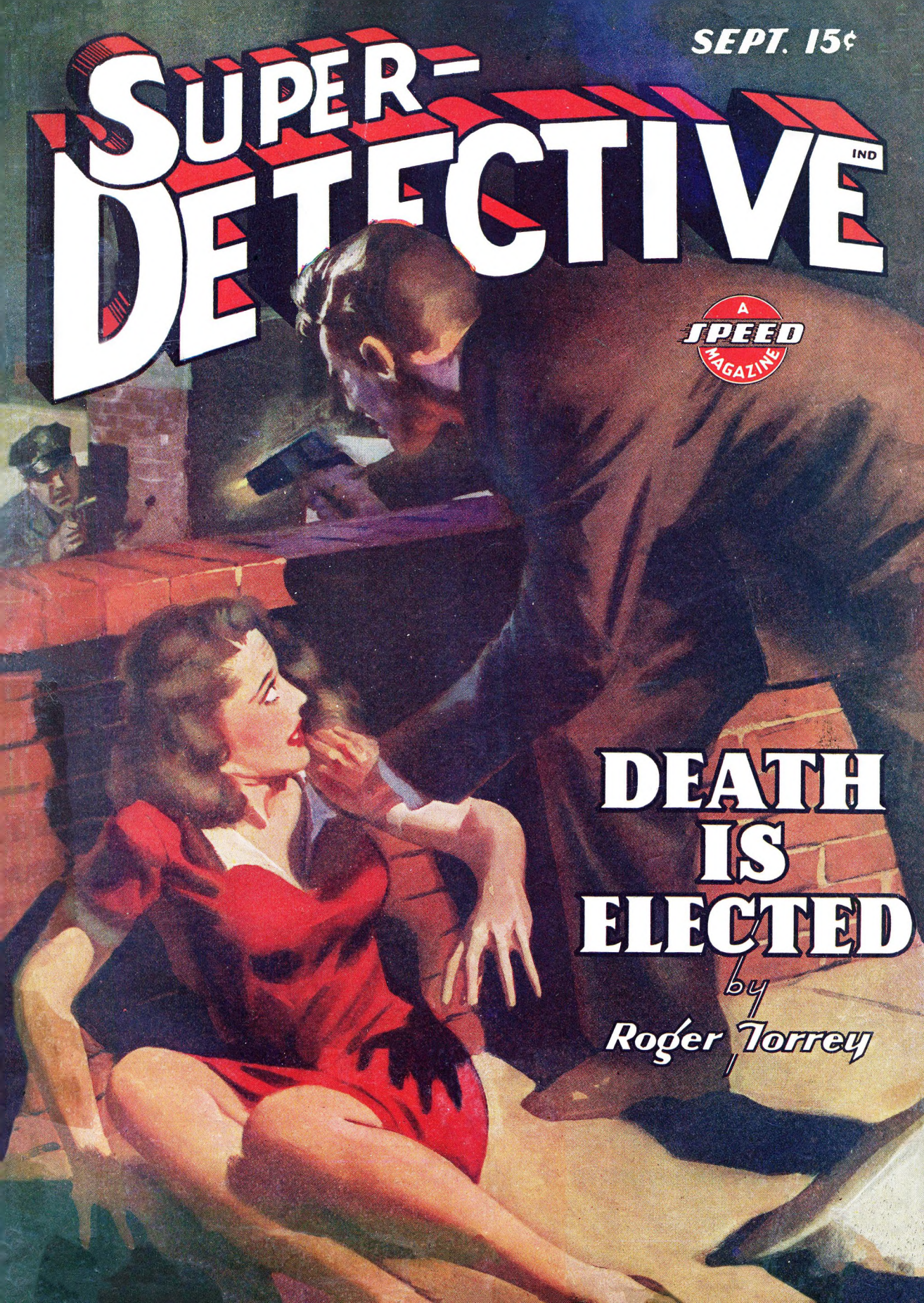
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A SPEED MAGAZINE
DEATH IS ELECTED
by Roger Torrey

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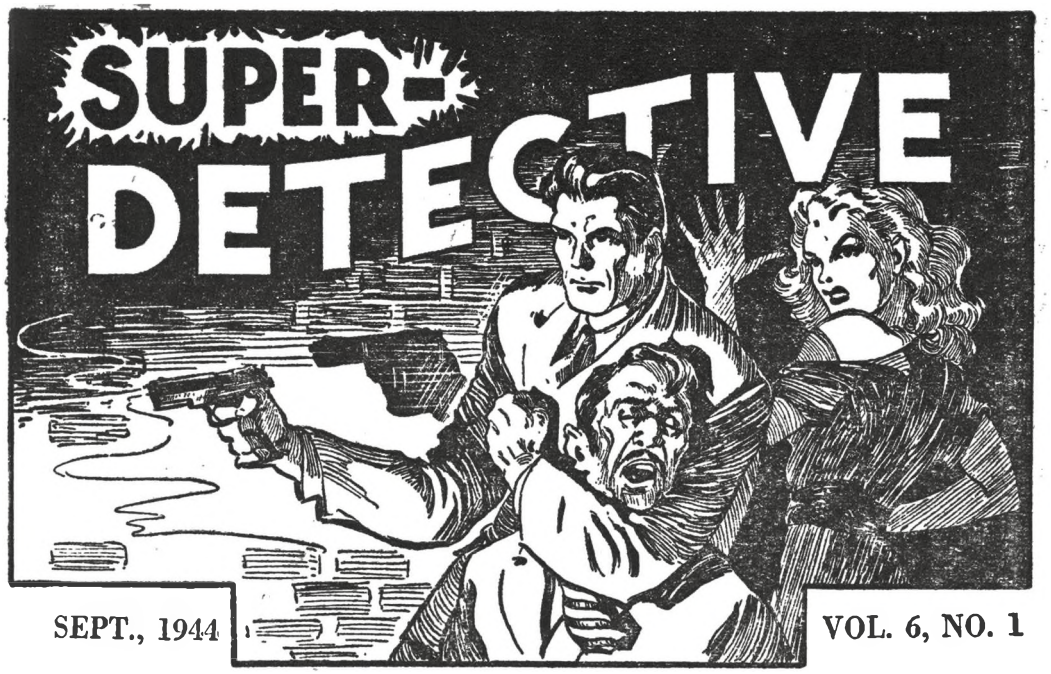

SEPT., 1944 VOL. 6, NO. 1

Super-Detective Novel — Complete In This Issue

Feature Novelette, Complete In This Issue

Shorter Stories

SUPER-DETECTIVE is published monthly by Trojan Publishing Corporation, 125 East Forty-sixth Street, New York 17, N. Y. Frank Armer, Publisher, K. W. Hutchinson and W. E. Matthews, Editors. Re-entered as second class matter April 7, 1943, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Subscription: Yearly, $1.50; single copy, 15c. Canadian and foreign postage extra. Manuscripts should be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope and are submitted at the author's risk.

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It was a strange religious sect that wanted to elect a President of the United States. Wanted to so much that they'd put up over a hundred grand. Now there was nothing else they asked for except to catch the man who'd run out with their dough!

DEATH IS

CROWLEY had aged ten years in the last two. I've noticed that sort of thing lots of times and never have understood it. A man will work at high pressure and hold up under it and then, when he stops and takes it easy, he'll go all to pieces.

Jim had been a high pressure man if ever there'd been one. He'd worked as foreign correspondent for ten years and

By ROGER TORREY

Under the cover of that gun, I dived head first, like a wrestler making a flying tackle.

ELECTED

had covered the world and five wars during the time. He'd been a top man and had made top money and he'd saved part of the last and bought a country newspaper down in North Carolina. He'd always talked about getting one, and the only thing I couldn't understand about it was why he'd picked the one he did.

It was just too small a town for him—his paper, even if he put it on its feet—

wouldn't have a chance to grow.

I didn't tell him that, though. I just sat in his office and reached out my hand for the highball he handed me.

He said: "I don't know whether I've got another hunch or not, Mike. I used to have 'em and depend on 'em, but I've been out of harness for awhile and maybe I've lost the touch."

"You'll never lose it, Jim."

"Maybe, maybe not. We'll know tonight."

I raised my eyebrows and said: "So soon? I thought I'd have to play old sleuth around the pine trees for a while."

"You don't like it here, eh, Mike?"

"I'm city. Not country."

"You don't know it down here, that's all."

"The Lord forbid!"

Jim laughed. "You haven't laced into any of our East Lake corn likker, kid. You haven't seen any of the corn-fed damsels yet."

"Should I?"

"One of them's mixed up in this business."

I said that would make it that much worse—that when women got mixed up in trouble, it just added complications. Crowley grinned at me and told me again I should be married.

As he's a bachelor, this didn't mean a thing.

HE said: "There's a sect lives back in the hills, about ten miles from here. They own a whole valley and it's a honey. Some of the best farming land in the State and they farm it. And how! They call themselves the Brothers of Man and they're something like the Mennonites. Know anything about the Mennonites?"

"A little," I said. "And probably most of it's wrong. They're Pennsylvania Dutch, I think, and most of them live in that state. They don't believe in modern improvements, like the automobile and buttons and stuff like that. They're hard working, decent people, and they keep to themselves and expect others to do the same. I've never heard anything against them, that is, in the sense that they're troublemakers or anything like that."

"These people are much the same. More modern, but they believe in the same keeping to themselves idea. But they carry it farther—they want a President who will guarantee them that. They want to elect a man named Vanderwort."

"Never heard of him."

"He's one of the big shots of the sect. They've got branches in other places, Mike. Anyway, they put up a hundred grand—to be exact a hundred and twenty-two thousand, four hundred—for a campaign fund for the guy."

I laughed.

"Sure it's funny. But it isn't funny to them. And it won't be funny to them if the guy that did the promoting—the guy that raised the hundred odd grand—skips out with it."

I stopped laughing and asked whether that had happened.

"I don't know yet. That's what we're going to find out tonight."

"Who from?"

"From a kid named Hoffenheimer. He ran around with Brother Howe's—Chief-Brother Howe's gal. Howe's the head of the clan and his gal is the belle of the country around there. This Klasson came in there and promoted the dough and also Howe's daughter. This kid, Offenheimer, is sore about it and because of that is willing to talk."

"Disappointed love, eh?"

"It's good even among the Brothers of Man, Mike. Though whether the kid knows enough about the deal to be any good to us I don't know."

"What makes you think this Klasson is going to run out with the dough?"

"A hunch, Mike. I've had a lot of them in my time and most of them have worked out. You know that."

"I know it. What's Klasson like?"

Crowley shrugged. "What's any promotor like? A good talker, for one thing. A good-looking guy, in this case. Claims to be of Dutch extraction and his name could bear that out. That is, if it is his name."

"Look Dutch?"

"Well, he's blond and blue-eyed. And a heavy man, if that means anything. Call it a hunch, but I say he's as crooked as a dog's hind leg."

"When's the kid supposed to be here? This kid Hoffenheimer?"

Crowley looked at his watch and told me the guy was due any time from then on. Then we had another drink while we waited. And then another and then another.

We were on the sixth, I think, when Crowley got the call from the sheriff's office.

IT seemed that Crowley, playing smart and working for the local crime coverage, had made a pal of a deputy-sheriff named Wilcox. Wilcox drank Crowley's liquor and in return passed on anything that came into the office. I got this dope while we were hustling over there in Crowley's old jaloppy.

He said: "This Wilcox isn't a bad joe. For that matter, the sheriff's a good egg. They've called me on everything from a hen house robbery to a colored cutting scrape, so far. This is the first big thing I've hit."

"Where'd they find the kid?"

"Side of the road, about three miles out from town."

"The road coming from this Brothers of Man colony?"

"Yeah. He must have been on his way in."

"Who found him?"

"A colored man named Amos. That's all anybody knows him by—he's not one of the local lot."

We pulled into the parking place by the site of the court house then and found Wilcox, the deputy, waiting for us.

He said: "Hiya there, Mr. Crowley. Can I ride out with you, sir? This damn' county car I got won't turn a wheel."

He pointed over to where another deputy—I found out this one was named Ellis—was cranking away at a Model-A Ford.

"Sure," Crowley said. "Can't start her, eh?"

"Ellis, he went and wound her up too tight and he busted the main spring," Wilcox said. "I done told him he shouldn't do it. I done the same thing with my damn' watch and it's still being fixed. But Ellis, you can't tell that man a thing."

HE called Ellis then and the two of them climbed into the back of Crowley's car. Crowley introduced me, saying nothing about my business but just naming me as a friend.

Wilcox said seriously: "Mister Donaghan, a law man in these parts sure leads him a life. Night and day it goes. A man gets him no rest. Cuttings and shootings! Robbery and violence! Whiskey trouble!"

I went along with the rib and said it must be pure hell on a man. He told me I just had no idea of what a law man went through to earn his sidemeat and grits.

He amplified this with: "Not more'n six months ago a boy named Abraham Washington cut another darky named Cy Josephs three times. Sure would have killed Josephs, too, except that Josephs had shoes on and had sense enough to take to the graveled road with Abe after him."

"Did Abe catch him?"

"He was doing right well—he was up to within fifteen feet or so of Cy. But then the gravel got between his toes and he had to stop and pick it out. That give Cy another lead. By God, Mister Donaghan, them boys kept that up 'till I had to go out and stop 'em."

"Pinch 'em?"

"Well, no. It sorta pleased me to see the way them boys stepped her off. Neither one of them had moved outta a slow walk since I been in the country."

I laughed, properly.

"And fourteen hens and a pig was stolen not more'n a month or so back. You remember that, Mister Crowley, sir?"

"Sure do," said Jim.

"Had a mighty hard one there, too Mister Donaghan. Took me mighty nigh two weeks to catch the thief. And then I had to turn him out."

"Why?"

"Sheriff's son-in-law, damn it."

I laughed again. Not that it was funny but I could see what the poor guy was try-

ing to do. He had a murder case in front of him—probably the first one he'd ever faced—and he was trying to get his mind off it.

I said: "You mentioned whiskey trouble. I'll bet they still make a lot of that mountain dew in these parts."

I'd walked into that one, fair and square. It was the stock joke in the country—Crowley knew it as well as the local boys.

Wilcox said solemnly: "That's the trouble, Mister Donaghan. That's just the trouble, sir. They just don't make enough of it to go 'round."

While we were laughing at that one, Crowley pulled in back of a brand new Packard, whose lights shone on a group of men down slightly below the side of the road on the right.

One white man and half a dozen colored boys.

We couldn't see the body, which was just below road level . . . and if I hadn't been expecting it I'd have had to look twice to make sure of what it was.

It was smashed up that badly.

CHAPTER II

A Case of News

THE boy had been hit full on and the car that did it must have been going around sixty. I don't think there was a bone in the kid's body that wasn't broken and, as far as his face, he might just as well not have had one. It was smashed so his own people couldn't have told who he was.

Crowley was no detective but he got the proper thought inside of thirty seconds.

"There'll be a badly smashed car near here," he said. "There has to be—no car could hit a man like that without doing itself a lot of damage."

I'd kept quiet—there was no reason for advertising myself as a detective at that time.

Wilcox said: "I think you're right Mister Crowley, sir. You boys, there!"

The colored boys snapped to attention. Wilcox was the law, and when the law speaks in the South, colored people jump—and fast.

"Get up the road. Look at each cut-off. When you see where a car's turned off, you follow them tracks. Keep going until you find a smashed car."

The half dozen gave him yes sirs and trotted up the road, and Wilcox watched them go. He was grinning widely.

He said: "As soon as them boys get around that turn, they'll go into a slow walk. But, by golly, they move while I can see 'em, don't they?"

I said they certainly did.

"Makes it nice, sometimes, for a law man. You got all the free deputies you want. They ain't good for much except errands, but it certain and sure does save a man a lot of steps."

The Packard belonged to the local doctor and he and Crowley and Ellis, the other deputy, were squatting by the body. Wilcox and I joined them.

I said: "How d'ya know this is Hoffenheimer?"

"His clothes," Ellis said. "One of the boys you just saw was comin' down the road and he heard a big smash ahead of him, like. He kep' on comin' and a car passed him, sort of weavin' and slidin'. That'd be the car that hit this kid. The boy says they was jus' one light on and it was sort of cocked up in the air. He could hear a tire hitting a fender, too."

"Did he see what kind of car it was?"

"Un-huh. Too dark. He kept on comin' and by and by he comes here and sees young Hoffenheimer in the ditch. He says he stopped and saw he was dead, but my guess is he high-tailed into town without waitin' for a damn' thing."

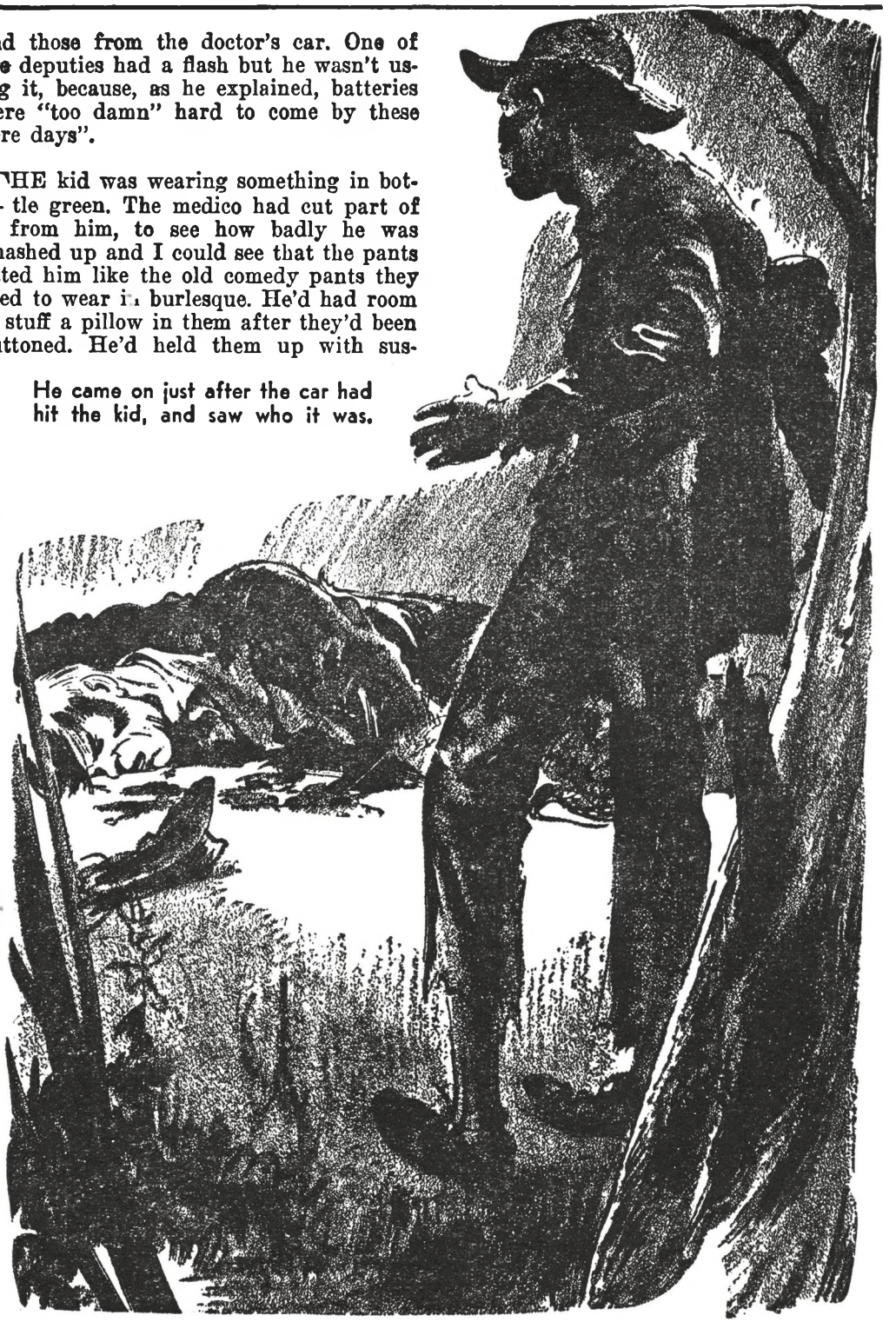
"How did he know it was Hoffenheimer?"

