped aside then and glanced out of the corner of his eyes into the bedroom. Vallee edged to a point where he could see through the doorway, taking care to give Schwartz no excuse to start throwing lead. His eyes took in the bed, the shaded window, and a corner of the dresser with the half-consumed cigarette he had tossed into the tray still smouldering. Then he saw what lay on the floor and a queer prickling started in his scalp and spread along his spine.

SOMEBODY had murdered Vera Selden, beyond a doubt. She lay



"In there," she said. "He seemed drunk, and he tried to make love to me."

on her face across the carpet, her wavy red hair spread fanwise about her head, her statuesque body crumpled.

A thin stream of crimson had crept down her back and formed a glistening puddle just above her hips, sloping over onto the floor. The source of the stream was at the hilt of a

slender brass paper knife that had been driven deep between her white shoulder blades.

Vallee felt the blood drain from his face, leaving the skin tight-stretched over his cheekbones. His mouth was suddenly dry. He knew a frame when he saw it, and he knew Eichert's

reputation as a builder of frames. He wondered whether they'd railroad him straight to the chair or give him a chance to buy his way out.

He said, his lips stiff: "All right. What's the story?"

"As if you didn't know!" Eichert scoffed. "Ever since you moved here, Winter suspected Vera was doubling with you. He hired me to watch from the apartment across the court, one floor up. She came here half an hour ago. You had the shades down, but your shadows were plain. She stood in front of the window and put on a strip-tease act. You stabbed her when she wasn't expecting it."

Vallee's brain was groggy. He could feel the net tightening, but he couldn't see the strings that operated it. Until he could grasp the whole picture, he had to fight in the dark. He said wearily: "Put your gun away, Schwartz. Mine's in my pocket. I'm getting tired."

Schwartz appropriated Vallee's automatic. He grunted: "All right—put 'em down. But I'll blast you if you get funny."

"To hell with you!" Vallee growled. "I suppose you've got a gallery of witnesses, Eichert?"

"One," Eichert replied. "Me. That ought to be enough, with the evidence that's here."

"Call Winter," said Vallee. "I want to see that double-crossing rat. There's a flaw in your dirty case somewhere, and I'll find it."

"I called him right after I phoned Schwartz. He'll be down."

"And while we're waiting," Schwartz put in, "you might as well tell us why you bumped her, Vallee. You can't bluff your way out. What

did you have against her? Why did you pull a dirty trick like that?"

"Keep it up," promised Vallee, red anger getting the better of his caution, "and I'll bust your nose again, gun or no gun! I didn't do it. I saw exactly the same thing Eichert says he saw—a man stab a woman against the window blind. Only I saw it in Vera's window, across the court. "So I went over there and found nothing and came back."

"And I suppose," the sergeant sneered, "you want us to believe she was killed over there and carried here while you were out!"

"It could have been done. The court is enclosed, and corridors run on all sides of it. While I was going one way, the killer could be bringing her here the other way. Nobody would be watching this late."

"That won't do. Take a look at the body. Nobody set that stage. There's a wound on her arm where she fell against that hook that holds the curtains back, and there's blood and skin on the hook. Only three drops came from that little cut on her temple, and all of them fell on the carpet. The blood on her back isn't stopped any, and most of it would have come out the same minute she was stabbed."

VALLEE went into the bedroom and looked down at the body. It was a damned shame a girl like Vera had to go out that way, he thought, noting the intriguing curves of her sleek shoulders, back, and hips. Even in death she was beautiful.

Schwartz was right about the blood and skin on the curtain hook. The girl had been killed in that room,

assuredly. And it was funny about the wound on her temple; it was a double puncture of the skin. He couldn't see any object she might have struck in falling that would cause such an injury. . . .

Eichert called: "Here's the maid. Maybe she can tell something. Where did your boss go tonight, baby?"

Stella's wide innocent eyes looked at all of them. She got a glimpse of the pitiful body and gave a short, choked scream. Getting her breath, she stammered: "Miss Selden went out about an hour ago. She didn't say where she was going, but I thought she might have come here. She liked Mr. Vallee."

"You know damned well she never knew me!" Vallee accused.

She flashed him a vengeful look. She continued: "A little later Mr. Vallee started pounding at our door. I let him in and he acted drunk. He—he tried to make love to me!"

"R o m e o V a l l e e!" Schwartz chortled. "Thought you could make her fall for you, too, so she wouldn't tell anything. Then all you'd have to do would be to get rid of the corpse!"

Vallee's lip curled. "You little louse!" he said to Stella.