"Worked for Hoffenheimer's old man once, he says. And young Hoffenheimer's wearing his courting suit. Most of them conchies are big guys, too, and Hoffenheimer was a little guy. You take a look, mister, you can see. If a man once saw a suit of clothes like that, would he soon forget it?"

I hadn't noticed, but then the light was poor. Nothing but that from our headlights

and those from the doctor's car. One of the deputies had a flash but he wasn't using it, because, as he explained, batteries were "too damn" hard to come by these here days".

THE kid was wearing something in bottle green. The medico had cut part of it from him, to see how badly he was smashed up and I could see that the pants fitted him like the old comedy pants they used to wear in burlesque. He'd had room to stuff a pillow in them after they'd been buttoned. He'd held them up with sus-



He came on just after the car had hit the kid, and saw who it was.

penders—if he'd used a belt, they'd have been pleated like zoot suit trousers.

The coat was all right except that it must have fitted the kid like a tent. It didn't have any lapels, either, but I never could see any use for them, anyway.

He'd been wearing elastic-sided gaiters instead of shoes, and although he wore a white shirt, he'd worn no necktie.

Crowley said: "I forgot to tell you, Mike. These people are all conscientious objectors. It's not a stall—it's the real thing and the Government recognizes it. Most of them had deferments because of all the farm stuff they were producing, but the two or three that were taken were given hospital work for the duration. That was all right with them—it's just that they don't believe in war."

"What about the clothes?"

Crowley laughed, in spite of being within three feet of the body. "That's another one! They wear sober black all their lives, except when they do their courting. Then they can dress up. They have to go before the council, though, and declare their intention. They have to say they want to go courting and name the gal they're going to court. Then they can buy their store clothes and get at it. But they're saving people and they always send away to mail order houses and buy the cheapest things they can find that'll cover 'em."

"They sound like screwballs."

Wilcox cut in with: "Mister Donaghan, they're as screwy as a set of toads. But they're decent hard-working people, just the same, and we ain't had one mite of trouble since they came to this country."

"How long ago's that been?"

"Maybe twenty, thirty years ago. Before my time, anyway."

"No trouble at all?"

"We been called in a couple of times on account of some daddy laying too much leather on his boy or gal. That's about all. We give 'em a warning and tell the head man we mean business and he takes it in hand and that's all there is to it."

"Head man?"

"They call him the Head Brother. He's the boss man. It's a guy named Howe, right now."

"What'll he do about this?"

WILCOX took off his battered hat and scratched his head. "I don' know," he confessed. "I jus' don't rightly know, Mister Donaghan. You see this is the first time we ever got a killin' since I been here that one of the Brothers was mixed up in. I got a damn' good notion he'll do something, though. Them people stick together like nothin' you ever see in your life. One of 'em has a bad crop and the others divvy with him. Like that they are."

The doctor said: "Speaking of Howe, here he comes now."

I looked up the road and saw a truck coming. It was old and battered but it was a big five tonner.

I asked Crowley, under my breath: "I thought you said they didn't have cars."

"They don't. Cars are foolishness. But trucks are all right—they've got to get their produce to market as fast as the competition. That's business—cars are for pleasure."

I said: "Maybe these people aren't so much chump after all. They make money and they don't spend it. They keep the kids home and make 'em work and they save wages they'd have to pay any help. They let 'em make a little splurge, so they can catch a gal to marry and so raise more kids for cheap labor. It's a good stunt."

Crowley said: "It's one that works and that's the test. Here's Chief-Brother Howe."

Howe had stopped the truck, not bothering because he was blocking the road, and he was leaning from the cab and peering down at us. He looked to be a big man—at least his shoulders looked five feet wide in that dim light. He had a spade beard but no mustache, and his hat was black and wide-brimmed. He could have been a Mennonite, for all I could see of him.

When he spoke, I had a surprise. His voice was a baritone and as smooth and nice as I ever wanted to hear, and he didn't sound like a farmer. And he didn't act like one, either. There was no foolish

question about what we were doing there or about if anything had happened.

He said: "Dead, of course."

The doctor said: "Killed instantly."

"Young Hoffenheimer?"

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Howe."

"Brother Howe, please. Who struck him?"

"We don't know yet," Wilcox broke in with. "We're looking for the car right now."

Howe looked at him and I could see he didn't think much of that particular law and order. He just said, and just as quietly:

"Here?"

"Beg pardon?"

"I asked if you were looking for the car that struck the lad here?"

I could see the red creep up on Wilcox's cheeks even in that light.

He said: "Well, no, not exactly. I got a crew of men out lookin'."

"Sheriff know about this as yet?"

"Sheriff's out of town."

Howe looked at the doctor for a change.

"You're the coroner here, also, aren't you, doctor?"

"Yes, mister, Brother Howe."

"I'll tell his father. When will you hold the inquest?"

"Tomorrow evening, probably."

"You'll notify us, of course."

"Oh yes."

Crowley said: "Have you any idea of why this happened, Brother Howe?"

"An accident, I presume."

Crowley didn't say anything and Howe gave him his full attention. "Do you mean to imply that it is something other than that?"

Crowley nodded.

Howe said: "We may have had differences in the past, Mr. Crowley, but I'd appreciate your telling me what you think of this."

"I think it's murder."

"Will you be in your office this evening?"

"In about half an hour. I'll have to make up a new front page, you see."

"I'll call on you then, if I may."

"Please do, Brother Howe."

THEY both nodded and Howe shoved his truck in gear and kept on toward town. Crowley gave me some explanation—enough to explain what had been said, anyway.

"I ribbed the pants off the Brothers over the hundred and twenty-two grand. I kept it clean but I mentioned that anybody that donated to a campaign fund to elect an unknown ought to have his head examined. That an unknown wouldn't have a chance. It was just common sense—a ten year old child would know it. But the Brothers took the stand that I was interfering with their business and didn't like it. I was, if it comes to that. It was their money they were donating, of course. Brother Howe came to me and pointed that out."

"What then?"

"I admitted it. I told him there should be a law protecting fools against their own folly, though, and I'm afraid he resented that. I also told him they should look up and find just who Klasson was before they turned their dough over to him. And that Klasson, for my money, was no good. And that he didn't have the morals of a cat—and for Howe to take the last personally, because it was aimed right at him and his family."

I knew Crowley had a nasty temper and I could understand him breaking loose, even if it wasn't good sense.

I said: "What did the old gent do then?"

"He left. I didn't tell anything but the truth in the articles, so he couldn't stop them. There were no witnesses to the conversation so he couldn't take action against me for anything I'd said. I think the old boy would have tried to do something by hand, but I'm as big as he is and twenty years younger. He's got brains enough not to try anything that he couldn't win on. But he's smart—he won't hold a grudge if it pays him not to hold it."

"I pegged him that way."

One of the colored men Wilcox had sent up the road came running up then, out of breath and with the whites of his eyes showing in the car lights.

"We found 'im, Mister Wilcox," he said.

"Jus' up the road a piece. The front of it's all smashed in like a busted egg."

"Anybody there?"

"Nossir."

Wilcox looked around at us and nodded. The doctor said he'd be getting back to town and that he'd send the local undertaker out for the body. And he also said that somebody should stay with it until the undertaker got there and Wilcox told the colored boy he'd have the job.

It was then the colored boy backed up in the traces. He said, stoutly, that he'd do anything, anything in the whole world for Mr. Wilcox, but that staying with a dead man was out of the world. That he just couldn't do it—that his feet just wouldn't stand still and let him do it. That they'd take him right down the road, no matter what he said about it.

Crowley said: "I'd stay, of course, but I've got to get back to the shop and get this set up. I go to press in the morning."

His paper came out Tuesdays and Saturdays.

Wilcox said: "I should have Ellis with me."

That left it up to me. I said: "I'll stay, if that undertaker can come out right away. I don't want to spend the night out here with the mosquitoes."

"He'll be right out," the doctor promised.

So Crowley and the doctor drove off toward town, Crowley riding with the medico—and the two deputies drove the other way in Crowley's old rattle-trap.

I stayed with the body—and it was a black, black night.

I'D heard a lot about the quiet peaceful woods but I didn't find them that way. I've been in the woods—that is, I've driven through them in getting from one town to another—but I'm no woodsman, and what goes on there at night is something to hear, even if you can't see it.

There's a lot of rustling and not only in the trees. The bushes move and there's a lot of little noises like squeakings and scurryings going on under them. Crowley, afterward, claimed it was mice and little things like that, but it sounded like something a lot bigger than mice to me. The shadows don't look right. It was dark, so dark that trees and stumps just stood out as a little blacker blotches in the night, but they seemed to shift position when I looked at them for a while. There were owls—I knew enough to know what the noise was they were making—but that's a hell of a thing for a greenhorn to hear when he's alone in the woods for the first time. Some farm house dog, a long ways away, started howling, and that didn't make me feel any better.

I was with a dead man, remember, and worse than that, a murdered man.

It wasn't that I was afraid—I wasn't. I had a gun and I knew how to use it. I wasn't afraid of the dead man—a dead man can't hurt you. It's the live ones you have to watch, and I knew it. It was just that the combination of everything had me as jumpy as a cat and I'm not lying.

The Irish are superstitious people anyway, and Donaghan's a name that isn't Swedish.

I was in a state by the time I'd decided that one of the noises I was hearing wasn't normal. I heard a crashing sound that was three times as loud as anything that had come along that far, and a grunting sound that followed it. Then I heard heavy breathing, not over ten feet from where I sat by the body and I went into action.

I said: "Who's there?"

There wasn't a sound, past a sudden gasping noise.

"Who's there? Speak up or I turn loose."

There wasn't a sound.

I STILL didn't want to shoot anybody but I didn't like the spot I was in. I lined the gun against a tree ten feet to the right of where I'd heard the sound and touched it off, and like a fool I kept my eyes on the gun muzzle when I pulled the trigger. The orange flame that busted out against that blackness blinded me, and all I heard was a lot of crashing noises going away from me fast.

I liked it better that way. I didn't like it alone with the body one damned bit, but

"Yeah, I know him. He's a guy who likes action for his dough."

it was better than having company in my watch.

The ordinary noises stopped still and they stayed that way for about fifteen minutes. All the little squeakings and rustlings stopped, that is—the big rustling from the trees kept on of course. Then everything went gradually back to normal and I got so used to it I even got a little sleepy.

In fact, the only thing that kept me awake was swearing at the undertaker and the time it was taking him to get out there.

About then I began to think I was seeing a light. Up the road, first, then back in the trees. I put it down to nerves and kept on talking about the undertaker, but when I saw it bob and heard a swearing sound go along with the bobbing motion, I knew

it wasn't just my imagination.

I ducked back of a tree, getting down on one knee and with the gun out ready for action. I knew it wouldn't be either of the deputies—they'd have come down the road as they had a right to do.

Now I didn't use my head—anybody used to the woods would have known what to do. I just waited, sweating it out. I should have moved around until I was in a position to cut whoever was coming off from the trees, so as to make him cross the road in front of me when getting away, but I didn't do that. I stayed at the side, along the road. The light was probably fifty yards away when I first made sure it was really that, and I watched it near until it was about ten yards away.

Of course I couldn't see a thing behind it.

The light went out and the man stumbled once while getting to the body. He didn't swear but I could hear him grunt.

And then I said, again: "Speak up or I turn loose."

He must have had a gun all ready in his hand because he was shooting before I got the last word out. It was then I was thankful I was on one knee. The guy was shooting at shoulder height and over me. He cut loose three times and, at that distance it was both deadening and blinding—that orange cone from the gun muzzle was all I could see.

I lined up with it by the feel of the gun and turned loose back at him. Just once. I heard him fall and jumped for him, and I'd covered ten of the twenty odd feet between us when he snapped the light back on and full in my face.

And he shot at the same time.

CHAPTER III

Motive for Murder

THE undertaker was a chubby little man with eyeglasses, and all I could see was light shining on these when I woke up. Wilcox and Ellis were there and they had the lights from Crowley's car and the undertaker's hearse on me, as well as that from a big five-celled flashlight the undertaker had had brains enough to bring along with him.

The undertaker said: "Hagh, coming out of it, eh? I thought I was going to have a nice fresh customer when I saw you laying there, mister. Ha, ha, ha!"

Wilcox said: "You got creased, Mister Donaghan."

"An inch lower and you'd be as dead as young Hoffenheimer," his partner, Ellis, put in.

I could barely hear them. My head was ringing like one big bell. I put up a hand to the top of my head, where the ache seemed centered, and found it piled with bandages, and I could feel sticky, gummy blood around the edges of this.

The undertaker apologized with: "I didn't have any water to work with, mister. Just what was in the emergency can I carry for the car, in case I should get stuck on some back road. I just clipped the hair around it and taped on a pad, but it'll do until we can get you back to the doctor."

I said that was fine but it took me three times before I could get the words out. My tongue just didn't seem to track.

The undertaker noticed this, too, and said I probably had a bit of concussion and that it would last for a couple of days. He told this to Wilcox and Ellis, speaking over my head as though I wasn't there.

I tried to stand up but found I couldn't. They told me I'd have to ride back in the hearse, though, and I managed to talk enough to tell them nothing doing—that I'd ride back in the car or stay there. That I wasn't riding with any corpse.

They soothed me down on that and I found that I could keep on talking.

"The guy came twice," I said. "Or maybe it was two different people. Once over on that side, and once in through the woods. I shot at the first guy and he beat it—I didn't say anything, either. But the second guy started the ball rolling—he blasted at me three times before I even shot back."

"You see him?"

That was Wilcox, quivering like a hound.

"I did not. I was all fouled up by the

light he was using. I couldn't see behind it."

Wilcox said: "We heard the shooting when we was up the road. That is, this second one. It sounded like a battle. You say you shot at somebody else?"

"Or maybe at the same guy. Maybe he ran that first time and turned around and came back."

"Not likely. You say he came in from that side?"

"Yeah. Over there."

WILCOX took the flash and went the way I'd pointed. And then I heard him start to snicker. Ellis and the undertaker joined them and the undertaker started to just roar. He was even wiping his eyes when he came back.

He said: "Mister, the people around here turn their hogs loose to graze. You took a shot at one of them pigs. A big one, too, by the size of the tracks. You scared it as bad as it scared you—them tracks are four feet apart, where it took off."

It might have been funny but it wasn't to me.

"It wasn't any hog that second time, mister."

"Indeed no."

Wilcox said: "I'd say, Mr. Donaghan, it was a man about five foot ten and weighing close to two hundred pounds that shot you. I'm judging by the size of the foot prints, taking for granted the ——wore shoes that fitted him. He was wearing number nines —I do and my foot fits those tracks, figuring a difference in the shoe last, of course. That puts him about that height. Ellis, here, weighs two hundred and five and he sinks in just about as far as the fella did. I don't—I weigh one seventy-five. You see?"

That was a branch of sleuthing I didn't know anything about. You don't get that sort of thing with a city practice.

I said: "Nice going. That's a new one."

"It's not new to any country sheriff."

"What about the car?"

Ellis said: "Brand new Chevvy—that is, the last model that was sold before the war stopped sales. It belongs to a guy up in that settlement—a guy named Ollie Ressler. Reported stolen over the phone, an hour before this thing broke. We gave it to the State cops and they put it out over the teletype, but it looks like the car never got out of the country."

"Smashed bad?"

"Front end caved in. Bumper bent and the radiator shell shoved back into the radiator so it won't hold water. Pump connections broken. One light just hanging by the wiring and the other pointing up at the sky. Right fender back on the wheel and the running board on that side buckled pretty bad. Frame probably sprung. Even hitting a man at a speed like it must have been going don't do a frame any good."

"The guy driving it was certainly taking a chance."

Wilcox said thoughtfully: "Ellis and me were talking about that, Mr. Donaghan. Not so much of a chance, when you figure it out. Them cars have unbreakable glass in the windshield. There was no chance of shattering it. He was expecting the shock and was braced for it. He was on a straight road—even with a smash like that he could still hold the car on it. No! When you figure it out, he wasn't taking too much of a chance."

"Check the car for prints?"

"No equipment. The State men will do it tomorrow. I left a couple of them boys there to watch it tonight and told them to keep the hell out of it. I told 'em why —they won't bother a thing. But it won't do a bit of good."

I didn't think it would either, but I waited for him to tell me why.

He ended with, and gloomily: "Hell, man, everybody in this world knows about fingerprints. The guy'd wipe 'em off the first thing he did after parking the car."

CROWLEY lived about half a block from the newspaper office and Wilcox let me off there—it was then about half past two. And Crowley was on the screened front porch, waiting for me. He had a bottle and ice and glasses ready and he sounded worried when he spoke.

"It took you long enough," he said. "I was beginning to think of organizing a

rescue squad, but you had all the local law out there with you."

I came into the light then and he saw the taped pad on my head.

"What's happened, Mike?"

"I got shot. Wilcox is going to get the doctor up and have him over here to fix this better. This was done by the local ghoul."

"My good Lord! What happened?"

"The guy came back. Or I take it that way. Nobody else would have had any reason for sneaking up like that."

I told him what had happened and why I thought the man who'd come back was the same one who'd driven the murder car.

I said: "He didn't have time to stop when he hit the kid. He had to keep on going and ditch the car. So he came back to make sure the kid didn't have anything in his pockets."

"You think he knew the body had been found?"

"Sure. But he probably didn't know anybody was waiting by it. He came up easy, just to play it safe."

"And you didn't see him?"

"Hell, no."

"That'll be Klasson."

I said that if Klasson was the killer, it seemed likely.

"The Chief-Brother had quite a talk with me."

"What did you find out?"

"Nothing. He's smooth—he pumped me instead of the other way around."

I didn't believe that and said so. Crowley was too long in the newspaper business to let a farmer work him like that and I knew it.

Crowley said: "Well, it was fifty-fifty at that, I guess. He told me Klasson hasn't been around for four days. He was due back yesterday, to make a report."

"About what?"

"About the money. It's in a Norfolk bank."

"Is the Chief-Brother sure of that?"

"He is not. It was too late to find out for sure though, tonight."

I said: "Well, if they're fool enough to put up that kind of dough, for that kind of purpose, to that kind of guy, they deserve to lose it."

"I told them that in the paper, or words to that effect."

"He still sore at you?"

"No. He asked me about his kid, too. What I'd heard about her. About whether there was talk about the kid having an affair with Klasson."

"And?"

"I told him the truth. I said there was just plenty of talk—that the two of them had been seen together. Parked alongside the road and all that. Visiting the same people here in town at the same time. You know—the kid would drop in for a call on some pal—and by and by Klasson would drop in, too. It's an old gag."

THE doctor came up then, dressed in a pair of pants and a pajama top and slippers. He skidded his car into a fast stop in front of the place and dashed up the steps with his little black bag as though he was going to a fire. He came to a dead stop when he saw us sitting calmly on the porch, sipping highballs, and his face reddened and his jaw dropped down until his chin was on his chest.

"I'll be damned," he said.

"Join us, doc," said Crowley.

The doctor looked at me. "Hey!" he said. "You're supposed to be in bad shape. Concussion and what not. A gash in your head you could lay a pencil in and all that."

"That undertaker takes the long view of things, doctor. I'm not hurt—just a little touch. Just enough to put me out for a few minutes and to give me a headache."

He shook his head and made clucking noises and put his bag down. I noticed he took the drink that Crowley made up for him, though, with no argument and before he looked at my head.

"That damn' undertaker pounded on my door and told me you were at death's door, Mr. er, is it Donaghan?"

"It's Donaghan, doctor."

"Well, a friend of Jim Crowley's a friend of mine. Let's take a look at that."

He took the tape and pad off my nog-

He was shooting then, before I'd got the last word out.

gin, pulling a bunch of hair while doing it, and told me the undertaker had done a neat job, considering he hadn't had anything to work with. The cut wasn't deep and only about four inches long.

He clipped more hair and shaved me a bit and put on a little prettier bandage, and then that was over.

Jim already had another drink set and ready for him. And the doctor reached for it with an ease that showed a lot of practice.

"Thanks," he said. "Oh damn' this being a doctor! Up all hours and when you go to bed, you can't sleep from fretting about some patient who you know isn't worrying in the least. It's hell to have a conscience."

I said that I'd never been bothered with one and that I didn't think Crowley kept awake at night fretting over his—or his lack of one.

Crowley said: "You're not local, doc, and maybe we can talk it over. I mean this Hoffenheimer affair. It smells all over the place."

THE doctor didn't pretend not to know what Crowley was talking about. He said: "You mean Klasson and the Howe kid, of course. I'll tell you, Jim, the kid wasn't killed because Klasson was jealous of him. There was more to it than that. I wouldn't put it past Klasson, this killing, I mean, but jealousy wasn't back of it. He was just playing around with the Howe kid while she was serious."

"I figured that," Crowley said. "Through what Howe said tonight, if nothing else. And Klasson's at least thirty-five and the kid isn't over twenty."

"Seventeen," said the doctor. "I know. I delivered her—I should know."

We agreed he'd know if anybody would. And Crowley said thoughtfully: "There'll be something to hold Klasson on if all else fails. Contributing to the delinquency of a minor. And that's tough in this State—that's going against Southern womanhood, gents, and they really go to town on that."

"What did Howe admit?" the doctor asked.

"Nothing. He acted worried, though."

"Are the police looking for Klasson?"

"I don't know. They didn't say. You know anything about that, Mike?"

I said: "They're going to pick him up for questioning—I know that. Wilcox said that, but that's all he said. They can't put a charge against him—they haven't got a thing on him. Maybe it wasn't him—there's nothing to show it was."

"I met Klasson," the doctor said. "I guess everybody in the country did, for that matter. That was a man that got around. Somehow I didn't think he was the murdering type."

Crowley said it or I would have.

He said: "Doc, for a hundred and twenty-two grand, just about any man on the street's a killer. That's a rule and don't forget it."

The doctor said he'd bear it in mind.

CHAPTER IV

A Smooth Article

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA, is just a town too big for its size. There's just too many people—four hundred odd thousand of them in a town built for a hundred and fifty or sixty thousand. The hotels are jammed at all times. The rooming houses the same way. They have State owned liquor stores so the bars can only sell beer and wine, but the bars are jammed to the doors after seven in the evening. For that matter, almost any afternoon.

The town's wild on prices, too—in spite of the OPA. Beer's five and ten cents a bottle more than any other place, except the beach towns around there, and while restaurant meals are reasonable enough in most places, the portions are cut to the bone. And the town's a dingy dirty place—an old town and in poor repair, for the most part.

Of course it's full of Navy—Portsmouth's just across from it by ferry and Newport News is just across Hampton Roads. Both Portsmouth and Norfolk have shipyards, and big ones, and that puts war workers in the town. As well as every other industry that's been converted to war work.

It's a tough town and a good place to keep a buttoned-up lip. Phoebus, which ranks with Panama City and Long Beach, California, as a tough Navy town, is right up the line from there, which should give you an idea of how many Shore Patrols there are on the streets—and the Navy isn't putting out Patrols unless there's a need for them.

All in all a funny place—and a new one to me.

Not so to Crowley. He knew the news-

men there and they knew him, either personally or by reputation. One of the papers had run his column, for that matter. He knew a bunch of bootlegging and gambling joints—all newspapermen do—and he even knew a pal of his that had a spare bedroom for us.

This was a guy named Eldridge, that worked for the *Pilot*, the morning paper. A nice guy, about thirty, and married to one of the prettiest women I ever saw in my life.

And one of the nicest—she took us in and acted as though we were doing them a favor by visiting like that.

Crowley didn't tell Eldridge what we were there for, not because of trying to spear a bit of news for his semi-weekly or anything like that, but because the thing could cause trouble for an outsider. It could cause trouble for us and we knew it and discounted it, but putting an innocent bystander in the front wasn't reasonable.

Jim was planning on giving Eldridge the yarn, when it broke of course, but until then we planned on working it out alone. And neither of us thought that finding Klasson would be much of a trick, if he was in town. If we were right about him taking the money, he'd be spending it—and a man working with a hundred odd thousand dollars, fast money like that and spent the same way as it would be, would leave a path behind him ten feet wide.

The bank gave us no dope at all and we had to go to Eldridge for help on that. Eldridge, through the paper of course, knew some of the bank men though, and he got the information for us with no trouble. The money had been taken out in cash—and the paying teller had remembered all about it because of the size of the withdrawal. And it hadn't been Klasson who'd taken the money—the teller was sure of that. It had been drawn by an Englishman named Colclough, and he'd had to show the bank plenty of information on himself before they'd given him the dough.

Just on the normal bank routine, that is. They'd had no reason to think anything wrong and hadn't; it was just that banks don't pay out a hundred and twenty-two thousand dollars in cash without finding out who they're paying it to.

COLCLOUGH was six feet four and did not weigh more than a hundred and fifty pounds. Just a string bean. He wore an eyeglass, and the teller remembered he'd talked as though his mouth were full of mush. He'd had papers from the British Embassy in Washington showing he was in the States on a war mission. He was an Oxford graduate. He was vouched for, that is by letter, by one general and two full colonels in our own army—men who'd known him overseas. He had a war record that was really impressive—he'd been in some guard regiment over there from Dunkirk on, and was only out because of wounds received in action.

He'd made quite an impression with the bank people—anybody who draws out better than a hundred thousand in cash usually does. But they didn't have a suspicion that he wasn't all right—and that's what Crowley and I were looking for.

We made a routine check on Vanderwort, too. The Brothers of Man's candidate for President. It turned out he was a decent enough guy—a big farmer up in Pennsylvania—with no more chance of even being mentioned in the primaries than I had. He'd have taken the Brothers' vote solidly—and nobody but they had even heard of him.

We didn't think he knew anything about the campaign fund raised for him, even. Crowley got this dope through one of the Pennsylvania papers—he got anything and everything he wanted that way because of his connections . . . and getting the stuff on the bank withdrawal and on Vanderwort hadn't taken him six hours. We were ready to start looking for Klasson and Colclough by noon of the second day we were in Norfolk.

And what a look we made of it.

WE picked up Colclough in Jimmy Morrison's place. Morrison, a fat little man with a beaming grin, was an old pal of Crowley's, and ran a fairly nice little gambling spot. Two open poker

"Hold it quiet," the man said. "This thing scatters."

games, with a houseman taking a rakeoff, one crap game, and two blackjack set-ups at the side. He sold no liquor, claiming he was taking enough chances without fooling with the State Alcoholic Board of Control—Virginia's ABC thing. He paid off the cops on the gambling, which made it safe enough—but if he'd started paying off the liquor enforcement men, he'd have been poor and he knew it.

He said: "Yeah, he gives me a play now and then. Heavy dough, too—he don't stay long enough when he comes, but he gets action with his dough from the time he comes in the door."

"He come alone?" asked Crowley.

"So far he has."

Crowley described Klasson. "Would you remember, Jimmy, a big, redfaced man of around thirty-five? A big diamond on his left hand middle finger. Swell looking clothes, usually dark and quiet-looking. Hair just starting to turn at his temples, but blonde for the rest of it. A good talker —not loud but convincing. A heavy drinker but carries it well—he'd be drinking when

he came in, for sure."

"That would fit half a dozen guys that give me a play."

"Named Klasson, Jimmy. He talks with a very faint accent—claims he's Holland Dutch."

Morrison shook his head.

"He'd come in with this Englishman, maybe."

Morrison objected: "This Colclough always came in by himself. I've told you that."

Crowley sighed and said we'd get a line on Klasson somewhere else, and again told Morrison that we'd keep hushed about what he'd told us. We went out the door—his place was at the edge of town, on a road leading toward the beach, and just as we started to get in Crowley's old car, a cab pulled up.

And Crowley said: "By the Lord Harry!"

I was thinking along the same lines. The girl that was getting out from the cab was a honey. A little wench—weighing not more than a hundred pounds. Barely five feet tall, just a small edition of sweetheart.

Light blonde hair, and with it looking as though she'd just stepped out of a beauty shop. Make-up just right—just enough to bring her out and not enough to kill the kid effect she gave. I don't know anything about women's clothes, but the dress this one was wearing must have cost just plenty—it fitted like the paper on the wall, and she had what it took to be fitted. High heels, not the spike kind but the kind that look well.

She looked to be about twenty-two or

three, with a year for allowance either way—and she looked smart and big city all over the place.

I said: "A honey! When I'm rich, I'm going to buy 'em in sets, just like that. I'll use her for a sample."

Crowley said: "It's Mandy!"

"Mandy?"

"Amanda Howe."

I REMEMBERED what I'd been told about Chief-Brother Howe having a daughter, but this couldn't be the kid and I said so. The Howe kid would be country—she'd have to be. This gal was anything but country—this was a smart city kid and it stuck out all over her.

I said: "You're slipping, Crowley. This babe's got class."

Crowley was out of our car by then. He went to the girl and stood in front of her, not saying a word.

The girl said: "Why, Mr. Crowley! Imagine us meeting here like this!"

"Just imagine!" said Jim, not moving.

The girl waited for him to say something more and he kept quiet. And she proved then she was just a kid and a little over her depth, because she got flustered and said too much and said it too fast.

"I—I came down from Melville to visit a friend. Isn't it odd that we should meet like this?"

"Not if we're looking for the same friend," Jim told her.

"But who would that be? I mean, well, Mr. Crowley, you'd hardly know the people I know, that's what I mean."

Jim nodded toward Morrison's place, which was a fairly big house and set back away from the road.

"It wouldn't be Morrison that's the friend, would it, Mandy?"

"Oh, no. Oh, no, of course not."

"Klasson?"

"Oh, no."

"Dad down with you?"

"Oh, no."

"Alone?"

"Why, yes. I—I came down to visit this girl friend of mine. We went to school together, you see, Mr. Crowley, and we visit back and forth quite a bit."

Crowley stepped back away from her. He said: "Well, no doubt Morrison can put you in touch with her. Be seeing you, Mandy."

He got back in the car and when we drove away, she was standing on the sidewalk, staring after us.

She didn't look happy about it, either.

Jim said: "How the kid ever got away from her old man I'll never know."

"He that tough?"

"Tougher."

"But she said she'd been away to school."

"Sure. That's different. He picked the school."

"She learned something, Jimmy."

Crowley suddenly laughed. He said: "I'd give a pretty if her old man could see her now. She must have had clothes parked down here—he wouldn't let her get on a bus, dressed like that. And chasing Klasson like this—why Chief-Brother would go nuts."

"You're sure she's chasing Klasson?"

"What else? He's ducked her and she's on the trail."

I said: "I've got a hunch. I've got a notion we should telephone the Chief-Brother about this. It's his money we're looking for, which makes one count, and this gal of his in the picture makes a second. I think he should know about her being here."

"Why, Mike?"

"It would stir things up. The kid might find this Klasson."

"Well? What if she does?"

"I'd like her old man to be here, if she does."

Crowley thought of it and said he'd put in the call when we went back to Eldridge's place.

DOMINION BEACH is out of Norfolk to the south, about twenty miles away. A fair beach, set between two big camps, and probably a nice little town during the war. Just like Norfolk—too many soldiers and too many war workers for the size of the place.

It had been a tourist trap for three months in the year, the years before Pearl Harbor, and Crowley told me that open

gambling was an accepted thing during those months—and that they cleaned house the minute the season slackened.

And that the cops made theirs during those three months the joints ran wide open, and so were an easy bunch to work with the rest of the time.

Albert Ringer was the boss gambler, it seemed. He owned three beach clubs, all of them with gambling rooms in the back—and he controlled the other dozen places that ran. One horse parlor, with a track wire and phone service—two pool rooms where they took bets on the races and anything else—and about twenty bootlegging spots. He didn't own them all but he held a working interest in them.

Where Norfolk spots were scattered through different owners, Ringer's town was centralized, and Crowley thought we'd do better in going directly to the head man.

I didn't know a thing about either Norfolk or the Beach and had no opinions at all in the matter.

Jim said: "This man Ringer is funny. He acts like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, but he killed three men during Prohibition that I know of. He stood trial on it and came out clear with a self-defense plea. The three tried to hi-jack him out of a load of hootch, and he took 'em bang-bang-bang. He talks like a preacher and he looks like an actor but don't let him fool you."

I said I'd be expecting something.

"He's a hard man to find, Mike. And I'm not sure just what I'm going to tell him when I find him."

"Why not give him the set-up?"

Crowley said scornfully: "With a hundred grand mixed up in it? Don't be silly. He'd go all out for the dough and we'd get what the little boy shot at."

"Why would he bother? Hasn't he got the gambling sewed up?"

"Money's money, in Ringer's book, Mike. Any kind of money."

This was funny. Usually, when a man's got a town like that, he don't want strange crooks hanging around. They hot it up for him too much. The cops can't let a stranger go, like they can a local man—and when the stranger's picked up, it gets the town newspaper notice.

So the local man usually will throw the stranger to the cops, just as fast as he can do it. I told this to Crowley, which wasn't necessary as Crowley knew it as well as I did.

Jim said: "But Al Ringer's different. He don't go by the book, Mike—not in any way. Wait and see."

It was then a little after three in the afternoon. We landed in the beach before four, had one drink at a place called the Officer's Club, another at one called the Blue Moon, and another at one called the Goose. This one was supposedly a hunting club, but the members didn't seem to be hunting anything but a little whiskey to drink.

We were hunting Ringer, though, and we found him here.

The barman jerked a thumb over his shoulder and said: "Al's in the office. But whether or not he's busy, I wouldn't know, bud."

"Tell him it's Jim Crowley, will you? He knows me—tell him Associated Press, if he doesn't remember."

The barman made good Collinses and he turned out a couple more for us before he drifted toward the back room. I was facing away from it when Ringer came out, and the first I knew he was speaking from behind me.

"Well, Jimmy boy!" this voice said. "Well, fella! I thought you'd dropped off the earth—I haven't seen you since Heck was a pup."

Jim said: "Hiya, Al! This is Mike Donaghan—Al Ringer, Mike."

I turned and shook hands with a guy that could have doubled for Lewis Stone in movies. The same white brushed moustache. The same mannerly, slightly bored way of talking. The same gray hair brushed back in the same fashion. The same beautifully tailored clothes and way of wearing them. The man looked like he belonged on Fifth Avenue, rather than in a crooked little beach town.

He gave me just one look and said: "Hagh, an eye! Don't tell me you're needing a private eye, Jimmy lad."

I don't look more like a private cop than anything else, but I might as well have had my license pinned to my coat. It takes brains to spot a man like that, and I gave Ringer credit for them, then and there.

Jim said: "I'm acting like a family friend, Al. Mike and I are pals from the old days and I called him in. I'm acting for a man named Howe—ever hear of the name?"

"Not that I recall."

"From up my way?"

Ringer said: "The last you were in any of my places, Jimmy, you were out of the city on a vacation. You'd just come back from across—I remember we were talking about the time you had getting a priority on clipper passage over from Spain. That'll be two, maybe three years ago."

"Know a man named Klasson?"

"Un-huh. Not that I remember."

"Colclough? Basil Colclough?"

Ringer shook his head. I was watching his eyes and couldn't tell a thing by them—he could have been lying or telling the truth and there wasn't a quiver in his face to say which way it was. He had beautiful teeth and his happy smile didn't change in the least. His eyebrows or eyelids didn't jerk, and the color in his cheeks didn't alter either way.

CROWLEY said, making it confidential: "It's a sort of mess, Al, and I could use a bit of help. Girl trouble, you see, and the girl's old man is keeping out of it to save scandal. If he appeared, why, the old ladies in our town would know their suspicions were right, and the kid would be ruined for the rest of her life. You can understand."

"Certainly. What's your town, Jimmy boy?"

"Melville. Over the line in Carolina. A little place."

Ringer nodded and said he'd heard of the town. Crowley told him about owning the paper there, and let it be understood that he'd stepped into the scandal because of being such a good friend of the poor little girl's family.

"Under age?" asked Ringer.

"Just seventeen."

"Will the father make charges?"

"Oh, no. He wants the guy to marry the girl. There'll be no squawk. When I find him, I'll just tell the old man, and he'll do the rest."

"With a shotgun?"

Crowley laughed and admitted: "There might be a little persuasion. I wouldn't know."

Ringer and I laughed, too.

"Which is the man? This Klasson or this Colclough?"

"Klasson. Colclough's just a friend. I've got a hunch I can find Klasson through him, that's all."

Ringer said: "I'll pass the word around, Jimmy boy. We'll see what we ean do about it—I'll help any way I can."

Crowley said he'd depended on that and Ringer told the barman that drinks were on the house for us from that time on, and went back to his office.

Crowley said: "That tore it. I should have known better."

"Known what better?"

"Known he wouldn't go for a yarn like that."

It hadn't been much of a story but I thought it had clicked, at that. It was just screwy enough to be believed, I thought. I told Jim this but he shook his head gloomily.

"Not so," he said. "Al Ringer can smell a dime farther than the average man can smell a dead horse. He knows better."

"What difference will it make?"

Crowley didn't know the answer to that one and admitted it.

CHAPTER V

Ambush

BASIL COLCLOUGH was just as thin as a man can be and still navigate under his own power. He was way up over six feet high, this in spite of being stooped and carrying his head pitched well forward, and he didn't look as though he was more than six inches thick. He didn't have any shoulders—his body seemed to slope from his neck into his waist, with his arms just tacked on the sides.

He wore a monocle, had buck teeth and probably adenoids, and looked like the Englishman in the comic strips.

I wasn't fooled. When a man carries a commission in one of England's Guard regiments, he's no cream-puff.

He was in Al Ringer's Dominion Club, one of the beach places, and Al had sounded very pleased about locating him when he'd phoned us at the Goose, where we were still having a drink or so.

"Got one of them for you," he'd said. "The Englishman. And you can't take him out of here too soon to suit me."

"What's the matter?" Crowley asked.

"He's hitting my game. He's ahead about eight hundred, right now."

Crowley said we'd be right there and the barman called a cab for us. We paid a buck to ride three blocks and a half and we spotted Colclough the instant we came through the door.

He was at the crap table and he was betting the house was wrong. He was putting down hundred dollar bills to back himself, too—and the house was coming in second to him. He had at least three thousand dollars in hundred dollar bills in his left hand—just folded the long way and held loose. He was betting the house wrong and taking any side bets as well, and I noticed he was laying the right odds as though he'd been shooting craps all his life.