A short, bulky form filled the doorway. Parkhurst Winter came into the apartment. He wore dinner clothes without hat or topcoat. Pale, ice-cold eyes were set in his moon-shaped face. He raised a pudgy hand to adjust the diamond in his shirt front and an ostentatious ring glittered—a heavy ring set with a huge emerald, balefully green as the eyes of Satan, and a huge ruby, red as new blood.

"Where did you come from so quickly?" Vallee demanded.

"From Vera's apartment," Eichert replied for Winter. "He told me he was going there for a showdown with Vera, and when I saw you kill her, I phoned there. I left a message with the maid."

WINTER ignored them all. He stepped to the door of the bedroom and looked coldly at the dead girl. He looked at her a long time, and when he faced the others again his face was not altered.

"If she had to cheat," he commented, staring hard at Vallee, "she should have had better sense than to pick a killer."

Vallee felt all his muscles go rigid. He would have liked to cram Winter's costly jewels down his gullet—the icy diamonds, the emeralds that were the color of jealousy, the rubies that were the color of blood. The fiery ring with its twin stones held his gaze, fascinated him.

"You're a filthy rat, Winter," he said. "You're back of this. You wanted to get rid of Vera and you hired me to watch her just so I'd be on hand. You murdered her and framed me!"

Winter's sneer was slow and elaborate. He drawled: "Vallee, you've been seeing too many movies——"

Something snapped in Vallee's brain. Like a panther springing, he hurled himself at the fat man. His knuckles smashed against Winter's flabby jaw and he knew a fierce elation.

Schwartz went for his gun with a grunt of pleasure and had the sights on a line with Vallee's diaphragm when Winter stumbled against him. The gun roared and spat flame, but

Eichert got the lead. He screamed and grabbed a shattered right wrist.

Vallee made the doorway safely. Stella stood in his path and he felt a satisfying jolt as he crashed into her soft form. She went down, clawing at the air, legs waving wildly. For the moment silk-sheathed legs were her most obvious features.

Then Vallee was in the corridor, rounding the corner, bound once more for the apartment that had been Vera Selden's, certain the answer to this most tragic of mysteries could be found there.

This time Vallee had to use his shoulder. His hundred and eighty pounds thudded against the door three times before the bolt splintered away from the frame. He dashed to the bedroom and paused while his eyes traced an imaginary line that would reach from the center of his bedroom window to the center of the shade before him. A continuation of that line would strike the upper part of one of the clothes closets.

He opened the closet and flung aside expensive gowns. Behind them a shelf was piled with hat boxes. One of them had a hole the size of a man's fist punched in the side. He grabbed it, withdrew a small object of heavy metal and glass.

He whirled to face Sergeant Schwartz. The big cop's face was splotched with angry purple. His revolver swung to cover Vallee. The private operative saw the look in the cop's eyes and knew Schwartz wasn't going to give him a chance to put his hands up this time.

HE DREW back his arm and threw the metal object at the sergeant.

As it left his hand, the gun belched flame. The bullet hit Vallee's side like a gigantic fist, knocking the breath out of his lungs, spinning him half around. Agony streaked along his ribs.

But the heavy machine caught Schwartz on the forehead, and Schwartz reeled backward and fell, out cold.

Stella had come into the room. She started to flee, but Vallee's flaming glance seemed to burn all the strength out of her. She cowered back into a corner, trembling, as he staggered toward her.

"Talk fast!" he snarled. "I know the answers now, so don't lie!"

"It was Winter!" she moaned. "He kept after me till I said I'd help him. He said he'd buy me pretty clothes and get me an apartment as nice as this. All I had to do was get you here and keep you for a while, so he could take Vera to your place and stab her. He was going to hide afterward in the janitor's closet in the hallway."

"What did he have against her?"

"He'd promised to marry her. She wasn't like most girls—he couldn't buy her off. She had letters and things, and was going to make trouble for him. It made him furious."

"And you—you worked that machine?"

She nodded. "That's all I did. I swear it!"

Vallee glimpsed Eichert slinking away from the door. The rat had been listening, had got the drift of things and was checking out. Vallee would have chased him, but his wound was throbbing horribly. He sank giddily into a chair.

Stella came over to him. She sat on the arm of the chair. One of her shapely knees was cocked up and the skirt slid back from it, baring a glimmer of ivory thigh above sheer silk. "If I was real nice to you, would you tell on me?" she coaxed.

Vallee laughed harshly. He was thinking of the poor kid across the court with a knife in her back—reflecting that it would be far better if the law reserved other things than the electric chair for men like Winter. Things like the rack, or a cauldron of boiling oil.

HE WAS mildly surprised to see Winter appear at that moment in the doorway, his face twisted with rage, his hands in the air. Behind Winter came Eichert, his left hand holding an automatic, while his right hung limply at his side, wrapped in a bloody handkerchief.

"I overheard Stella spilling the truth," Eichert said. "I could enjoy seeing you in a tight spot, but I'll be damned if I'll see you railroaded for a murder you didn't do. I went back to grab Winter when he came up for air after your punch. What do I care if it does cost me my fee?"

Vallee said: "My God, Eichert—I'd have sworn you were in it!"

"Not murder. A guy's got to draw the line somewhere."

Schwartz stirred on the carpet. A groan came from his thick lips and he sat up slowly rubbing his head. "What hit me?" he asked.

"Only the evidence," Vallee told him. "I socked you with the movie projector Stella used to throw silhouettes on my window. Eichert saw them and was taken in.

"By the time Eichert phoned the precinct station down the street, where you hang out, the whole business was finished. Winter would deny hiring me and I wouldn't have any alibi. All he had to do was wait in the janitor's closet till he heard me go back through the corridor, then pretend he'd just come in to see Vera."

Schwartz glowered at him. "You socked me twice," he rumbled, "And I only shot you once. I ought to have your license taken up, but I'll forget about that if you'll tell me how you did it, so I can take the credit."

"Credit, hell!" Vallee snorted. "You'll be lucky if I don't have you kicked off the force for shooting me after all the rest of your dumbness. The clues were right under your nose. That funny wound on Vera's temple was made with that big ring Winter is wearing—the one with the emerald and the ruby. If you'll look at it closely, like I did, you'll see bloodstains on the setting. He slugged Vera before he stabbed her—the louse!

"As for the shadows—Winter supplied the tip-off to them. He told me I'd been seeing too many movies, and the word clicked. A movie-projector was the only thing that could put on that show, short of two actual people. And it was easy to see where it must have been placed to hit both windows. . . .

"Winter will burn, and you can't collect from a dead man. I'll spend a week in the hospital on account of your damned bullet." He sighed, and then he grinned. "But that sure was a sweet sock I gave you with the projector—wasn't it, Schwartzie?"

SHE WAS

DANDRY stroked his mustache and looked at me through his pince-nez. He said: "I don't owe you anything, Roper. Not a damned thing."

The library of his suburban mansion matched his own pompous manner and his well-fed girth. I hated him for the fire that burned on his hearth when I didn't even own a second-hand overcoat to keep me warm. I hated him for his stuffed belly when mine gnawed with emptiness. And most of all I hated him for what he'd done to me.

"You owe me five lost years out of my life," I told him. "Five years of hell that might have been more if I hadn't earned a parole for good behavior. And you owe me Betty. Not that I want her, after you've married her. . . ."

He shrugged his fat shoulders. "You stole," he taunted me. "You looted the company and sent it into bankruptcy. Don't come whining to me because you had to pay the piper. As for Betty——"

I bit back the anger that swelled in my throat. "You're the one that did the looting," I said. "I was innocent, and you framed me." I was a fool to fling that at him. It would not get me anywhere. But hunger will make a man do crazy things.

I went on: "I'm not asking charity. And I'm not trying to shake you down. I haven't got a shred of evidence to blackmail you with."

"Otherwise you'd do it, I suppose?" he sneered.

I let that pass. "All I want is a stake. I'll pay it back when I get on my feet. From the looks of your house, you'd never miss a couple hundred dollars."

"And why should I stake a jail-bird?"

"Because we were partners and you sent me to prison on a phony rap. And because you made Betty divorce me so you could marry her."

He said: "What happens if I turn you down, Roper?"

I guess I wasn't quite sane. "Then I'll kill you, steal what I need, and to hell with the consequences," I told him.

He stood up quickly, as if alarmed. "That won't be necessary. If I give you five hundred, will you leave town and not come back?"

I said: "Yes. Cash. No checks."

DANDRY walked out of the room.

He was gone about three minutes. I didn't suspect a double-cross until it was too late to do anything about it. He came back with a .32 in his pudgy fist. He left to get the

Sending his partner to prison on a phoney rap and then marrying his partner's wife wasn't enough for Dandry. Above everything else, he had dreams of wealth that closed his mind to any qualms of conscience or decency

POISON

By HENRY PHELPS



She had probably died instantly when she fell.

gun, not money. He pointed it at me and snarled: "Now get out, damn you, before I forget myself and give you what's coming to you."

I should have known he'd pull something like that. Lice don't change in five years or five centuries. If I made a move toward him, he'd shoot me dead and tell the cops it had been self-defense. And he'd get away with it.

I said: "Okay, Dandry. You hold all the aces just now. But look out. Some day you'll be on the other end

of that gun." I went out of the room and out of the house.

There was snow on the ground, it was four miles back downtown to my three-dollar-a-week bedroom, and my shoes were thin. Well, so what? I was getting used to tough breaks. Maybe my luck would change some day. Maybe I'd be riding instead of walking.