Ringer met us at the door and looked very unhappy. "He's into me now better than fourteen hundred," he said. "I can stop him but I don't like to run queer dice in the game. I got a couple of good customers in that game and they don't like the fast stuff."

I said: "We'll handle it."

I moved in on Colclough's right and Jim took the same spot on his other side. He turned and gave me a blank look from the eye that wasn't covered with glass and when he spoke, he sounded like old Dobbin. It was more like a neigh than regular talk.

"I say," he said. "But you're pushing, my man."

"That's not me," I said. "That's what's in my pocket."

"Oh, I say!"

"I'll say it. It's a gun. Walk to the door now. Never mind your hat."

"Are you an officer?"

"That's right."

"I refuse to leave these premises. I say there, owner!"

Ringer came over, walking as if the floor was covered with egg shells.

"I say, there! This man is trying to take me from here at the point of a gun."

"I'd go then," Ringer said. "You'll have to kill your own rats, mister. I've got troubles of my own."

Somebody else said: "I'll take care of this, Crowley!"

I'D been watching Colclough—you never can tell about a long stringy guy like that. Sometimes they can move like greased lightning. Now I looked over past Crowley and saw Chief-Brother Howe, still with his beard but somehow not looking like a farmer. For one thing he was dressed in what the boys wear in the Easter Parade, and for another he acted as though he was right at home.

Crowley said: "Hey, you, Howe!"

It sounded funny.

Howe said: "I'll take care of this man."

He reached past Crowley and got his hand on Colclough's arm and he must have put out a lot of pressure in that grip. Anyway, Colclough whitened and dropped the monocle from his eye, and it splintered on the tile floor of the club.

Colclough said: "I don't know you, sir."

"You will," Howe told him.

"We'll give a hand," Crowley said. "You know, of course, why we wanted him."

"You'll not interfere, please," Howe said. "Come on, you."

He marched Colclough toward the door and we stood there and watched it. Ringer said: "That was neat—I take it that's the father."

"Been busy on the phone this afternoon, Al?" Crowley asked.

"Why, Jimmy boy?"

Crowley laughed.

"Well, maybe I did put in a call or two or three," Ringer said. "Why didn't you

boys come out with it? Why not cut me in? We can work together—this one isn't Klasson and Klasson's the one that's got the money."

I said: "There isn't any Klasson. Not any more. You've figured that, Ringer, the same as I have."

"Well, yes."

We'd both passed Jim Crowley on that one. He looked puzzled and Ringer explained.

"Klasson, from what I hear, is the one that touched those farmers for the dough. Right?"

"Right."

"He cut this bird in for some reason, then. This is the guy that took the dough from the bank—the first real proof of anything being sour about the whole collection business. Right?"

"Well, yes. The money wasc given in good faith and until it was taken from the bank, Klasson could always claim he'd collected it the same way."

"Sure. Then this bird takes it out. You figure it out. Cut a hundred and twenty grand in two and what have you got. Just half. And who'd give a damn about Klasson."

"You think this man Colclough's killed him?"

"Sure. And I think as soon as it comes out that your Melville cops are looking for Klasson for murder, Klasson's body will turn up. That'll answer everything. The cops will have that kid's hit and run death solved. They'll have the killer's body. They won't work too hard in finding who did the guy in—they're human, as much as policemen can be that way."

"You've got it figured pretty close," Crowley said. "I hadn't thought about Klasson being out of the way."

"I talked to some hick cop named Wilcox," Ringer said. "He and another one named Ellis will be down tonight. They've got a warrant out for Klasson on that hit and run thing, but they'll never serve it on him or I'm all wrong."

"What are you after, Al? The money?"

"At least a part of it."

CROWLEY and I had talked this out but Crowley didn't say what we'd decided on. He said: "The thing is that it's getting complicated. I could figure this Colclough in the picture—I've got an idea of just how he fits in. But old man Howe don't jibe. Neither does the kid. She's in town, too, Al."

Ringer looked surprised. He said: "You mean there actually was something between the girl and Klasson? That that wasn't just a stall you gave me?"

"It wasn't a stall. She's down here looking for him."

"What about the father? Is he here because of the daughter or because of the money?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"What do you think, Donaghan? This should be right down your alley."

I said: "Mister Ringer, I can put you in this right where you belong. I know something about rackets and racket guys. I can put Klasson in the thing—I've seen promoters, and plenty. I can even put Colclough in the picture. He's harder to place but both Jim and I have placed him. But as far as this man Howe's concerned, your guess is as good as mine."

"Is he honest?"

Crowley shrugged. "There's some larceny in every heart, Ringer. You should know that."

"Is he nuts about his kid?"

"I'd say so."

"Is she—well, let's say in trouble?"

Crowley shrugged and said he hadn't the least idea—and that the kid had been the one who'd done the chasing, rather than Klasson. And that Klasson had been a halfway smart man and that possibly he'd kept away from the girl as a matter of policy.

Crowley didn't believe this last nor did I. But it was a possibility and we'd taken it into consideration.

"D'ya think this man Howe can make Colclough talk? That he can find out about Klasson through him?"

I said: "Look, Ringer! Howe's a tough old rooster but he's strictly amateur. Colclough's a tough guy and strictly professional. Colclough will tell him just as much

as he thinks Howe should hear and that's all. That's a guy that won't bluff."

"He went out with him easy enough."

I laughed. "He'd rather go with Howe than with either Crowley or me. Crowley's seen enough stuff on the other side to turn him a little sour, mister. He wouldn't take much urging to get rough. And it's my business to be that way. This man Colclough took that in one thought and went with Howe because of it."

"He's got a fine war record," Ringer said thoughtfully.

Crowley and I looked at each other but we let it pass. Crowley said: "You must have been just as busy as a little bee on that damned phone, Al."

Ringer said: "I've got friends in Norfolk, too. Even in the banks there. I would not be surprised if I talked to the same man in the bank that you did."

Neither Crowley nor I would have been surprised either.

ELDRIDGE'S house was in a nice little sub-division between Dominion Beach and Norfolk proper, and it was a little after ten before Jim and I drove in there. We'd had dinner and a few drinks afterwards and we'd made the rounds of Ringer's places with him, more to be doing something than anything else. Neither of us expected to see Colclough again that night, and although Ringer had got busy on the phone and found that Chief Brother Howe was registered at the Vernon, in Norfolk, we thought we'd leave him alone until the following day.

The girl wasn't registered under her own name in any of the better places, although that didn't necessarily mean she wasn't there under an alias. And she could have been telling the truth about having a girl friend in the town—no reason why she shouldn't have had.

The lights were on, both on the porch and in the front room, and as we parked the car, Jim said: "I guess maybe the Eldridges are having company."

I said that seemed likely and we started up the walk. Then a man stepped out from the bushes behind us and said: "Hold it quiet, boys! This thing scatters, sort of."

I'd heard him before he spoke and had half turned. I saw he was holding a Model '97 Winchester pump gun, one with the barrel sawed off to about eighteen inch length. He wasn't lying one bit when he said it would scatter.

I said: "Okay, guy! I've got about twenty bucks on me, that's all."

Crowley said: "I'll go clipped for ten. Sorry, mister, you should have caught us before we went out playing around."

"It's no hold-up."

I'd been afraid it wasn't. I said: "Who are you working for? This isn't going to get anybody one damn' thing."

"You ain't the judge, sonny boy."

He whistled then between his teeth, and it was so loud and shrill I jumped a foot straight in the air. And the guy was as nervous as I was. When I came down, he had that 12-guage lined on my middle and he had the hammer back on it.

I said: "Boy! You scared me."

"Don't jump like that, mister. This is something new to me—I'm sort of nervous."

THE door opened and two more men came out. They were on that lighted porch and I got a fair look at them but I'd never seen either of them before in my life. Nor had Jim Crowley—he muttered as much to me.

One said reprovingly to the shotgun man: "You should have let 'em walk right in, Sam. There's no need of stopping them—you was just here in case they started a run-out."

"Cry, cry, cry," said Sam. "Don't I ever do nothing right?"

"Not often."

This was apparently the boss—a short, dark, slim little man. He was around forty, needed a shave badly, and had the kind of beard that would need shaving ten minutes after he'd had one. He had a scar running down over one cheekbone and talked with an accent I couldn't place. Just a trace of one—not enough to catch.

First I thought Greek, then knew I was wrong. But I knew it was around that

part of the world somewhere in Southern Europe.

The other man said nothing, just teetered back and forth on his heels and stared at us. He had a silly sort of grin on his face and I decided he was drunk—or if not drunk, not quite bright. He was big, slack-jawed, and his white shirt hadn't been changed for too many days. He wore a coat as dirty and kept both thumbs hooked in his belt while he rocked on worn out shoes that should have been thrown away.

The thin man, the boss, said: "Search 'em, Dobie!"

The big man came down to us and I could smell garlic and some liquor that I didn't place for a second. Then I got it.

I said: "That mastica's all right, but I'm damned if I like it second hand."

Crowley said: "Greek?"

The guy grunted something in a language I didn't know and the thin man on the porch broke in.

"His name's Dobranovitch and he's not Greek. He's a Bulgar."

Mastica's a Greek drink but I suppose they drink it all through that part of the country. Though I had a notion that Bulgarians went for prune brandy, something called slipovitch or something like that.

I said: "Okay, mister. I'd like to know how Colclough got away from Howe, but I suppose we'll find out."

I was ahead of Crowley on that one, too. I heard him grunt as he figured out my reasoning.

The thin man said: "I think, mister, you know too damn' much now. What you think?"

"A shooting here won't help your side. We're here with the cops, mister, and they know what we're here for."

"That I do not believe."

"Ask Colclough."

"Why not ask Klasson?" he asked, in turn.

I laughed and he scowled at me and then spoke to the shotgun man. "Dobie's got this one's gun. The other one has none. You and Dobie take them in their own car—I will follow in ours."

"No, no," said the shotgun man. "That I won't do. This guy is too smart—I don't know nothing about this gun business and you know it."

"Dobie will be with you."

"Nuts! He don't even know what day it is. You come and let Dobie drive the car."

"He is drinking too much. The police would stop him maybe, and they'd take him down if they did."

"We'll come back for the car then."

The thin man thought about this and admitted: "That perhaps would be best."

Crowley said: "What about the Eldridges? If you've done anything to them, I'll see you hang if it's the last thing I do."

"Those people are all right. Both they and their niece. A pretty girl that one."

I SAW Crowley's jaw drop but he had sense enough not to say anything. And it was a wonder because he saw the same thing I did and right at that time.

The front window shade pulled a bit and I saw Eldridge's head outlined against the light. And back of him, in the center of the room and so plain there wasn't a chance of a slip I saw Amanda Howe, looking just as calm and cool as she could be. Mrs. Eldridge was just beyond her, but Mrs. Eldridge looked as though she was scared to death.

I said: "Oh yes, the niece. Nice kid."

"We will not stay here and discuss women," he said. "Sam, keep behind them. Gentlemen, you will go around the side of the house—our car is there. You will get in the back with Dobie. I will drive and Sam will sit in front with me and watch you. I don't have to tell you what will happen if you make foolish moves."

It was funny. If I'd thought I could depend on Jim, for sure, I'd have known just what to do. A sawed off shotgun in close quarters like a car isn't good for a thing. The one called Dobie was drunk as a fool—and by the time he'd got himself into action, I could have taken him six times over. The little thin man was dangerous, but he'd be driving and so would be too busy to count much for them. I knew I could reach out and grab the muzzle of that shotgun and twist it away from the

I caught her by the shoulder while she was still lacing him on the face. It wasn't fair, considering the shape he was in.

one called Sam. I knew I could lace one into Dobie's whiskers and take him out of the game. But I couldn't depend on Crowley not getting in my way, and when you're dealing with amateur gunmen, and from what Sam had said I knew that's what they were, you never know.

You can tell what a professional will do—it'll be the right thing for him and the wrong one for you and you can depend on it. But a beginner goes nuts and does the unpredictable—and when they're holding guns, that can be very bad.

Crowley knew what I was planing and he took the play away from me.

He said: "Hold it, Mike! This is where we'll maybe find out something."

"And where we'll maybe not walk out

from after we find it."

"It's a chance," he said. "We'll know about Klasson before it happens, though. How'd you know it was Colclough back of this?"

"These guys' accents," I said. "They must be off some ship."

CHAPTER VI

Under Control

CROWLEY'S smart in his own field, but he was out of it in this case. A newspaperman gets around, all right, much more so than the average guy, but when it comes down to the pinch, he's still an amateur on the rough stuff.

And we were heading for rough stuff.

There were problems—too many of them to suit me. There were too many people in the thing. First there was Colclough and he didn't bother me much. That is, I knew where he stood. He was after the dough and that was all—and I was positive he'd killed for it. If it had been anybody but Klasson that he'd put away, I'd have thought more of it—I'll be honest. But Klasson had killed the Hoffenheimer kid with that hit and run business, had crooked the Brothers of Man in the first place, and it was a good thing for everybody that he was out of the way.

Colclough was dangerous but something dependable. I could spot him as a crook and a killer, but being able to spot him gave me an edge.

I could put Al Ringer in the place he belonged. After the money, of course. I didn't think he'd kill for it unless he was pinched pretty hard, but he was a cold-blooded guy and you never can tell with people like that.

Then I came to Chief-Brother Howe and I couldn't figure a thing about his angle. He was after Klasson, primarily, but I thought he'd be smart enough to realize Klasson was in all probability a dead man. He was after the money the same as everybody else—but whether he wanted it for his very own or planned on giving it back to the Brothers I didn't know.

When I'd first met him, I thought the last, but after seeing him in town I wasn't so sure. He didn't act his farmer part so well, and a hundred odd thousand bucks is enough to change most any man.

The girl was confusing, too. She'd come down there after Klasson—that I was sure of—but she wasn't acting like a high school kid at all. She was playing too smart for that.

I had the two Melville deputies to plan on as well. Wilcox and Ellis. They were after Klasson with a murder warrant in their pockets, but there was the money still involved. Some cops are honest and some aren't, but that much money can twist an honest man out of line and I knew it. Giving them the benefit of the doubt and saying they were honest to start with didn't mean they wouldn't change and do a little crossing if it paid them out.

That's where I had it on Crowley. He was going along, doing the best he could, but he wasn't figuring the angles like I was. He was thinking of nothing but Colclough and what we were running into, and I was thinking of that and the other complications as well.

Crowley proved this. He said: "I don't like this much, now that it's started, Mike. I had a hunch about Colclough but it was just a hunch. I'm afraid it's working out."

"What of it? He'll cross these guys, too. Watch and see."

"What about us?"

"We stall."

WE were running along the ocean then, almost to Dominion Beach. The houses were scattered—big bare weather-beaten places, and the surf was booming in so hard it crashed above the sound of the car motor. The little man driving the car started to slow, and that went along with what I'd thought.

I said: "This is ideal for Colclough. He could dig a hole in the sand under one of these houses and put Klasson away with no trouble. It'd be easy digging. Or he could take him out to sea in one of those rowboats, if he knew enough to get through the surf. The crabs would do the rest."

The little man checked the car and

swung it in behind one of the beach houses then. Sam moved the shotgun—I could have taken it away from him right then—and the little man came out with a .32 Colt automatic.

"Get out, you two," he said.

We got out, holding our hands at shoulder height. Sam was getting more nervous by the minute and I was hoping that shotgun had a heavy trigger pull. I looked up the road, back toward where we'd come from then, and thought I saw a car coast to a stop a hundred yards or more up that way—but I couldn't be sure because it showed no lights. But it was what I'd been expecting and I decided things would be breaking up soon.

I said: "Easy with that cannon, guy. We're not making you trouble. We're going along nice."

"You are smart," the thin one said.

I was listening over his voice and was sure I heard a car door slam. Who it was I didn't know, but I knew I could plan on some outside action pretty soon.

I said: "Okay, guy! Let's get it over."

And then Al Ringer said, from the shadow by the house: "You guys drop those guns!"

I was keyed up because of that stopping car. I wasn't expecting Ringer right then, but I was all set for action of any kind, and because of it I moved fast. I went down to the ground just as Sam turned loose his shotgun over me, and when Crowley fell, he landed full on me. He was dead before he fell—his blood soaked through my clothes before I could crawl from under him. Ringer, or somebody with him, got Sam at the same time, but I didn't know it until I was in the clear and saw him on the ground. I just heard another gun—a pistol—slam out twice.

Ringer said: "You, Donaghan, look at Crowley."

We were away from the house while Ringer was in its shadow. I had light enough to see that Sam's shotgun had taken out the front of Jim's throat as well as most of his lower jaw.

Ringer said: "It was bound to happen. Come on—get moving."

I said: "Me, too?"

"You bet."

There'd been three shots fired but I didn't have much hope of help from the law. The house was well by itself and the surf was booming in so strong that it muffled the shots and made it almost impossible to localize them. And I didn't think Ringer would have any trouble with the local law anyway—they would be on his payroll for sure.

I saw the little thin man had dropped his gun and raised his hands, and I saw that big Dobie was just standing there, trying to figure what had happened.

I said: "Hey, Ringer, I'm on your side."

"I'm on my own side," he said. "It's every man for himself."

HE came out from the shadow then and I saw he was holding a .45 automatic. Another man came with him, this one with a short barreled .38. This one went behind the thin man and smacked him over the head with the butt of the gun, coming down with it still in his palm and without a word being said by Ringer.

Ringer said to big Dobie: "Pick him up, stupid! Carry him in."

Dobie picked the little man up as though he was lifting a sack of flour, draping him on his shoulder the same way.

Ringer said to me: "This is the pay-off, Donaghan! I don't know what you're in this for but I knew what Crowley was doing. How'd these guys find you?"

"I don't know."

Dobie said, talking broken English: "It is what the boss say. These men they ask for him and he find where they live from the man they ask. He is smart man, the boss."

I got it then. We'd asked that lousy gambler Morrison about Klasson and Colclough, and he'd talked out of turn. You can depend on it—a hustler will stick with another hustler against the rest of the world. That also explains how Amanda Howe had located us at Eldridge's.

Ringer said sharply: "Move now. Take him inside the house, big guy. You, Donaghan, I'm watching you. One move and you're through."

"What about Crowley? You going to leave him here?"

Ringer laughed and said: "He won't run away. Nor will that other one. Let 'em keep each other company."

"This is going to blow things wide open, mister. You can't have a newspaperman killed without a fuss."

"Catch wise, Donaghan. You were the fall guy. Crowley was using you from the start."

That I didn't believe right then but I kept my mouth shut. We went into the house through a back door and from there into a front room, and when I saw who was waiting for us, I almost didn't believe it.

This, because I hadn't expected ever to see Klasson, and there he was.

I'D never seen the man but I recognized him, even in the shape he was in. He was tied to a chair with his feet taped to the legs of it and with his hands stretched out along the arms and held there at the wrists by more of the same tape. He was alive and conscious, but just barely so. His face was just one big bruise and he wheezed rather than breathed. His hands, fingers and all, were puffed up like sausages and they'd been working on his feet as well. I could see even from the door that he'd lost a few toenails.

He had a gag in his mouth, held there by more tape, but he could turn his head and he did this, watching us come in. He didn't look sane but I wouldn't have expected that from him in his shape.

Ringer said: "I left him like that—that's the way I found him."

"Who did it?"

"Colclough."

"Where's he?"

Ringer nodded and I looked the way he'd indicated and saw a foot sticking out from back of a davenport. Just one foot and one thin ankle, but the foot was drawn up against the ankle in a way that meant but one thing. Ringer verified the thought for me.

"We came in and he argued it. A guy like that should learn to shoot before he tries that stuff."

"What about Howe?"

"He wasn't here."

"They went out together from your place—we saw them go."

"He wasn't here—we looked."

I didn't think he was lying but I could not be sure.

I said: "Why'd Colclough keep this guy alive? You figured that yet?"

"Sure. The money. This guy's hidden his part of it."

"You guessing or are you sure?"

Ringer said to the big man, Dobie: "What about it, simple? Didn't this fella hide his share of the dough? Wasn't that it?"

Dobie was staring at Colclough's foot. He was about sober by that time—enough had happened to shock him out of his drunk.

He said: "Hey, the boss, he is dead."

"You bet. I asked you something, stupid."

"You ask me what?"

"Did this guy hide his money? Is that what Colclough was trying to get from him?"

"He is stubborn, that one," the big guy said solemnly, nodding at Klasson. Klasson tipped his head up so that he could look back, and his eyes, or what I could see of them, looked absolutely crazy. "He is crazy. He lets us pull off his finger nails and his toe nails, and yet he says he does not know where his money is. He tells us where he puts it but it is not there. He is lying to us, that one."

Klasson spoke, but I had trouble making out what he was trying to say. They'd hit him on the throat and it hadn't helped his voice a bit. It was more of a croaking noise than ordinary speech.

"The money's in the flour bin," he said. "I told them that but they kept on."

Ringer jerked his head and his partner went out in the kitchen. We all waited, and he came back, shaking his head.

"Not there," he said. "They took that part of the cabinet apart."

"Were you and Crowley here?" Ringer asked me.

"We were not. You saw us when we picked up Colclough and had Howe take him away from us. You saw us sticking

around after that. When we left you, we went right home, and these guys were waiting for us. Figure it out, Ringer."

"It was just a hope," Ringer sighed. "I don't quite get this and that's a fact."

THE little man was on the floor, where Dobie had put him down on coming into the room. I was looking down at him and saw his eyes open, then close slowly. They didn't look in the least dazed, either, in spite of the smack on the head he'd taken. I saw Dobie, sober now, just in front of Ringer, and I saw that Ringer had dropped the muzzle of his gun so that it was pointed at the level of Dobie's knee.

Ringer's man was just in from the kitchen and he was holding that short gun of his so it was pointed at the floor.

Things were just far enough along, I thought. Ringer had things his own way and I didn't want it. The thin little man and Dobie weren't the problem Ringer was turning out to be—and he was no help in finding out a thing.

And, with the little man awake, I thought it was the time to move.

I didn't say a word, but started to stare at the door past Ringer. I let him see me watch it, then turned my head away as though I wasn't interested. I could see his head cock as he listened. By and by I did it again and this time I got a rise.

"Hear something, Donaghan?" he asked.

"Oh no," I said.

"Go take a look," he told his man.

The guy moved, walking right past the little man, who still had his eyes closed. And just as he got level with him, I took my chance and jumped at Ringer.

Ringer had his head half turned again and I was almost to him before he was ready for me. He started to tip his gun, not bothering to swing it up from his hip, but I was into him by then. I caught him in the belly, head first, just like a wrestler making a flying tackle—and he went back and down with me covering him like a blanket.

I got his gun wrist with both hands and twisted, and I was too enthusiastic because I felt his arm go at the elbow joint. He screamed like a woman as he dropped the gun and I grabbed it and turned, making sure the safety catch was latched down as I did.

I needn't have worried. The little thin man had grabbed Ringer's man by one ankle and big Dobie had taken over from there. He had the guy by the throat and was shaking him back and forth. He hadn't paid any attention to the gun the man still held though, and this was fatal even as I watched. The guy had it still down at his side, with his whole arm flopping loose as Dobie shook him, but even as I saw him he tipped the gun up and let it go in Dobie's side.

It didn't stop the big man, at least for a moment. He kept on with his shaking but he didn't put his heart in it like he'd been doing before. The other man tipped the gun up again, to shoot him loose, and I got his wrist and jerked the gun free.

And then Dobie went down in a heap, but still with his hands on the guy's neck.

THE little thin man was up by then, looking on the floor for either Ringer's gun or the one I'd just taken from the man in Dobie's hands. I showed him both of them and motioned him to the side.

I said: "It's under control, mister."

The guy got away from Dobie then—rolling on the floor to the side of the room. Dobie, the poor dope, was still trying to catch him and rolled after him, but he was too hard hit. He got flat on his stomach and tried to lift himself from there and couldn't make it.

Then somebody said from behind me: "Well bless my heart!"

It was Wilcox and Ellis, with Amanda Howe right behind them. Wilcox was holding an old .45 Single Action Colt, one of the Frontier models. He had the hammer back on this relic and was looking around for a target. Ellis had an even worse weapon—a nickel-plated affair that sold new at around fifteen bucks from a mail order house.

I said: "You can cuff these guys together, Mr. Deputy. I don't know what you can charge Ringer and his boy friend with, outside of just murder, but you can hold

the little guy over there for the FBI. They will want him."

"Hunh!"

"Ringer and his pal just killed a guy named Sam, out by the back door. Sam killed Jim Crowley, just before then. But this little guy will be wanted by the Federal men. He was working with Colclough."

"Colclough?"

"That's the dead man behind the couch."

"And Klasson?"

I hadn't been paying much attention to Klasson since the fracas had started. I saw him now with his head tipped back so he could look at us through his puffed-up eye sockets. And for the first time Amanda Howe realized who he was.

She didn't do what I thought she'd do, either. The guy was a hospital case or worse—I figured it would be touch and go whether he lived after the torture he'd gone through—but that didn't hold her back one bit. She walked past the two deputies to him and started lacing him in the face, right hand and left hand, back and forth and back and forth again, and she was using language on him that should not be used on a mule. She not alone just cursed him—she used every filthy word I'd ever heard on him.

I had no use for Klasson—he was responsible for everything, as well as being the one who'd killed the Hoffenheimer kid. But beating him up like that, when he was tied down and in the shape he was in, was just too much.

I caught her by the shoulder and yanked her back and spatted her on the cheek with the flat of my hand as hard as I could lay it on.

And Wilcox said approvingly: "That was just right, Mr. Donaghan. If you hadn't gone and done that, I'd have had to. That's Klasson, all right, isn't it?"

"That's right."

"I got a warrant for him, right here in my pocket. Has he got that money here? He and the other fella took it out of the bank, we hear."

"He hasn't got it."

"Who has?"

I said: "Get on the phone and get the sheriff's office here. I don't think they'll turn Ringer loose, if you tell 'em you're charging him with murder. Speed it up, man! If not, that dough will be long gone."

"Who's got it, Mister Donaghan?"

"Chief-Brother Howe."

Amanda was over by the wall, glaring at me. She called me a dirty name and I laughed at her.

I said: "It's better pay than farming, sister, but your old man won't get away with it."

Wilcox said: "But Mister Donaghan! What makes you think that Mr. Howe's the one that's got it? He's an honest man—at least he's been that way for twenty years."

"So was Jim Crowley," I said. "If he s l i p p e d, why shouldn't Chief-Brother Howe? And who else would have it?—everybody else is here that's been mixed in the thing but him. He's gone and the money's gone so figure it out for yourself."

CHAPTER VII

A Case for Mr. Whiskers

RINGER had said that Howe had checked in at the Vernon and we found him there. He was very calm and very sure of himself—and kept that way until I found the check stub from the Vernon check-room—and then he went into little pieces. Not that he admitted a thing—he claimed he was going to return the money to the Brothers of Man, and that it was just chance that he had a New York ticket with a reservation for the early morning train.

There was nothing the cops could do to him about it, either. They couldn't prove he was going to run out with the money, though they knew it as well as I did.

By that time I had two FBI men in on it and things were going smoothly. They'd taken our prisoners away from the local sheriff—not taking any chances with Ringer's pull at all—and they had things well under control. They'd put in a couple of calls to Washington, checking Colclough from the ground up—and they had Klas-

son in a government hospital with two armed guards on duty by his bed.

The little man who'd been in charge of the three who'd picked us up at Eldridge's place was in jail with an open charge hanging over him, and Dobie and the one named Sam and Crowley were in the city morgue, along with Colclough. Ringer and his man were in the local calaboose charged with murder—but the federal men were the ones who'd charged them and they were only in the local jail because of convenience in questioning.

The head man of the FBI was a bird named Shires. A little stocky man with eyeglasses, who looked like a moderately successful banker or insurance man. Anything but like a Government cop—and he was a good one.

He said: "I don't quite see, Donaghan, how you knew Colclough wasn't just what he said he was. He had the papers, certainly."

"A British officer wouldn't have been running around with Klasson. A British officer wouldn't have spat in Klasson's face. That was the first. And a British officer wouldn't have been fooling around with stolen money."

"There's bad apples in every barrel, Donaghan."

"Not in the British barrel during war time, mister. They aren't those kind of people. And then again this guy was just too much that way. No Britisher ever acted that British. He was just a cheap crook who'd sold out."

"And that's another thing. How did you know he had a foreign tie-up?"

"Because of Klasson, of course. Klasson was German instead of Holland-Dutch. So are a good part of those Brothers of Man—you'll find that out, too, when you make a check on them. That was half a war fund and was given with that idea in mind. There were too many conscientious objectors in that crew, Shires. They started right after the last war, if you'll remember—and they didn't like the way that one ended. They started building up right then and there for another one. I don't say all of them are that way—that Vanderwort they wanted to run for president may be perfectly all right—but he'll stand checking along with the rest."

"He'll be checked."

"I've got a notion you'll find Vanderwort's campaign fund wasn't going to be used for campaigning. My hunch is that it was going to be used for helping escaped Nazi prisoners and little odds and ends like that. I've got a notion that you may find some of the same hidden away with some of the Brothers."

"We'll check—you can depend on that."

"Colclough was in with Klasson and they decided that a hundred and twenty-two grand was worth ditching the party for. That's all! Howe went after the dough and so did Crowley."

"That I won't believe."

I SAID: "I didn't believe it either. But figure it out. He drops all holds and starts looking for it. It was none of his affair—you'll notice he didn't turn it over to your agency, the way he should have."

"You didn't either."

I didn't have any answer to that. I might have had ideas about the money as long as Klasson and Colclough were fooling around with it, but I'd lost them when I'd figured out why it had been collected. It was nothing I could admit, though, and I kept my mouth shut.

Shires said: "Well, it's a lot of money—enough to excite anybody. Even Crowley, I presume."

"It certainly excited everybody else."

"The reason I figure that war prisoner angle is the men that were working with Colclough. They were probably attached to him with that idea in mind. They're all foreigners and they're all off ships. They'd be the logical kind to help stow away escaped prisoners, and the kind of dough Klasson had raised would help a lot of prisoners escape. It's all logical, but you'll have to do some work to prove it."

"If it can be proved, we'll prove it," Shires said confidently. "It was a lucky thing for us that Crowley asked you in on it. D'ya suppose he was thinking . . . ? Well, let it go."

(*Continued on page* 93)

THE VAGABOND BLONDE

SAM QUENTIN sat behind the big, immovable desk in the apartment which was also his office and said gloomily, "That is probably one of your nephews or nieces or cousins. You must have hundreds. Are they always into something messy?"

"It's not my relatives who are griping you," retorted Hattie McGregor. "It's that blonde at the Mayfair Club. When are you ever going to learn, Sam Quentin? They take your money and leave you for a uniform, every time!" She was fifty and square-built and greying uncompromisingly and she had never been a blonde.

"Answer the bell," said Sam. "I'm not interested in your second-guessing lectures."

Hattie McGregor glared, then went across the big room and through the small foyer and to the solid oaken door. She did not use the peephole, as the ring had been at the bell marked "John Jones", which by its deeper note gave knowledge that a friend or customer was without.

Sam Quentin slumped in his padded swivel chair. He was forty and looked older. He had a thin, lined countenance

By WILLIAM R. COX

Slugging fiercely, he said, "Muss me up in public, would you! Damn your eyes!"

"I'm not a detective," Sam said. "I'm an investigator of life, but only if life or death interests me." And so began the strange case of the blonde known as Marigold Moonstone . . .

and long dark eyelashes and nervous, clever hands. He watched Hattie return with a large, red-faced lad in a private's uniform. He said, "Hello, Carey. How much do you need?"

Carey McGregor was one of Hattie's favorite nephews, but Sam had never decided why. He grinned and said, "I hit the crap game, Sam. I'm all right. . . . Just wanted to tip you off on something. Right in your line."

Sam said, "I'm not interested. I never look for trouble. It finds me."

Carey said, "Well, there was a guy in my outfit, see, and he was strictly n.g. So they found somethin' wrong with him and tossed him out, the army did. His name is Dugan and they call him Gypsy."

"Go away," said Sam. "I hate people with nicknames."

Hattie said to her nephew, "He lost another blonde."

"Didn't know he ever had one," said Carey impudently. "Well, anyway, Gypsy Dugan came here to Newkirk, because I just saw him. He was with Joe Saperstein and Mort Moscow. There was a gal with them. She was a honey, with yellow hair and blue eyes and a shape like you know, those calendar broads."

Sam said, "So what, you dummy?"

"This gal did not look happy," said Carey and his voice became careful and serious. "She looked worried. They walked her into the Mayfair Club and took her upstairs. I slipped over and watched through the doorway. Mort Moscow came back and told me to scram, and he meant it. He didn't recognize me in uniform."

Sam said, "I still don't seem to get anything from you."

"But you're interested," said Carey confidently. "It was the same when I worked for you. . . . Tough talk comes outa you, but you're interested."

THE other bell, the one marked "Sam Quentin, Investigator," pealed harshly. Hattie McGregor gestured at Carey and the soldier made a quick exit left and into a room which he knew of old. The room had a concealed panel which slid back behind a diaphanous mirror and allowed anyone therein to command a view of Sam's living room-office.

Hattie went into the foyer, closing the door behind her. In a moment she came back and said in a whisper, "You want to see Simon Pattner?"

Sam said, "I don't want to see anybody. But let him in."

Simon Pattner, fifty, slant-eyed, dressed to his double chin, seemed to float over Sam's rugs despite his bulk. He sat down without invitation, lit a long cigar, and said, "Mr. Quentin, you do not know me very well, but I can pay you off, and how! I need a detective."

Sam said, "I am not a detective. I investigate strange things as the mood strikes me. I am an investigator of life, but only if life or death amuses me."

"That is a lot of baloney," said Simon Pattner. "Money talks." He drew out a wallet and put ten crisp new one hundred dollar bills on Sam's cleared, shiny desk. He said, "I want you should find a girl named Marigold Moonstone. . . ."

Sam's voice did not grow louder, but it lashed like a whip. "Take your damned money and get out of here, Pattner. Go back and run your damned department store. And send some filthy shamus after your girl friend, but don't bother me!"

Pattner wilted. His fat face grew comic with despair. He reached out, touched the bills, pushing them toward Sam. He said, "No, Mr. Quentin. I apologize. I was wrong. But it is not like you think. I don't want cheap help for this. Marigold Moonstone is not a tramp. She was in the hat department. She is a lovely, decent blonde girl and she has not come to work for two days, and at her boarding house no one knows where she is. Her bags are still in her room. She has disappeared, Mr. Quentin!"

Sam said boredly, "Missing Persons Bureau, Captain Zill, a nephew of Mrs. McGregor, will help you."

"No!" said Pattner vigorously. "A girl worked with Marigold Moonstone. Now she works at the Mayfair Club. Zelda Keer, a hard-boiler. She called Marigold and made a date with her at the Coffee Pot.

My operator told me. After that, no Marigold!"

HATTIE MCGREGOR appeared at Sam's elbow. She held a notebook carelessly where he could see it and said, "You are wanted on the other phone, Sam."

The printing on the notebook said, "Carey says take the money and case the Mayfair. Marigold Moonstone was probably the blonde he saw being dragged in there."

Sam said, "Zelda Keer, eh? All right, Pattner. I'll take your thousand. You'll hear from me later."

The stout man dropped a photograph on Sam's desk. It was a large, shiny job by a professional studio, but the face that looked up at Sam was young and fresh and without guile. Pattner said, "That is Marigold . . . I have great interest in her, Mr. Quentin. She is good. She is also smart, believe me. Get her, bring her to me. I will do anything to help her." He hesitated a moment, then left.

As the door closed, Sam said, "Hattie, what is the dope on the robbery at the Pattner Department Store last week?"

Hattie McGregor went to a filing cabinet set into the wall of the apartment and said, "Thieves broke in, cutting the burglar alarm, and stole $15,000 worth of jewels from the safe and $10,000 worth of irreplaceable silk from the storerooms. All was covered by insurance, my confidential report says. The police have no clues—or too many clues—anyway, they are nowheres on the case and Jack McGregor says they will not get any place."

"Jack is a very dumb detective," said Sam.

Carey came out of the small room and Sam showed him the picture. "Could this be the girl you saw with Saperstein and his hoods?"

Carey said, "Certain'y that's the girl! Gimme a gat and we'll go down and blast her loose right now."

Sam picked two of the new hundred dollar bills off the heap on the desk and said, "You get the hell out of here and back to camp before you get you and me both into more trouble. Neither of us is going to mess with Saperstein."

Carey pocketed the bills, his face sad. "That's the trouble with you, Sam. No romance. None of the fun of the business. I could never understand why you were in it. Me, I'd go take that joint apart and like the work . . ."

"Get out!" said Sam. "Go become a pfc, or a corporal, or something. You belong to Uncle Sam. Git!"

Carey kissed his aunt, hugged her tight, flipped a salute at Sam, and went to the door. He paused, looked back and said, "Just one thing. Pattner is prob'ly a crook and had that stuff heisted and is sellin' it through another outlet. Pattner always was a sweat shop operator. . . . And that Zelda Keer is a tough broad and no kiddin'!"

Sam said wearily, "You're telling *me*?"

"Oh!" said Carey, grinning. "Zelda bit ya, huh?" Then he left hastily, recognizing that Sam was not amused.

Hattie McGregor said, "Carey is a smart boy and you are a nasty middle-aged goat, and now that we have a case with TWO blondes in it, I suppose you are positively beatific!"

Sam picked up the phone and dialed headquarters. While the number buzzed, he said, "You go sit on a tack and get thinking about things . . ." A male voice barked and he said into the instrument, "Sam Quentin. . . . Want to talk to Jack McGregor. . . . Hello, Jack? There's a girl improbably named Marigold Moonstone who may be held at the Mayfair Club. . . . Get her out and bring her here, will you? . . . Yeah, tell the chief I said maybe. . . . But get her."

Hattie said, "You use my nephews to collect your past due bills, to earn your fees, to run your errands. Then you criticize them! You're a hard man, Sam Quentin, and not half as smart as people think!"

Sam said, "What did I do wrong now?"

"You haven't even thought of checking Pattner's store!"

Sam shook his head. He plopped a rakish, ancient hat upon his round head and said, "Hattie, you are my hair shirt. . . .

Without you to second-guess me, I'd be a dead duck!"

He went out through the wide, pleasant hall of the apartment house and was again grateful to his dead father for building so well, upon a hill in Newkirk's Forest Scene. Sam allowed only those people who could pass his personal approval to dwell in the Forest Scene Apartment, and himself occupied the entire left wing of the first floor. He stood a moment, looking down on the city of two hundred and fifty thousand people and wondered if he had come upon a really interesting case of human behavior.