I rode sooner than I expected.

TWO blocks from Dandry's house a maroon sedan pulled up to the

curb alongside me. A voice said: "Get in, Terry. I'll take you wherever you're going."

It was Betty. Dandry's wife. My wife, once upon a time.

If I hadn't been so cold, I'd have told her to go to hell. But the wind was as sharp as razor blades through my threadbare hand-me-downs, and that sedan looked inviting. So did Betty.

I got in.

She was wearing a fur coat. An expensive one. Her sleek, tapered legs stretched to the foot-pedals. They gleamed silkily in the dashboard glow. Her soft contralto poured over me like warm liquid. "Hello, Terry. I—I heard everything. And I had to follow you—help you——" I saw the up-and-down stirring of her pouting bosom under the fur coat.

Again I was a fool. I remembered the sweet, clinging softness of her in the old days, when she'd belonged to me. And the sudden starved feeling in my heart wasn't food-hunger. That should have warned me, but it didn't.

I let her go up with me to my room.

She slipped out of her coat and said: "Well, Terry . . . ?"

Her crimson lips were moist with promise. So were her blue eyes. Her frock was cut low at the neck-line. I could glimpse gleaming skin, softly curved, white and enticing. Her whole length swayed ever so slightly.

"Afraid of me, Terry?" she purred when I made no move toward her.

I said: "I'm not your husband now. Dandry is."

"To my regret," she came back

with soft bitterness. "If only we could turn back the calendar——!"

"You mean you're dissatisfied with your bargain?"

"He beats me. Cruelly," she said. "Oh, Terry . . . Terry . . . I've been so wrong. . . !"

She came close to me. I put my arms around her. I couldn't help doing it.

She strained against me.

I lost my head. I know it was wrong but I kissed her.

My hands tingled on well-remembered curves. Little ripples of sensation seemed to course through her. She parted her lips on my mouth.

The fragrance of her wheat-yellow hair made me dizzy and drunken. Madness filled me with a throbbing ache. Longingly she panted: "You *do* love me, Terry! I know you still love me!"

"Yes, God help me. I do."

"Well, then——?"

I swept her off her feet and cradled her in my arms. For a while I was in a fool's paradise. . . .

LATER I said: "Leave him. We'll go away together. We'll get a fresh start and forget the past."

She wriggled her frock straighter on her shoulders and smoothed its mussed creases. "But we can't do it without money, Terry darling."

"I'll make money."

"N-no, Terry. There's a much better way. A way that'll give us revenge for what we've both suffered."

"How do you mean?" I asked her.

"I—I can't tell you now. I've got to get home before he finds out I'm gone and starts raising hell. He might take a notion to use his fists on me."

"I'd kill him if he tried it."

She grabbed my arms. "You mustn't even think such things . . . I'll be seeing you again, Terry. Soon. You won't leave here, will you? Promise me?"

"They'll be kicking me out unless I pay my rent," I said glumly. "It's two days overdue and you don't rate much consideration in a dump like this. You pay up or you vacate."

She opened her beaded purse, fished out a ten-spot and handed it to me. "This will tide you over, won't it? I'll bring you more, later." She kissed me and left me before I could put up an argument.

THE next night she came back again. She said: "Everything's all set, Terry."

"Set?"

"He's left town on a business trip. He'll be gone at least a month. I've got my grips all packed." Her voice seemed strained, almost calculating.

"Well?" I said.

"You're coming home with me. Now."

"What for?"

"There's ten thousand dollars in currency in his wall safe. He's been looting his new company, just as he did when you were his partner. I know the combination to the safe. We'll take the money and run away together——"

A vague suspicion stirred in the depths of my mind. "If I'm caught, I'll go back to prison," I said.

"You won't be caught. I promise you that. Nobody's home tonight except the butler."

I still didn't like it. I said so.

She slid her dress low over her

shoulders. There were bruises on her upper arms. "Aren't you willing to run a little risk to take me away from th-things like this?" she whimpered.

I was a sucker. I kissed the black-and-blue marks. Then I kissed her throbbing throat and her wet red lips. Fool's paradise again! I was starved for the miracle of her love. . .

Afterward we drove out to her place. A butler let us in. He was fat and pompous, like Dandry; maybe even more so. I hadn't seen him on my previous visit. In fact, I hadn't seen any servants at all.

Betty dismissed the lackey. "I won't be needing you any more tonight, Herkimer," she said.

He didn't bat an eye, although he certainly must have thought it strange for his mistress to be entertaining a threadbare scarecrow like me. He just bowed and strutted away to the servants' quarters belowstairs.

UP IN the boudoir I saw that Betty had told me the truth: her luggage was packed and waiting. She led me into Dandry's den and pointed to the wall safe. Flickering light from the fireplace gleamed on the chrome knob. She whispered the complicated combination to me.