Sometimes life was very dull to Sam Quentin. He had a mind which roamed in strange fields, and his tastes were bizarre and society frowned upon his doings for the most part. He lived alone except for the acidulous Mrs. McGregor, and often he brooded. No branch of the armed services wanted him and at times there seemed little left . . . but blonde girls and an occasional case which rewarded his unorthodox "investigation."

CHAPTER II

Behind Locked Doors

PATTNER'S DEPARTMENT STORE was a very large establishment. Mr. Charles Denziger, the general manager, had a suite of offices slightly larger than the Taj Mahal and twice as ornate. He had two secretaries and a male attendant of some kind and wore a mustache waxed to precise points and a carnation. He greeted Sam Quentin coldly and said: "Mr. Pattner merely mentioned that he had employed you. I can give you no information about Miss Moonstone nor about anything else."

Sam's expressive eyes hooded themselves. He glanced about the gleaming office and said, "How much do yous tand to lose on the robberies?"

"Really, Mr. Quentin," said Denziger severely, "I don't see where that enters the case of Miss Moonstone."

"How confidential was Miss Zelda Keer's position in the hat department?" said Sam. He added, "Of course I am going to repeat these questions to Mr. Pattner and inform him that you refused to co-operate with me. You seem comfortable here. I thought you might like your job pretty well."

Denziger came to his feet. The male companion, a giant called Doug Grange, a handsome, moronic, muscular gent, stepped forward. Denziger said thunderously, "That is enough, sir. Mr. Pattner happens to be merely an employee here. You cannot bluff me! You may leave now!"

Sam's eyebrows popped wide. "Pattner doesn't own this place? Well-well-well! That *is* interesting! I'm sorry I intruded, Mr. Denziger. I didn't realize . . ." He let his gaze run over the threatening, well-dressed big Grange. He slowly retreated. He said, "A tough lad, eh? I'll see you all again."

He went rapidly out of the business department and took the elevator downstairs. He wandered into the ladies' hat department and talked to a svelte, dark girl with pouting lips. "Were you friendly to Marigold Moonstone?"

The girl said, "Everybody is. Who are you?"

"A pal of Mr. Pattner," said Sam and waited.

The girl said, "You just came from Denziger's office. . . . Go fly a kite, Mister Spy."

Sam said, "Maybe you've got something there." He went out of the store and got his car from the parking lot. He drove to the side street upon which the Mayfair Club was located. This fashionable nitery was closed tight during the afternoon, but there was some action as Sam parked and sat in his small sedan, watching. Two hulking plainclothesmen came out. They had tight hold of a small, wriggling girl. Joe Saperstein, egg-headed, rotund, fish-eyed was protesting to them. Jack McGregor, stalwart as a bull, shoved Joe inside the club. The other cop put the girl in the squad car at the curb.

Sam chuckled, then was sober. Jack got out and the squad car headed for Forest Scene. Sam thought for a moment, then reluctantly got out of his sedan and ambled

Sam said bluntly, "Simon Pattner was murdered. He's under the piano."

across the street, entering the Mayfair Club hesitantly.

SAPERSTEIN glowered from behind the bar. Hike Moran and Mort Mos-

cow, two swarthy men in pin-striped, double-breasted suits and nobby white felt hats growled beneath their breath. Saperstein said, "What the hell you want, Sam? I got trouble enough."

"I saw the coppers take Zelda," said Sam mildly. "Can I help you, Joe?"

The proprietor of the club narrowed his eyes. "Say! That's an idea! You ever hear of a twist called Marigold Moonstone?"

"What about her?" asked Sam.

"The coppers are lookin' for her," said Saperstein. "I want her, too. She's a blonde. How about findin' her for me?"

Sam said, "Captain Zill, Missing Persons Bureau . . ."

Saperstein said, "I'll pay you plenty if you find her. She's got blue eyes and weighs about a hundred-twelve, five feet four, and well hung together. Five Cs says you can't locate her quick."

Moran and Moscow stared at Sam. Saperstein came from behind the bar. He said, "And if you can spring Zelda for the night show, I'd appreciate that. You got a drag downtown, they say."

Sam shook his head. "You know Zelda. She'll act tough."

Saperstein shrugged. "I need her. The cops got funny ideas about me."

Sam said, "Okay. . . . I'll send her back. And I'll look for this Marigold Moonstone. . . . You got a picture of her?"

"No," said Saperstein, "but she's got a scar here." He pointed to the spot on his round body where an appendictomy scar would show. "She worked here once," he added. "In the chorus, a couple years ago. She wore a black wig, then. . . ."

Sam repeated, "I'll have a look around." He went out very quickly and sought the privacy of a phone booth, being careful that the one on each side was empty. He called the apartment and said to Hattie McGregor, "Jack grabbed the wrong dame. Turn her loose and tell Jack to tail her. Show him the picture of Moonstone. . . . Hattie, could there be a dame named Marigold and Moonstone, too?"

"In show business? Of course," said Hattie. "Have you learned anything?"

Sam said, "You know me . . . I never learn. Saperstein also wants the Moonstone, he says."

There was silence on the wire. Then Hattie said, "It begins to get complicated. You'd better see Pattner again."

"Always a step ahead, you old bag," said Sam affectionately. He hung up, then dialed Pattner's house number. There was no answer. He called the store. The girl said Pattner was not in.

He went out, got into his car and drove it out to the new and gaudy section of Newkirk, where architecture ran riot among shrubbery expensive but too orderly for reason. He selected the "show place" which was Simon Pattner's and entered the long, winding driveway. The house was a grand mixture of French chateau and English country house with Moorish towers.

No one answered the bell. Sam walked thoughtfully around to one of the four side entrances. The place was bigger than Grand Central Station. But there was no sign of servant or gardener.

On the east side of the house one door stood open. Sam walked in and traversed a kitchen, a butler's pantry, a dining room like a lodge hall, a library filled with uncut sets of books, a "den" with trophies mounted and somewhat moth-eaten. He crossed a wide foyer and went into a formal parlor, which contained a music alcove and a white grand piano. He stared for a long moment at the feet protruding from beneath the piano.

THEY were well-shod feet. Simon Pattner had fallen and rolled over on his stomach, trying to arise, Sam thought. From the distorted position of the body it seemed that way. Sam did not want to go close and touch the body, because he knew the M.E. and he was a very meticulous and tough doctor. He went near and bent close, though. Simon was dead and still quite warm.

Sam arose and stood still, looking around the room. There was music on the rack. It was popular sheet music and the song on top was, "I'll Get By".

There were two glasses maculating the

top of the piano with rings as the ice melted in them. Sam sniffed, but could detect only the odor of good Scotch.

He squinted again in the half light at the body of the stout man. He saw blood upon the rug and was quite sure the wound had been made by a bullet. He shrugged, went into the foyer again, and found a telephone hidden in a wall niche. He called headquarters again and said, "Homicide. . . . Captain Regan? . . . Quentin. . . . Come out and pick up the corpse of Simon Pattner. . . . Yeah, I was looking into something for him. . . . Better hurry, he's still not stiff and the doc may learn something. . . . Yeah, I'll wait. . . ."

He began prowling around the huge house which Simon Pattner had built for his wife. Mrs. Pattner had died of pneumonia and Simon had never moved out. The department store wizard, as they called him downtown, had been a kindly, sentimental man. Gross, overbearing in manner at times, he was clever and knew when to compromise, as witness his attitude in Sam's apartment that afternoon. Sam went up a flight of stairs and investigated a bedroom loaded with heavy furniture which was evidently in use. Carefully he searched through the drawers of a dresser and a closet full of Simon Pattner's clothing. He found nothing of interest, except that there were gaps in the racks where clothing might have hung.

There was a closed door which evidently led to a bathroom. Sam tried the knob. It was locked. There was no key in the lock.

He paused, teetering on his toes. Then he said loudly, "Is anyone in there?"

There was silence. Sam repeated, "If anyone is in there, you had better come out. There has been an accident and the police are coming!"

A trembling voice answered, "I can't get out! I'm locked in! Who's there?"

Sam said, "Both doors are locked?"

"Yes," said the light voice.

Sam said, "Are you Marigold Moonstone?"

Again there was silence. Then the girl said, "Ye-yes!"

Sam produced his keys. He had several and they were very fine examples of the locksmith's cunning art. He selected one and easily opened the bathroom door.

The girl wore blue and she was beautiful. She held out white, trembling hands and said, "What—what has happened?"

Sam said flatly, "Simon Pattner was murdered. He is under the piano."

She stammered, "I was singing for him. . . . I had to powder my nose. . . . When I tried to get out, I was locked in, and no one answered my cries. . . . I thought he was playing a joke. . . . He was a funny man, sometimes. . . ."

Sam said, "The police won't like that story."

She said, "I've been up here an hour. . . . It was frightening. . . . I didn't hear any shot. . . ."

Sam said, "How did you know Simon Pattner was shot?"

Her eyes were violet, not blue. She had a skin like velvet. She turned very pale and said, "I don't know. . . . I just said that. . . ."

Sam said, "The cops will be here any minute. You'll be arrested, of course. Is that all you know? Where have you been the last few days?"

SHE said, "Why, I went to New York about the tryout for radio." She seemed to think everyone knew about that.

Sam said, "What tryout?"

"A girl friend told me about the chance," she said. She bit her lip. "I don't know why I'm telling you this. . . . Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm Sam Quentin. You used to work for Joe Saperstein, under another name," said Sam slowly. "Joe would like to see you, right now."

She said, "But I'll be in a cell, won't I?" She lowered her eyes, lifted them suddenly to stare at him. "Unless you help me. You're a great detective, aren't you?"

"No," grunted Sam. There was something in her eyes. He surveyed her carefully. She was dressed in clothing which was designed to show her figure, which

was perfect. Sam said, "Well. . . . wipe your fingerprints off anything you touched in here. Come downstairs and, if there is time, I may show you an out."

He thought hard, racing down to the parlor. He used a silk handkerchief, wiping the keys of the piano. He made tinkling noises which he deprecated as unseemly in the face of death, then he had to decide which glass was hers. He chose the one nearest the keyboard and took it back into the kitchen, washed it, dried it, put it away. When he returned to the hall, Marigold Moonstone was ready, a small traveling bag in her hand.

Sam said, "Did you live here?"

She flushed a deep scarlet. "No! I just returned from New York this morning. I saw Joe Saperstein, then I met Mr. Pattner in front of his store and he drove me out here for a drink and a conference. . . ." She stopped stubbornly.

She nodded, her eyes filled with sudden tears. "He was very nice to me. I—should I go in and look at him?"

Sam said, "No. Take my car and drive to Forest Scene. Ring the doorbell at my apartment, the one marked 'Jones'. Mrs. McGregor will take care of you until I get there. By no means stop, and do not get in touch with Joe or anyone else. Otherwise I think you may get into very serious trouble."

She said, "Why are you so trustful of me?"

"I'm a sucker for a blonde," said Sam gravely. "Didn't Zelda tell you?"

She flushed again, started to speak, changed her mind. She fled down the steps and started Sam's car expertly and drove out of the Pattner estate.

Sam went in and picked up the phone. He dialed a number, then said, "Jack? Where's Zelda? . . . The Mayfair? . . . Okay. . . . If you see a blonde broad around town in my heap, pick her up and jug her. But if she goes to my place, forget about it. . . ."

He heard the first police siren and went out to meet Captain Regan, a thick-necked but efficient cop.

CHAPTER III

What a Woman!

REGAN said, "He was shot with a .32, just once and right smack in the ticker. The job was done close up, but not contact. . . . No powder stains. We'll have the bullet. All we got to do is get the weapon and the murderer! . . . And will you please stop using you secretary's nephew as a private operator? McGregor draws pay from the city, you know."

Sam Quentin said, "Where are the servants?"

Regan looked pleased. "We located the butler and he says Pattner fired them all yesterday. In a closet under the steps we found three bags packed with stuff. Pattner was going some place and he meant to stay. . . . Now what have you got? The chief said particularly to get anything you had. The chief does not love you very much these days, Sam."

"The chief got on the force through my father," said Sam. "One of dad's few mistakes. . . . The only thing I have got is the strange fact that Pattner no longer owns controlling interest in the department store."

Regan said, "What the hell good is that?"

"I don't know about the robbery and you do," said Sam. "But I'll bet there's a tie-up."

Regan said, "I've thought of that heist. I've thought of a lot of things. Pattner was a sucker for a woman. There's a gal missing from his store."

"Who is she?" asked Sam innocently.

Regan shook his head. The chief'll be sore if you break this case ahead of the department. I've said enough." The photographers and the medical examiner had departed. Two men bore a long morgue basket into Pattner's parlor. Sam frowned and went down to Regan's car. Regan said, "How did you get out here, Sam?"

"A friend dropped me off," said Sam blandly. "My car is in use. . . ." He got in and Regan's chauffeur drove them back to town. They stopped before Pattner's Department Store. Sam left Regan at the

"I detest physical violence and guns," Sam said. "But you're a little guy. I can handle you."

door, saying, "I'll check back here and keep in touch with you. Don't worry about me, captain. I'll see you get credit for breaking the case."

Regan said, "Nuts!"

Sam walked down the street. He turned a corner and came to the Mayfair Club. It was the supper hour and couples were dining in the dimly lighted dining room and a band played soft music. Sam went up a pair of partly hidden stairs and entered a door marked "private". A slim,

pretty blonde girl got hastily off the lap of Joe Saperstein. Joe dabbed at the lipstick on his face and said angrily. "What's a matter with knockin' when you blow in here?"

Sam said, "Hello, Zelda. I see you got your hooks into Joe, like you said."

The blonde girl had green eyes. She spat, "Go 'way, you smart shamus!"

Sam said, "I found the other girl, Joe. She's probably out at my place now." He picked up the telephone and dialed his own number. He stared at the blonde, wondering how he had ever thought she was beautiful. She had good features, but an amateur could have detected the stubborn chin, the cat slant to the eyes, the beginning of solid little chops at the base of her jaw. She was predatory and she looked it in the strong light. He sighed, acknowledging his weakness. . . . He said to Hattie on the phone, "Is Marigold there?"

Hattie said, "You and your women! She did leave your car, though, and her bag."

"You mean she's gone?" demanded Sam.

"She stayed about an hour, very restless," said Hattie in businesslike accents. "Took an aspirin. Acted scared. Then she went to the bathroom and I had work to do. When I looked again, she was gone. She went out so quietly that I never heard the door . . . back way, of course."

Sam said, "You are one fine assistant! You are like. . . ." He hung up, swallowing his rage. He said to Sam, "She got away."

ZELDA stopped repairing her makeup. She said harshly, "If Marigold Moonstone scrammed the burg, it would be better for everybody!"

"I thought you were her pal," said Sam. "I thought you tipped her off to a radio audition in New York?"

"She came back, didn't she?" sneered Zelda. "She hadda take another crack at Simon Pattner. Or maybe that Denziger. They're all after her. . . ."

Joe Saperstein said, "Now, baby. The gal's all right. She never made no passes in here when she . . ."

Sam said, "Tell me about her when she worked here."

Saperstein said, "Well . . . nothin' much . . ." He looked uneasily at Zelda Keer. "She wore a black wig and her name was 'Honey Melody', then . . ."

"Honey Melody was a prizefighter back at the turn of the century," said Sam Quentin.

"That's what she called herself," said Joe. "She could dance, but she always wanted a singin' spot. Jackson, the band leader, auditioned her, and said she was terrific. But that night she quit and left town. . . . Then she turns up again at Pattner's in the hat department."

Sam said, "A mysterious girl, isn't she?"

"A gold-diggin' bum!" flared Zelda.

Sam smiled grimly. "The well known pot is now calling the well known kettle black . . . You two go back to your little petting party, and Joe, you'd better hold one hand on your wallet."

Zelda said, "You cheap, two-timin' shamus. . . ."

Sam closed the door, chuckling at the look of dazed calculation struggling over Saperstein's face. He started down the stairs and almost bumped into a man coming up.

The man was small and thin and breathed heavily through his mouth. He should have been an unhealthy looking little fellow, but his face was tanned and his eyes bright, if close-set. He slid a glance off Sam and started to hurry past.

Sam put out a hand and restrained the man's progress. He said, "Gypsy Dugan, I believe."

"Take your mitts off me!" snarled the little man. "I'll . . ." He made a motion toward his hip.

Sam jerked him down two steps and pinned him to the wall. He said, "I detest physical violence, Gypsy. Also guns. But you're a little guy. I am not averse to handling little guys. I just want a word with you about Marigold Moonstone."

Dugan's eyes darted fire. He growled, "Are you nuts? I don't play with people like that. Marigold! Moonstone!"

Sam said, "You play with Joe Saper-

stein. He's a friend of mine. Why did the army discharge you, Dugan?"

"None of your damn business!"

Sam said gently, "I'd lay off the dope, if I were you. It makes for an early demise."

He released his hold and the little man poised, staring out of his too-bright eyes. For a moment Sam thought he would be shot before he could seize Dugan again. Then with a muttered curse the ex-soldier ran up towards Saperstein's office. It looked bad for Joe's petting party.

Sam went thoughtfully out of the Mayfair Club. He walked back around the corner and Pattner's Department Store was closed for the night. Across the street Sam stepped into a doorway and stared upward. The top floor, where the offices were located, showed a strong light.

A watchman strolled by and rattled the street doors. He disappeared into an alley towards the warehouses in the rear. Sam waited, chin sunk, thinking about the strange and swift circumstances of his chase after the vagabond blonde called Marigold Moonstone . . . or Honey Melody. He thought back to the girl's statements at Pattner's house after the murder. If a man had proffered such a story, he admitted, he would probably have held him tightly until Captain Regan arrived with handcuffs.

She had been too composed, beneath her light, abstracted manner, he knew. Her story had been far too pat—and too thin. There was every reason for him to believe that she had been downstairs when Simon Pattner was shot . . . excepting the fact that she was locked in the bathroom and the key was gone.

That was the only reason Sam had turned her loose. He had not found that key. He had carefully watched the police make their customary search, had even examined the vacuum cleaner dust which they had swept up through the house. There had been nothing like the bathroom door key.

It had not escaped him that the key might well be upon the person of Marigold Moonstone, that she had locked the door from the inside and hoped to find just such an out as he had given her. He had meant to check upon that with the aid of Hattie McGregor if necessary. He had never imagined that the girl would put herself in jeopardy by leaving the apartment at Forest Scene.

Suddenly he wondered if she had left willingly. She could not have received a telephone call without Hattie's knowledge. But she seemed a great girl for bathrooms . . . and Sam's first floor apartment had windows. . . .

The lights in the offices upstairs went out. Sam sought a deeper shadow, waiting. After awhile the front doors opened and Charles Denziger emerged, locking up behind Paul Grange, who stepped upon the sidewalk and stood as though listening, his hand in his coat pocket. The two wheeled without words and walked rapidly west.

Sam followed at a healthy distance. They turned the corner and went directly to the Mayfair Club. They entered and Sam drifted past the front of the night club. Five minutes later he came back, slipped a bill to the doorman, and stuck his head into the place. A spotlight found the small dance floor and Jackson led the band in a fanfare. Zelda Keer's lithe body, practically nude, flashed and writhed in an oriental posture, then broke into jive rhythm as Jackson played "Home Again Blues" in real Chicago jazz style. It was a wow. Zelda was unbelievably beautiful in the artificial lighting and her dancing was expert. That was the way Sam had first seen her, he remembered moodily, and something in the mad staccato dancing figure had appealed to him. . . .

His eyes became accustomed to the light and he looked around the club, remaining out of sight as best he could. There was no sign of Denziger or Grange.