I opened the safe. Except for some insurance papers, it was empty.

She sucked in a swift intake of breath. "Damn him!" she choked. "He must have taken the cash with him! But why? He couldn't possibly have suspected——"

"We won't need his dirty money," I said. "We'll go without it. We can make out somehow."

She said: "Don't be absurd, Terry.

We'll just have to wait. He will be putting more cash in the safe when he gets back from his trip. He always does. Then we can——"

"I don't like waiting," I cut in. "If you're so worried about funds to see us through, why can't we hock your jewels? They ought to bring plenty. I noticed a whole mess of pretties in the jewel case on your dressing table in the boudoir a minute ago."

"No. They—they're paste. Fakes," she came back nervously.

I walked into the boudoir, and she followed me. I said: "So these are all phonies, are they?"

"Yes."

"How about the mountings? Real gold, or brass?"

"G-gold. But how much could you get? Only a few hundred dollars. Not enough for our purpose, Terry."

I said: "Still looking for luxury. Is that it?"

She twined her arms around my neck. "Don't you understand, darling? It's not the money. It's revenge I want. The knowledge of how *he'll* feel when he finds out his stolen funds have been lifted——" Her eyes bored into mine. "It's the only real way we can hurt him."

Her nearness did things to me. It always had been that way. "Okay. We'll wait," I said harshly. I mashed her mouth with mine.

Then I heard a sound. It came from the hallway.

I raced to the door and jerked it open. I was just in time to see a fat figure waddling around a corner. Footsteps padded quickly down the back stairs.

"The butler. Snooping!" I grated. I started after him.

Betty tried to stop me. "You mustn't——!"

I shook her off. I pelted down to his belowstairs room and banged on the door. He opened up. He blinked at me.

I said: "What's the idea, eavesdropping?"

His eyes narrowed in their folds of fat. "I don't understand you—sir." He put nasty emphasis on the *sir*. There was something caustic and supercilious about his tone.

I said: "Maybe you can understand this," and I slugged him in the mouth. He went backward across his mussed bed.

Betty pulled me over the threshold. "You've got to get out!" she whispered frantically. "You should not have done that! Now I'll have to discharge him——"

"Better do it soon," I said. "He's no damned good." I blew on my stinging knuckles and left the house.

But I didn't go far. I was thinking of that butler. How much had he overheard as he stood outside the boudoir? How much was he likely to tell Dandry, later?

I sneaked back around the house to his window, wondering what to do. I peered in. What I saw made me feel sick and disgusted.

Betty was alongside him, talking to him. He had his arm around her waist, and he was grinning through his puffed lips. I couldn't hear what was being said, but I could watch him kissing her. And Betty wasn't trying to stop him. . . .

That was the kind of woman I

was in love with. Just a damned tramp.

I WENT home to my rat-hole of a hotel and checked out. I moved to another dump on the south side of town. I still had seven dollars on me. I squandered two of them for cheap whiskey and got roaring drunk. I stayed drunk three days.

A week passed before Betty found me. I was broke by that time. And hungry again.

"Why did you try to hide from me?" she asked me.

I told her what I'd seen through the butler's window.

She didn't even blush. "But I *had* to let him . . . neck me a little," she said. "I found out he was a private detective."

"You mean Dandry planted him to watch you while he was away on his trip?"

"Yes. So what else could I do but . . . bribe the man so he would not talk? Oh, Terry . . . please try to understand! Everything will work out for the best if you'll just have confidence in me!"

I pretended to give in. Not that I cared a damn about her. That was all over, now. But I needed some money. And I was beginning to wonder about the game she was playing. I was interested in seeing how the cards were going to turn when the show-down came. Then I'd know how to act.

So I said: "I understand, baby. Skip it. Give me a kiss."

She gave me a lot more than one kiss before she left. Among other things, she slipped me another ten-spot. . . .

Things went on that way for another three weeks. She came to see me almost every night. Not once did I mention running away with her. The next move was hers, I decided.

And the time came when she made it.

She rapped excitedly on my door around eight o'clock one evening. It was snowing outside. When I let her in, her fur coat sparkled with hundreds of tiny wet diamond-droplets where snowflakes had nestled and melted. She said: "Terry, he's back home."

"Dandry?"

"Yes. And I—I saw him put twenty thousand dollars in the wall safe a while ago. Then he went out. He said he had some work to do at the office and wouldn't be back until after midnight."

"Well, where's the money?" I said. "Did you bring it?"