Sam started toward the screened stairway which led to Joe Saperstein's office. Then he remembered the hopped-up Dugan and his ready gun, the glowering Moscow and his pal, Moran. He shrugged and left the Mayfair. He had no intention of walking into danger in heedless fashion. That

was for the police. Sam preferred to work out his problems in his head.

He started briskly for the nearest cab stand. A taxi slowed to the curb and Sam stepped into it. Before he could give an address, the cab started up. Sam lurched and fell into the lap of the passenger who sat rigid in a corner. He said, "What the hell? . . . Marigold Moonstone!"

CHAPTER IV

No Gag

SAM sat behind his desk and said, "You'd better tell me."

Marigold Moonstone crossed her knees and Sam winced at the lovely expanse of shin. She said in her pleasant, light voice, "My real name is Mary Stone. I am an orphan. I want to sing."

"Sounds very simple," said Sam. "But what about all this shennanigan around Newkirk?"

"I was working in the Mayfair Club and became friendly with Simon Pattner," she said steadily. "He was kind to me. He was a gentleman."

"You mean he was a patient wolf," nodded Sam. "He was packed to go away with you, when he was killed."

The violet eyes widened. "With me! You are wrong, Mr. Quentin. I was going to New York alone. The audition was successful. They offered me a job. I merely went out to Mr. Pattner's house to sing for him once more . . . he was sentimental, you know. After all, he had arranged for my audition. . . ."

"I thought Zelda tipped you off to the tryout," said Sam.

"Zelda Keer?" The girl's eyes hardened. She had, Sam noted a determined jaw. "Zelda wouldn't help me. She just pestered me with questions about Mr. Pattner. She was after him herself."

"What kind of questions?" demanded Sam.

"Oh . . . where he was going to be at certain times. . . ."

"Such as the night the department store was robbed?"

"Why . . . let me think. . . ." Her eyes were intelligent now, following Sam's trend of thought. Poor Simon Pattner had said that she was a smart girl, Sam remembered. She said slowly, "Yes, it was about that time. . . . I'm sure it was. Do you think . . . ?"

Sam said, "You had lunch with her before you disappeared."

"I didn't disappear," she protested. "I just went to New York. I didn't want to tell people . . . in case I flopped."

Sam said abruptly, "Have you the key to Pattner's bathroom?"

"Pattner's. . . . Of course not! I was locked in! I told you how it happened. . . . I thought Mr. Pattner was playing a queer joke."

Sam sighed. He said, "The police will never believe it. If they find one fingerprint. . . ."

The telephone jangled. Sam picked it up, listened. He said, "Yes, chief, I was there. I found the body, remember? . . . I made a statement. . . . What? You believe someone else was there? . . . Of course, you lunkhead, the murderer was there!"

He listened awhile longer. Then he said, "You can't scare me, chief. . . . Yes, I know you can lift my license and so what? You can have it. . . . No, I don't know anything more that I can tell you. Pattner just wanted me to look into a matter irrelevant to the murder. . . ." He hung up and grinned at the girl. "Well, you didn't wipe that bathroom good enough. They got a good set of prints. They are looking for someone to match them."

Marigold said, "What am I going to do?" She did not seem particularly frightened. She sat in one of Sam's white leather chairs and regarded him thoughtfully. She was the most beautiful blonde creature he had ever seen.

Sam said, "Tell me about Charles Denziger."

She flushed and said, "A predatory two-legged animal. But Paul Grange is worse."

Sam nodded. "They both wear perfume . . . and nail polish. Did you know they were friendly with Joe Saperstein?"

"No," she answered. "Joe was always

nice to me. . . . Most people are, Mr. Quentin, I don't know why. I mean—people are nice to me."

"Why did you leave the Mayfair? You were offered a chance to sing there?"

She said composedly, "I had a chance to join a road show and sing the lead. I took it. The show flopped in Cleveland, and I came back and went to work in the store to get a stake. I was ashamed to go back to Joe. He saw me and offered me a job, but Zelda was there and she hates me."

SAM unobtrusively pushed a button with his knee. Hattie McGregor wandered in, frowned at Marigold. Sam said, "Well, Hattie, I thought you'd gone out! I think Miss Moonstone could use a bath and a nap. She has had a tough day. . . ."

Hattie said, "If she would stay put, she wouldn't have such a hard time of it!"

"Yes," drawled Sam. "Where *did* you go when you left here, Marigold?"

The girl bit her lip. Then she said, "I've been waiting for you to ask that. . . . Why should you interest yourself in me. Mr. Quentin? Maybe you had better call the police and turn me in. I can't pay you."

Hattie said harshly, "Yes, why don't you call the cops? If you had good sense, you would. This chicken shot Pattner and you are digging yourself a fine grave. The chief . . ."

Sam said, "Simon Pattner already paid me to look out for you, Marigold. He said he would do anything for you. He said you were an honest girl, and smart in the bargain. He claimed he did not know where you were. He wanted me to find you."

The girl lowered her head so that he could not see her eyes. She murmured, "He was a good man."

"But one of you is a liar," said Sam calmly. "You had better take that bath. Your bag is in Mrs. McGregor's room. There are two beds in the room. I'm sure you won't mind if Mrs. McGregor stays close to you. You're such a vagabond!"

He watched Hattie lead the girl from the room. The bedroom used by his secretary was in the rear of the building, removed from his own bedroom by two bathrooms and a short hall. He leaned back in his chair and pondered. The beauteous Marigold, he was sure, was a consummate prevaricator. This neither amazed nor dismayed him. He set himself to ferret the reasons for her untruths.

He called Jack McGregor. He said, "You're a sorry detective. What have you been doing? . . . That's right, nothing. . . . Have any of you found the Pattner robbery stuff? . . . Have you checked the Mayfair thoroughly? . . . Nothing there, eh? . . . What do you know about Charles Denziger? He bought it out, eh? . . . Took a lot of hay to buy Pattner's store, didn't it? . . ." He listened to a dossier hastily gathered on Denziger. The man had been a sharp trader before coming to Newkirk. He had good bank standing and he had paid cash for the outstanding Pattner stock, including Simon's block. Sam waited until the slow but sure McGregor had finished, then said, "Give me a line to Regan."

While he waited, he considered several angles of the kaleidoscopic happenings of the afternoon and evening. He was astounded to see that it was not yet ten o'clock. Regan came on and Sam said, "Captain, I would advise you to keep a watch on all the retail outlets which might sell silk or jewelry in Newkirk and even all over the State. The insurance company can describe the Pattner loot. I would also advise a tail on Denziger and Grange. And if you could check on the Mayfair, especially a new employee, a discharged soldier called Gypsy Dugan, it wouldn't hurt."

Regan said, "Is that all you know? We're doin' half those things now. Who is this Dugan?"

"A hoppy," said Sam. "I'll be in the Mayfair myself later. Have McGregor around, will you? I'm nervous about tough guys."

Regan grunted, "You're nervous! You're screwy, but you ain't psychotic!"

HATTIE came into the room. Sam said, "Watch her every minute. Remember

anything she may say, awake or asleep. And don't let anyone in here. Have you got your gun?"

Hattie patted her left knee. She had, Sam knew, an automatic slung in a small holster beneath her skirt. She said, "I'm glad you're not trustful of that blonde like you usually . . ."

Sam said, "Just watch her and lay off the ballyhoo. There's something nasty happening. There seems no motive at all for murdering Pattner. He was leaving town. . . . There may be another killing scheduled. This case has become very interesting!"

Hattie said, "How could it miss? Two blondes!" She went back to watch over her charge.

Sam went out and got into his car. The keys were in the ignition and he drove down the hill to town. He parked a block from the Mayfair Club, withdrew the keys, and locked the car. He started to put the case into his pocket. Something was wrong with the snap which held the keys together.

He stood beneath a street light and examined the leather case. There was one key too large for it. He turned the piece of steel over in his hands. Then he hastily unhooked it and placed it in his pocket.

It may not have been, but it almost certainly was the key to Simon Pattner's bathroom. And Marigold Moonstone had been driving his car.

But why had she placed the key in the case instead of throwing it onto a trash heap where it would certainly have gone undiscovered? What kind of mentality did Marigold Moonstone possess, to leave the key where Sam was sure to find it? He pondered that for a moment, then thought he knew the answer.

He walked around the corner, passed the Mayfair, made another turn, and was on Main Street. He stood for a moment until the watchman had made his round of the front doors of the Pattner Department Store. Then he slid into the shadows and selected one of his special keys.

He went down an alley, following the watchman. The bulky figure turned the edge of the building. Sam waited, then darted for a side door. He tried the key. It worked. He opened the door and listened to the clang of a burglar alarm. He withdrew the key and, leaving the door open, stepped across the alley, and stood still.

The watchman came running, blowing his whistle. Seeing the open portal, he drew a large revolver and courageously dove inside.

Sam sauntered out of the alley and went around to the Mayfair Club without hurrying his steps. The doorman grinned and swung the door wide. The hat check girl showed her gold fillings and accepted his battered headgear. The head waiter, Alphonse, came bowing.

Sam said, "Just about time for Zelda's last show, huh?"

Alphonse said smoothly, "I can put up a table for you at ringside, sir. We're sold out, but always there is a table for you!"

"I'm not carrying that torch any more," Sam said. "This is business." He slipped Alphonse a twenty and winked. He walked down through the dining room and went behind a screen which covered the entrance to the dressing rooms.

He paused before a well-remembered door. He knocked and said in a low voice, "It's Sam, Zelda. This is important."

THERE was no answer. Sam waited, then drew out his silk handkerchief and gingerly tried the door knob. It gave. He stepped quickly over the threshold of the large room. The light gleamed at the make-up table, reflected from the mirror and spilled at Sam's feet. Zelda Keer lay huddled, fully clothed, her hands clenched.

She had been shot through the heart by someone standing exactly where Sam stood now, he knew at once. Someone who had opened this door and shot her on sight. She had been dressed . . . she must have gone out between shows, a thing she rarely did. Sam looked at her shoes and along the edge was a slight oily stain. There had been motor oil in the alley next to Pattner's. . . .

He backed away, closing the door. He walked down the hall and out into the small lobby. Alphonse recoiled from the pallidity of his features, but he said nothing. He went up the stairs behind the curtain.

Joe Saperstein was sitting at his desk. Moran, Moscow, and little Gypsy Dugan were arranged about the room. They looked at Sam without interest. Sam said, "I'm going to give you a break, Joe. Zelda's been shot."

Joe leaped to his feet and suddenly he did not look egg-shaped and soft any more. He said, "Is that a gag, Sam?"

"Go down to her dressing room and look," said Sam.

Guns had appeared in the hands of Moscow and Moran. Gypsy Dugan sat quietly, but his fingers were twitching. Joe looked around at them, nodded at Sam, and said, "Hold him. I'll look."

He was sweating. He went past Sam, mopping his bald head. Sam watched him go out, then walked slowly behind the desk and sat in Joe's chair. The three gunmen were like alert wolf hounds.

CHAPTER V

Almost The Truth

JOE SAPERSTEIN said slowly, "Looks like a .32 done it. . . . We got to have the law, huh, Sam?"

Sam nodded. "I just wanted you to get ready. Get these characters out and make them ditch their artillery. You've always been a pretty square-shooter. I'm giving you every chance."

Joe said, "What I got to do for you?"

"Tell me why Marigold Moonstone was in here, and if you and Moscow and Dugan forced her to come in early today," said Sam.

Joe said, "You guys scram. . . . You know where to lay low. I'll front this rap. Aud see if you can get somethin' on the killin' while you're at it. See the stoolies."

The three gunmen went out. Joe Saperstein wiped his face and said, "I kinda liked that broad. She was tough. She could always take care of herself." He stopped, blinking.

Sam said, "Sure. But nobody can take care of a murderer with a gun in his hand. . . . What about the other blonde, Joe?"

Joe said, "Well. . . . You know I wanted to see her. . . . It was about a deal, Sam.

I can't talk. Yeah, we sorta dragged her in here. Then we turned her loose and she went off with Pattner. . . . Moscow tailed her and saw 'em get into a cab."

Sam said, "Did you fence the Pattner heist stuff, Joe?"

The egg-headed man wriggled. He said, "Now wait, Sam. . . . I know you're on the level. But I strictly can't talk about stuff like that. The cops'll be in here like rats in a wine cellar. Ain't I in trouble enough with that broad gettin' knocked off in my joint?"

Sam said, "Murder is the big rap, Joe. I'm trying to save you. I'm guessing that Zelda was in on that deal with you. I'm guessing you've got the ice right here. The cops'll get it, Joe. You'd better give it to me."

Saperstein said, "Would you keep it for me, Sam? Would you? I'd trust you ahead of anybody if you say so."

Sam said, "I don't want your faith. Just the jewelry. And you won't get it back. . . . But the cops won't know where it came from."

Joe almost wept. He said, "Is that the best you can do, Sam? I'll give you dough. . . ."

Sam said, "And you'd better tip me off about the silk, too."

THE stout man despondently opened a wall safe which was poorly concealed behind an atrocious painting. He said, "That I can't do. I don't know about the silk stuff." He handed over a cigar box. "This is the junk. . . . Thanks anyway, Sam . . . I'm glad to get rid of it."

Sam said, "You call Regan. Say you found the body. Don't talk about anything else. You know how to clam up. Get a lawyer and go to jail. Let them put you in the can, Joe."

"Cans I don't mind," sighed Joe. "This thing is all wrong, Sam. . . . It was the silks I wanted to talk to Marigold about. . . . But I guess you knew it, sorta."

Sam said, "I'm beginning to guess. . . . I'll be springin' you, Joe, if all goes well."

"It'll get you a thousand frogs," nodded Joe. "You're a white shamus, Sam."

Sam went down the stairs. His pulse was beating strongly and a slight flush was on his thin cheeks. He had from the beginning tied everything up with the robbery of the Pattner Store. Now he was really closing in on the killer. It had not been necessary to ask embarrassing questions of Joe Saperstein. He already knew how the robbery had been worked and by whom, he was sure. He walked out of the Mayfair with the box under his arm, as if Joe had made him a present of cigars.

He walked down the street to the corner where he had left his sedan. He reached in his pocket for the keys. It was while both his hands were occupied that they came at him. He had half expected it, but he knew there was nothing he could do about it.

He tried to slide the cigar box under the car. He failed and someone kicked him in the ribs. He rolled over and his hatred of physical contact arose and choked him as a man seized him from behind and another kicked again at him. The keys were on the sidewalk, and he saw Gypsy Dugan grab for them, and then he was lashing out, trying to break loose from the iron grip of the man behind him. He never did see the other two, just Gypsy, who was obviously higher than a kite and had some trouble opening the door of the car.

Then a blow rattled Sam's teeth. He sagged, and the man who held him jammed him into the back of his own car. Another blow from the third man knocked him completely cold. . . . .

He awoke with his head buzzing and his tongue swollen. Hands were attempting to drag him from the car. He fought back blindly, aware of a terrible lassitude, of a singing in his blood which made him weak as a baby. There was something badly wrong with him. It was very hot in the car. . . .

A VOICE from far away said, "They almost got away with it. He's scarcely breathing."

"His face is red," said a heavy man's voice.

Sam made an effort and found his tongue was too thick. He let them take him out

and put him on the sidewalk. The man was big Jack McGregor, so it was all right. Jack said, "Ran a hose from the exhaust pipe into the car and jammed Sam in a death chamber! Smart cookies, them folks. Right on a street corner, in plain sight! The noive of 'em!"

Sam pushed against the sidewalk, conscious that he must look like an idiot with his hair mussed, his clothes disarranged, bruises on his face. He stared at Marigold Moonstone and said thickly, "Don't you ever stay put? You're in danger. . . ."

Hattie McGregor's nephew said, "She sure knew you were in trouble, Sam. She remembered you called me, so she came down and got me outa headquarters and brought me over here earlier'n I meant to come. I figured to catch you at Zelda's last show. . . . Hey! That reminds me! Some lunk put lead into Zelda! Same kinda gat was used on Pattner, Regan says. He says do you know anything you ain't told him? He wants to see you right away. They're holdin' Joe Saperstein, but he's got an alibi, and you know forty characters will swear Joe was upstairs alla time. . . ."

Sam got to his feet and leaned against the car. He found a pocket comb and ran it through his long hair. He shrugged his coat into place and said, "Go tell Regan I'll see him later. Tell him I'll have the whole deal for him. . . . I'll call you."

McGregor said happily, "I told the chief that when he said he was gonna have you picked up and put in solitary! I said, 'Chief,' I said, 'Sam'll have it tied up fer you if ya leave him alone.' I said, 'Chief, if you go puttin Sam in the can, he will have you back in the goat precinct'."

Sam said interestedly, helping Marigold into the car, "And what did the chief say to that nice little threat?"

"Oh, he did not hear me say that last," said Jack. "I said that after I was outside. But I knew you'd have the answer, Sam. You always do, sooner or later."

Sam said, "Collect a hundred from Hattie for your help. And stick close to a phone downtown. . . . I'll be seeing you."

The car was very warm and started at once. He drove rapidly away from the neighborhood, to the south. Marigold said, "Where are we going now?"

Sam said, "Anywhere to have a chat."

Marigold said, "You might pull down Cherry Street. That is where I used to board. My room is still paid for."

Sam said, "Fine idea. . . . Tell me which house." He reached into a compartment which he had built into the upholstery of his front seat and drew forth a tiny .22 automatic pistol. He slid it into his coat pocket and parked before the three storied old frame house which Marigold indicated.

THEY entered with a latch key which the girl produced. The house slumbered —it was past midnight. They tiptoed up a flight of stairs. Sam kept close to the wall. He was still weak from his carbon monoxide adventure and he was inwardly seething with rage. Physical indignity was the one thing in the world which he could not brook. It was a phobia which had ridden him all his life. He had been struck down and humiliated and almost killed, and his one thought now was to retaliate. . . .

The girl fitted a key into a door on the second floor. She was about to open it when Sam stepped forward, grabbed her, and swung her aside. He spun the knob, threw the door wide and dropped to his stomach all in one swift motion. The little revolver was in his hand. He had heard a noise in the room.

The light went out, but he was able to see the man crouching. He fired carefully, aiming for where he could do the most damage. The little gun made a spitting noise. Sam fired once more. There was a low curse, a shuffling of arms and legs, and then silence.

Marigold said, "You knew there'd be someone waiting!"

Sam got up without answering. He stepped into the room. The girl followed hesitantly. Sam snapped a switch and the light flooded down and illuminated the body of Gypsy Dugan. He was already dead.

Sam closed the door and faced the girl. He said, "What did Dugan want in here?"

Marigold Moonstone sighed. She said calmly, "Probably me."

Sam said, "You're no ordinary career girl. You're working for someone. Are you going to come clean now?"

She said, her voice weary, "I guess I'll have to . . . I guess there has been trouble enough."

Sam said, "It's past time you talked, believe me . . . Is there anything here we need?"

She went to a steamer trunk which was flat in a corner. The lock was scratched and bent, but Gypsy Dugan had not been granted time to force it. She opened the lid and took out an automatic to match the one Sam carried. She said, "I don't shoot as well as you, but heavier guns frighten me . . . I've got some letters and things, too." She put some papers into an envelope.

The small noises of the affray had not wakened anyone. Sam led the way down the stairs. They got into the car and drove away. Downtown, in front of the Mayfair Club a cop was stationed. Regan's car was at the curb.

Sam drove around the corner and said, "We'll wait here. Now you can talk."

She looked across at Pattner's Department Store and began her story. This time he knew she was telling almost the whole truth. He could feel the sincerity in her from the start and she seldom hesitated until she was finished.

CHAPTER VI

Whose Gun?