THAT seemed to set her back a little. "Wh-why didn't I think of that?" she berated herself. "I could have taken it. . . . But instead, I came after you. I'm such a fool!" She plucked at my sleeve. "But you can come and open the safe. Then we'll get away——"

I said: "How about that Herkimer guy, the private-dick butler? Suppose he's on guard?"

"He's gone. He's out of the picture."

"Dandry fired him?"

"Yes. This afternoon. And replaced him with a new man. A *real* butler this time."

"Do you think Herkimer spilled anything about that night in your boudoir?"

"No. How could he, after the way I . . . bribed him?" She blushed a little. Her eyes widened. "You're not holding that against me, are you, Terry? I—I couldn't help myself. I did it because I love you so much. Because I wanted us to have our chance at happiness." She squeezed herself against me. "You are not going to back out, Terry? You aren't going to throw me down?"

"Not if you don't want me to," I said.

She pulled a little automatic out of her coat pocket. "We're going through with it, Terry. We're going to take what belongs to us. Here. Put this in your pocket. In case anything goes wrong. . . ."

"Not now," I said. "Later. Give it to me when we go into the house. Let's get started." But when we got downstairs, I added: "Wait a minute. I've got a phone call to make."

Her eyes held quick suspicion. "What for?"

"I've got to contact my parole officer. I have to do it once a week. If I phone him now, he won't be expecting to hear from me for another seven days. We'll have that much start when they begin looking for me as a parole violator."

She said: "All right. But hurry. I—I'm nervous."

I made my call from a corner drugstore booth. It took me several minutes. Then I got into the maroon sedan and Betty headed for the suburbs.

She drove too fast. A motor-cop stopped us and gave us a ticket. After he got on his bike and roared away, I said: "Tear it up. You won't be around town to worry about making

a court appearance anyhow. Forget it." I put my arm around her waist to soothe her.

She was jittery. "Damn that flat-foot!" she whispered. But she did not gun her throttle after that. She took it easy. Ten minutes later we were walking into the house.

THE new butler met us in the hallway and offered to take our things. He wasn't fat like Herkimer. He didn't wear sideburns, either. He was smooth-shaven and paunchless.

Betty said: "Never mind, Hawke. You may go. I shan't need you any more tonight."

"Yes, madame," he said. He bowed and stalked off.

Betty and I went upstairs to the den. The only light came from the fireplace, just as before. She said: "Better take this gun, Terry," and forced it into my hand.

I accepted it. I put it in my pocket and went toward the wall safe. "What's the combination again?" I asked her.

She told me. I twisted the knurled chromium knob.

Just as I was swinging the circular door open, Betty said: "*Listen!* I hear somebody!"

I froze. She darted out of the room.

Now it was coming. Something warned me to run. But I didn't. I stood stock-still.

The portieres stirred behind me. Dandry's voice roared: "You damned thief!" Then a gun yammered twice. *Ker-rang krang!*

I jerked around. I saw a bulky figure pitch face-forward into the hearth. There was a hissing sizzle of

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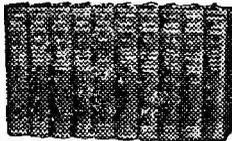


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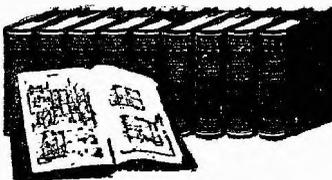
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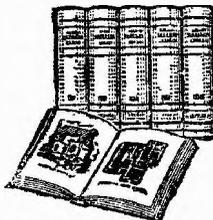
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human flesh roasting on the red-glowing coals; an acrid, pungent stink drifted to my widened nostrils. The fat form didn't move. It lay there with its face cooking horribly in the fire.

Betty screamed and came pelting into the room. She wasn't dressed—except for a nightgown. I could see the pallor of her cheeks and the white, rounded arrogance of lovely contours surging against thin silk. She flicked on the light.

Then somebody grabbed me and pinioned me. It was the new butler.

He rasped: "Call the police, madame! Quickly! The master has been murdered!"

I twisted and tried to get away from him. He was strong. Much too strong for me. Especially when he jammed my two arms up my back. Sweat streamed into my eyes. "Let me go, damn you!" I shouted. "I didn't shoot——"

Betty was tugging at the heels of the corpse on the hearth. She managed to drag the dead man's head out of the fire. His features were a grisly char. There were two bullet-holes through his white shirt-front.

"My husband——!" she screamed. She whirled on me like a tigress. "You killed him, Terry Roper! In cold blood!"

I said: "You're a liar."

"You did! You *did!*"

"And how are you going to prove it?"

"Your gun. It's been fired twice."

I said: "How do you know that?"

The butler put a little more pressure on me. "I saw you do it. I was watching. You shot Mr. Dandry twice and put the gun back in your pocket.

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Your fingerprints will be all over it. The barrel will match up with the murder-slugs. He caught you robbing his safe, and you killed him."

Betty picked up the phone and called headquarters. "I want to report the murder of my husband by a burglar," she said. "We've caught the killer. Please send some men...."

She hung up.

I STARED at her. God, she was beautiful. I could see the smooth, lyric perfection of her form through the thin nightgown; and I could also see the evil triumph in her eyes....

Evil. That was the word. If ever there was a soulless woman, Betty was that woman. She used her animal lure to attract men, to make them give her what she demanded of life. It didn't matter to her what happened to her dupes, after she was through with them. Let them starve. Let them rot in prison. Let them go to the electric chair—or roast their eyeballs against the coals of a fireplace....

I said quietly: "So you'd already pulled your kill when you came to my room and offered me your automatic. I was hoping against that. I was hoping I might prevent a murder."

Her lips curled. "I don't know what you're getting at. *You're* the murderer."

"I'm not, and you know I'm not," I said. "You're framing me. For a long time I've realized that you were sucking me into something. Now I see what it was. A murder frame. And I'm the fall guy."

"Tell it to the cops," she said.

"They'll be here soon. Maybe they will believe you."

"I'd sooner tell it to you," I shot back at her. "And you'll listen. Remember when I first came here and asked your husband for a stake?"

"Certainly I remember."

"When he refused me, I threatened to kill him and steal what I wanted. That was when your plot was hatched. How easy it would be to trap me into a situation where I'd have a murder gun on me, and my prints all over the wall safe! Your testimony regarding my threats would send me to the chair."

She said: "That's exactly where you're going."

"You laid all your plans carefully," I ignored her interruption. "Dandry ostensibly left town. A new butler was engaged. A fat one. Herkimer. Then you brought me here to open the safe, knowing all the time there was no money in it. That was just bait to keep me on the line."

"That night, Herkimer did some snooping and I popped him for it. You had to let him take liberties with you in order to persuade him to stay on the job. You tried to cover that episode by telling me he was a private dick. He wasn't. You lied about that. Just as you lied when you said your jewels were paste, not worth pawning. I looked at them myself. Don't you suppose I'd know the difference between phonies and the real thing?"

"So what?" she said.

"So I knew you weren't on the level about running away with me. Otherwise you'd have been willing to hock your sparklers. And why were you so anxious to appease a fat but-

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ler? Why was he so damned important to you?

"Because of the insurance papers I found in the safe that first time," I grated. "Life insurance papers. Big policies covering Dandry."

Her eyes flashed menacingly. That's dangerous talk, sucker."

I said: "I know it is. Tonight when you offered me a gun, I saw through the scheme. I knew why Dandry had ostensibly left town for a month—which he really did not. I knew why you needed a fat butler of Dandry's size.

"Dandry probably remained in hiding right here in this house the entire month. He went on a complete fast. He sluffed off his paunch and shaved away his mustache. Nothing can disguise a man better than to change his figure by thirty or forty pounds."

"You're insane. There he lies where you shot him. Does he look thin to you?"

I said: "That's not Dandry. That's Herkimer, the fat butler. He was killed just before you came to my hotel tonight. He was murdered with the gun you handed me. And when you brought me here, two harmless shots were fired from another gun—and Herkimer, dead at least thirty minutes, was tossed forward from behind the portieres, tossed so his face would fall in the fireplace and be burned beyond recognition.

"In other words, you were prepared to identify him as your husband and collect his insurance. I'd take the rap for his kill. Then you and Dandry would lam with the insurance money." I twisted around until I could see the servant who



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pinioned me. "You're Dandry," I said.

"And you're much too smart," he snapped back at me. "I guess we'll have to bump him, Betty. I'll claim self-defense. We can still get away with it."

TWO plainclothes detectives walked into the room. One of them said: "Afraid not, Dandry. Turn him loose and put up your hands. You too, Mrs. Dandry."

The jig was up and they knew it. But Dandry was a devil to the last. He whipped the automatic from my coat-pocket and tried to shoot his way to freedom. At the same instant, Betty broke into a leaping run.

Dandry's aim was bad. Or else fate guided Betty's steps. In any case, she plunged directly into Dandry's line of fire. Three of his slugs tunneled through her soft, feminine flesh. She screamed and stumbled and fell. Blood gushed out of her mouth. I think she died instantly. I hope so. After all, she'd been my wife, once upon a time. . . .

The detectives disarmed Dandry before he could do any more damage. He was like a maniac. "Where the hell did these rats come from?" he screamed at the top of his throat. "How——?"

I said: "I suspected this kind of set-up, although I was hoping we could prevent Herkimer's murder. When I phoned the parole officer, I tipped him off. He saw to it that Betty was delayed on a speeding charge. That gave headquarters time to send some men here to your house. They broke in and secreted them-



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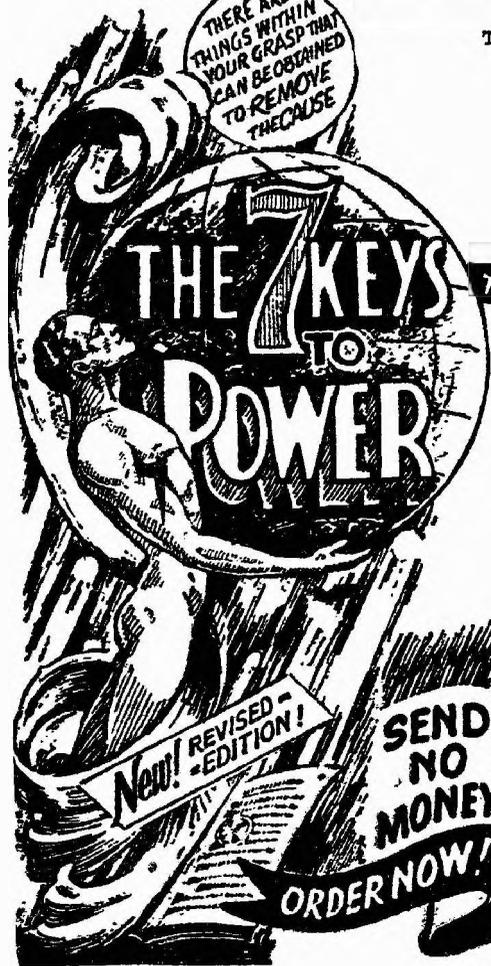
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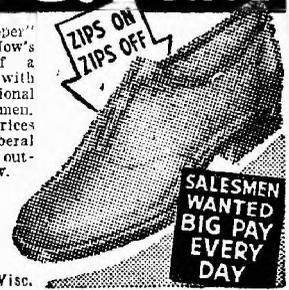
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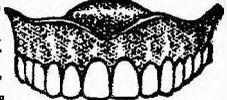


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selves where they could watch and hear everything."

The detectives nodded grimly. "We saw you shove that corpse toward the hearth. And you just drilled your wife. Too bad, Dandry. Let's get going. There's a long trip ahead of you—with the hot squat at the end of it."

They took him away.

I went out into the bitter night. But somehow the wind didn't bite so very sharply through my hand-me-down. I felt warm, inside. I felt square with the world.

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BLOOD ON THEIR HANDS

(Continued from page 69)

batteries! It will kill you! No time to bring the others!"

Joe groped blindly after the old man, up the ladder into the fresh air of the night, leaving three men to die behind him—and not too sorry for any of them. . .

They stood knee-deep in water on the submerged deck of the submarine, clinging to the conning tower. Bard pointed a skinny hand out toward open water past the bright torch of Liberty.

"I slowed the tug and aimed her out there where there aren't any ships," he said through chattering teeth. "If Holmann told the truth,

she ought to blow up now."

Joe cuddled Lois's trembling form against him, feeling the warm curves of her through her drenched frock, loving her more than he ever had. Together they watched the dwindling lights of the doomed craft, carrying a dead heroine to fame and a dying spy to oblivion.

A red pillar of flame split the sky. A deep-throated bellow of thunder rolled and reverberated over New York Harbor. Before the glare had died away, the green lights of police launches were visible off the tip of Manhattan, racing toward them.

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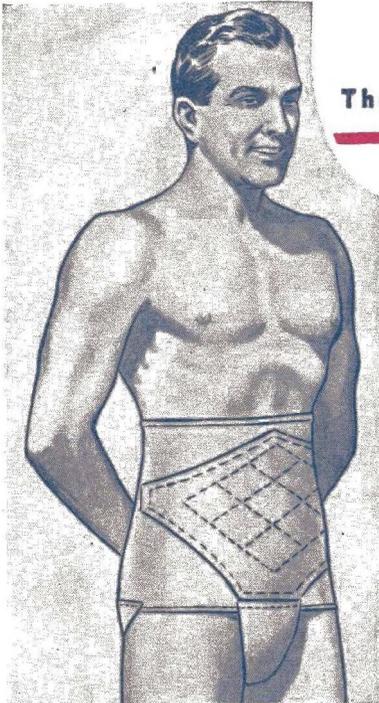
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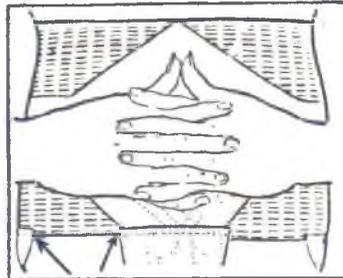
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