SAM drove slowly up the hill, making sure that the car following him could see him all the way. He turned in sharply and made the driveway alongside the Forest Scene Apartment. He slapped the door open and said, "Quick! The back door."

Marigold ran, gathering her skirts high. Sam followed, aware of the lights of the pursuing automobile. They gained the entrance and were inside. Sam said, "Easy does it. . . . Into the office!" He turned on the lights and showed her into the little room with the diaphanous mirror. He was sitting behind his desk, his knee against Hattie's push button when the bell pealed.

He pressed a switch which allowed his front door to open and sat back, waiting, his eyes very bright. Steps sounded briskly on the foyer floor, then Charles Denziger and Paul Grange entered the living-room-office. They came close to the desk and Denziger said, "Quentin, I want to hire you. Too many things have been happening."

Sam said, "I thought you didn't like me."

Denziger said, "That was an error. Simon's death on top of that robbery we had . . . and now the killing of Zelda Keer, right around the corner. . . . And there was another attempt to rob us this evening, earlier."

Sam said, "What do you want me to do?"

Denziger said, "There's a girl . . . Marigold Moonstone, she calls herself. I want her found and brought to me. She knows something about Simon's death. I have reason to believe she was in his house when he was killed."

Sam saw Grange's prominent eyes going about the room. The big, handsome man was not bright, but he had orders, Sam knew. He never took his hand from his right hand coat pocket.

Sam said, "I've heard of that girl. Do you think she might have something to do with your robbery?"

Denziger said, "She was employed by us. She left without notice. I've always thought it was an inside job."

Sam shrugged. He said quietly, "Why, you know damned well it was an inside job! You pulled it yourself!"

There was a moment's shocked silence. Then Grange's hand came out holding a revolver. Denziger breathed, "By gad, he's known it all along. I told you, Paul. . . ."

Sam said, "Too many people knew it —or guessed it. And you should never have taken a bindle-sniffer like Gypsy Dugan in on it. Nor Zelda Keer—even if she was your girl friend."

Denziger said, "You know too much. I suspected you knew too much. . . ."

"Now look at you," said Sam conversationally. "You've got murder raps hanging all over you over a lousy twenty-five grand job."

GRANGE'S hand came up and the gun pointed at Sam. But Sam only shrugged. "I'm sorry for you. But I can't help you."

Denziger said hoarsely, "You've got to die, Quentin! Get up! Walk out of here and don't make a move! Paul . . . find the girl!"

Sam said, "You'll have to kill half the town before you get through, pal. That's the trouble with amateurs in crime. . . ." He got up casually, half-raising his hands. He walked to the door leading to the foyer. Denziger had a gun at his back. Grange was fumbling with the knob to the room where Marigold was concealed.

Sam's foot found a switch. There was a flash of powder, blinding in explosion. Sam wrenched sideways, drew out a blackjack and struck viciously at Denziger's head. The man fell sideways. Sam hit him again, slugging fiercely. He said, "Knock me down on the street, will you! Damn your eyes! Muss me up in public!"

He did not even bother to look at Grange. He had glimpsed Hattie McGregor coming through the door with the big .44 in her hand. Hattie loved big guns. She used the muzzle, batting it against Grange's handsome jaw. There was a crunching sound and Grange skidded on the floor, dead to the world.

Sam said, "I wonder if I got a picture of Denziger holding that gun on me. That's a neat little camera device." He went over and took out a plate where the smoke still hovered from the flashlight. It fitted neatly into the wall behind a statuette. He handed the plate to Hattie. "Take good care of it. Now let me call Jack."

Marigold was edging around the prone figure of Grange, wide-eyed. She sat in Sam's chair while he telephoned. Then she whispered, "But the jewelry, the loot!"

Sam finished talking to McGregor and got Regan. He said, "Come out and hear the story, captain. I've got two customers for your jug."

He turned to Marigold and said, "Jack will pick that up at Pattner's Department Store, in Denziger's safe or somewheres. We can leave those minor details to the police."

She said, "I'm in trouble, aren't I, Mr. Quentin?"

"Just call me 'Sam'," he said, "and you won't be into anything but love!"

Regan came in almost immediately, as if he had flown. He stopped dead at the sight of the two awakening men on the floor. A uniformed cop lifted Denziger and Grange and propped them in chairs. Regan said, "What the hell?"

Sam said, "It's quite a story . . . Miss Stone, here, really broke the case. . . . She was working from inside for Simon Pattner. Simon suspected something was going to go wrong when Denziger got him into a corner and made him sell out. . . . Simon suspected that Denziger was a crook. Nobody in the store liked Denziger or Grange and Simon knew no decent business could be run by such people. Therefore there must be a swindle afoot."

Regan said, "Who killed Simon?"

Sam went on, "Simon got Miss Stone a chance to sing on the radio and in return she was to come back to the store and watch what went on. Meantime, however, Denziger had engineered a robbery and hired a Gypsy Dugan to take the stuff, stache it, then fence the jewelry. But they knew all the fences were watched, so they held it out. . . ." He thought of Joe Saperstein and glossed that part over. He said, "I think Jack'll be bringing the loot back here any minute. . . . Now Zelda Keer was in on the deal somehow, and when things got too hot, she began to welsh. Then Pattner came to me and these fellows knew that. Then Miss Stone went out to make a report to Pattner and they followed her. . . . While she was upstairs in the bathroom, one of them shot Pattner."

"She was the babe in the bathroom where we got the prints?"

"Certainly," said Sam blandly. "I got her away because she had the inside track

with other information. . . . It's all over now. One of those guns on the floor is the murder revolver. It killed both Pattner and Zelda Keer."

REGAN said, "And who killed that character Gypsy Dugan we found in this girl's room, if you please?"

Sam said modestly, "I did that. Nice job, eh?"

"For what?" demanded Regan.

"Self defense," said Sam. "He was lying in wait to kill Miss Stone because she too knew about the robbery. It all comes back to that robbery, captain. Denziger had his own store looted, as the first of a series of moves to liquidate Pattner's Department Store at tremendous profit. He's done it before . . . and always got away with it. He's strong in the banks . . . but lousy with everyone who ever knew him. Miss Stone knows him of old. Look him up, check your guns, and you've got your murderer."

"It sounds thin!" complained Regan. "The chief won't like it!"

"Look," said Sam. "I'm your witness. Check his movements when Pattner was killed, when Keer was killed. Check the gun. Call me in. They'll both burn."

Denziger moaned and said, "It's not true. I demand a lawyer."

"Furthermore," whispered Sam, "if you chuck 'em in a tank in an outlying precinct and hammer them, they're groggy already and they'll sing!"

From the hall, Jack McGregor's voice called, "Hey! Lemme in. Look what I got!"

He had the cigar box. The jewels were in it. He said, "Right outa Denziger's safe, like Sam said!"

Regan said, "I guess that clinches it. Take 'em away!" He stared at Sam, then at Marigold. He said, "But there's somethin' fishy about this. You better have it right when the D.A. takes your statement."

Sam said, "Don't be silly!" and ushered him out.

When the door was closed behind them all, Hattie McGregor came out of the dark room and handed Sam the picture. He could see the gun in Denziger's hand. He put it under a glass and stared hard. He said, "It's a .32, and it may be the right one!"

Marigold said, "If it isn't?"

Sam leaned back in his chair. He said, "You're in a bad spot, baby."

She said, "You'll help me!"

Sam said softly, "None of us are perfect. . . . Pattner made a pass at you out at the house. You ran away, locked yourself in the bathroom. You heard my phone call and no one answered, so you got the idea Simon was gone. You went downstairs, found him dead, heard me coming, and went back up. Right?"

She nodded. "That's the truth."

Sam said, "Nobody'll believe it. . . . Jack'll call me if the ballistics man gets through tonight. . . . But I can't be sure they still would be carrying a murder gun. No professional killer would. . . . Let's get back to Zelda. She must have been the go-between in the case of the jewels. She used to work at the store and Denziger went for her, we know. . . . At least you say so."

"She was late-dating him when you were —playing with her," said the girl.

Sam winced. "So you thought you could maybe get something for Simon by lunching with her, and she got suspicious and had Joe take you in for questioning, but you flirted Joe out of it?"

She said, "Well, he was very nice to me. . . . He always liked me when I worked for him. . . ."

Hattie McGregor was glaring. Sam grinned and said, "It certainly is wonderful how people are so nice to you. Even me, when you left that key to show me you really locked yourself in. Of course I knew then Simon had wolfed you a bit. It started me right. Then Zelda and Joe . . . so loving! There had to be big money in that!"

She said, "I only want to sing on the radio!"

Hattie McGregor snorted. Sam said, "Let's just relax. I've got to think."

(*Continued on page* 94)

SUMMONS TO MURDER

IT WAS a degrading job for a private detective and it had the odor of trouble, but times were tough . . . in his business anyhow. Ed Conover glowered as he eyed the solid row of dingy loft and office buildings across the squalid Long Island City street.

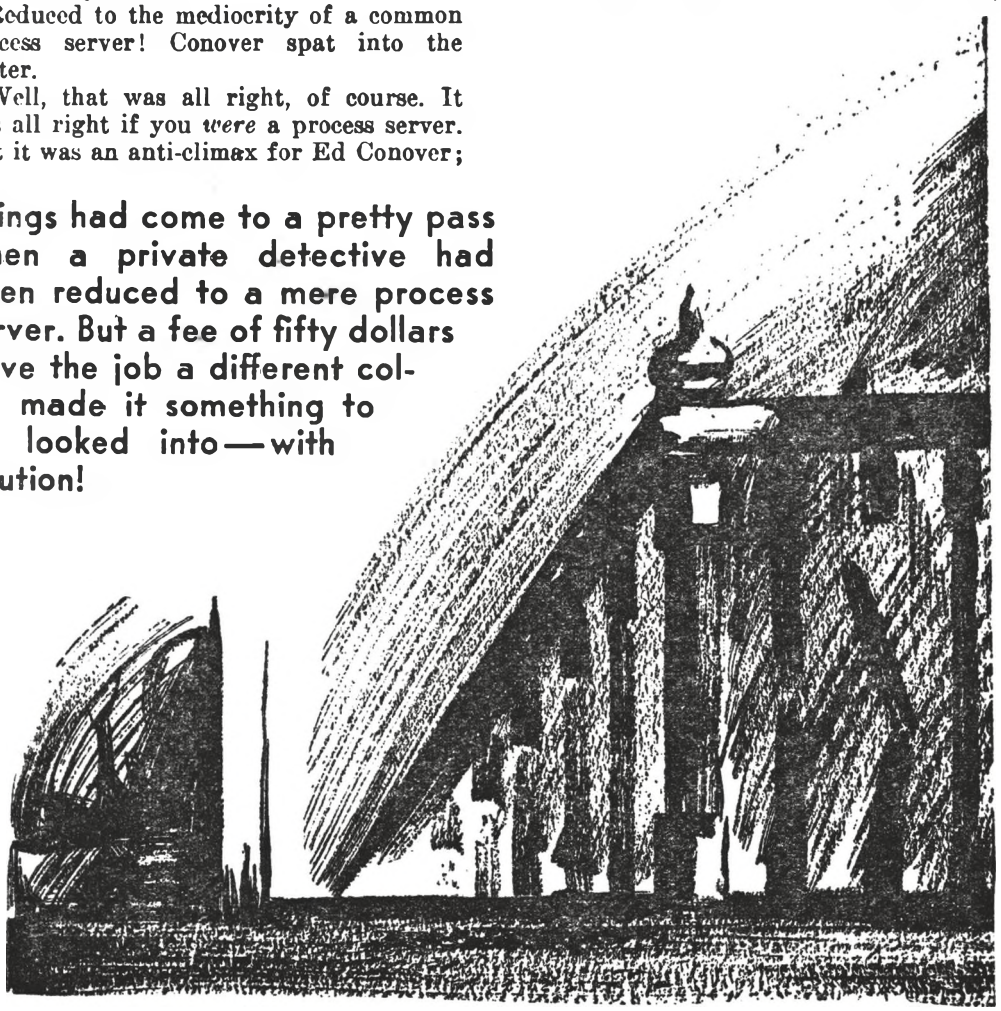
Reduced to the mediocrity of a common process server! Conover spat into the gutter.

Well, that was all right, of course. It was all right if you *were* a process server. But it was an anti-climax for Ed Conover; he had handled some high-powered cases in his time.

In his time! Yeah! An old-timer. A has-been. A once-was. Too old to be drafted, too battered to be accepted as a volunteer. All washed up at forty.

"Oh, hell!" Conover said. After all,

Things had come to a pretty pass when a private detective had been reduced to a mere process server. But a fee of fifty dollars gave the job a different color, made it something to be looked into—with caution!



By BEN CONLON

Conover caught at the man in alarm, as suddenly the lurch became a stumbling fall.

there was the fifty bucks to be considered—the fee which the shrewd little lawyer had paid him in advance.

Conover felt the bulge that was the holstered .38 under his armpit. If there should be trouble, at least he was heeled for it. And he half-expected trouble. When anyone donated fifty smackers to do a job that could be done for a deuce, trouble was to be expected. His client's brief explanation was cryptic, too:

"There's angles to this case. That's why I'm here. I don't want a run-of-the-mill summons runner. I want a guy with experience—and brains—who knows how to keep his mouth shut."

Conover had said: "Experience—and brains—will make the job cost fifty dollars. The rest is free." That was all. Dough on the line was too scarce for Conover to demand details. The client had paid without haggling and left hurriedly.

Well, if there was trouble, that was all right too, in Conover's mood at the moment. And somehow the feeling took a little of the drabness out of the job, took the routine humility out of it, and added the zing of possible danger.

He took a final peek at the summons to make sure of the address. It was for T. J. Finn Enterprises, to be served on T. J. Finn personally. The plaintiff was the sharp little lawyer, Nat Gates, who had hired Conover. The amount claimed due for past legal services was seventy-five hundred dollars.

THE building was three stories of dismal decay in the late afternoon shadows. It had the look of a run-down loft building converted into offices.

Next to it was a large lot, piled high with scrap of every kind. Over the entrance to the lot hung a weathered sign which exhorted:

BE PATRIOTIC
LEAVE YOUR SCRAP METAL AND RUBBER HERE

Conover said, "Aw, for fifty bucks," and crossed the street, a stolid, blocky man doing a distasteful job.

There was no tenant listing, no elevator. So Conover climbed the first worn flight of stairs. The unlighted hallway at the top made him hesitate, and he squinted along the corridor.

"Looking for someone?" a voice demanded behind him.

"Yeah." Conover started to turn. "Finn Ent—"

A sudden hard jab in his back punctuated the harsh command: "Stay put! Stick your hands behind your ears."

Conover couldn't see the man behind him, but he didn't have to see the gun. He shrugged, clasped his hands around the back of his neck. "Why me?"

"Keep shut!" The man's voice was curiously garbled, and Conover guessed that he probably had a couple of nickels in his mouth to disguise it. He reached around Conover's left side, plucked out the armpit .38, then fingered into the dick's breast pocket, took out the few papers there.

The papers rustled, were dropped to the floor one by one. Conover counted the sounds. One of the papers didn't drop. And Conover presumed that this would be the summons: all the others were various unpaid bills and Conover didn't think that his creditors were yet to the point where they collected at gun-point. The why of it all was quite beyond explanation.

"All right," the voice snapped finally. "Pick 'em up."

Conover started to bend. And as he did, the gun pressure against his back eased away—and the gun-butt slammed against the back of his head, down low, below the hat brim.

Conover smacked face first against the wall, sank to his knees. There was a red, burning mist before his eyes and hellish agonies lanced through his head. He groped blindly for a hold on the bare wall and slipped flat on his face. The floor was dirty and hard, but Conover didn't know it. He must have passed out completely for awhile, because when he opened his eyes again, the red mist somehow turned brown. It was the brown of the dim hallway and, a minute or so later, when he got his bearings, he knew where he was.

He remembered what had happened.

And after he had been slugged, the slugger had evidently shoved his unconscious form into a dark jog in the hallway, away from the stairs.

IT was the sense of hearing, more than sight, that told him he was away from the stairs, for it was a scuff on the stairway that drew his attention to the dusty flight which led to the upper regions. Someone was coming down those stairs—furtively. And Conover, who had lived four decades and been around, decided that this was no time to get up, or to move, or to groan. It would have been a luxury to groan just then. But it was a luxury, Conover decided, that he could ill afford. He continued to lie there, scarcely breathing, as he was conscious of the scuffed steps coming closer.

He couldn't see the man descending, at first. Then as the fellow reached the landing and circled around to the head of the next flight that led to the ground floor, Conover got a fair look at him. He couldn't make out the features, but as the man crossed the landing, Conover caught a hazy view of the profile. And of a thin, long knife-like nose that pointed the man's way like a beacon. The general impression was vague, but there was no mistaking that nose.

As the man turned his back to descend the final flight, Conover saw that he was exceptionally tall, with hunched shoulders and abnormally long legs. He'd know the guy again—if he ever saw him again.

Conover rolled, trying to get up. He almost made it, but in rolling he felt something hard press against his shoulder, and his hands explored. The hard something was his gun. For some reason, the guy who had slugged him had shoved the .38 back in its original holster after Conover had passed out.

Conover thought that was big of him.

It took him more hellish minutes to reach his hand and knees. He hung that way, dog fashion, swaying, until the mist cleared sufficiently for him to distinguish the white blobs of his scattered papers on the floor. He fumbled them into his fist, shut his eyes against the pain, and inched himself upright against the wall.

Standing there, rocking, he discovered that his papers were intact. He blinked, squinted at them. Not even the summons was missing.

"What the hell!" Conover's blunt face was set as he pocketed his unpaid bills and the summons. He stooped down gingerly and picked up his hat. He made out the doorway of a barren two-room office suite, where the slugger must have waited for him, but he didn't waste more than a glance there. He went prowling for the Finn Enterprises.

He drew blanks on the floor. It seemed untenanted. But on the third floor a sliver of light slid out from beneath a door midway along the gloomy length of corridor. Conover moved that way.

The thin line of light became a sudden glow as the door swung open. A bulky man reeled out into the hallway, bumped drunkenly against the opposite wall and, staggering, bent forward almost double, lunged at Conover.

Conover started a grab for his .38, sidestepping against the wall. Something about the off-balance lurch of the heavy man stopped him. He sprang forward, pinioned the fellow with both arms, held him steady.

The bulky man didn't struggle, didn't even speak. He was still bent forward, and a faint gurgling sound came from his throat.

Conover cursed, and half-dragged, half-carried the man back into the light of the office. There was a battered desk along a wall. Somehow, Conover found the strength to hoist the limp, heavy weight onto it. He stared down at the lax, beefy face.

An eyelid twitched slightly, seeming to wink slyly at Conover. Then the bulky man's jaw fell open. The head lolled sideways.

Conover sucked in a deep, strained breath. He didn't have to feel for a pulse. He leaned over, moved the lifeless hands from the darkly wet, sticky place where they had been clawing at the stomach.

THERE was just one bullet hole, and that had been quite enough. A considerable quantity of blood had oozed out between the dead man's shirt and vest. The shock of the slug had probably knocked the beefy man out; but he had revived long enough, before he bled to death, to make his last desperate lunging try for help.

Conover felt the lingering throb at the base of his skull, tightened his lips, and looked about the room. It was just another crummp, third-rate office. Kind of like his own.

He returned his attention to the form on the desk, carefully fingered a wallet from the murdered man's hip pocket. A driver's license made the identification: Timothy J. Finn.

"Huh!" Conover grunted. He'd never be able to serve that summons now. Finn had been served already with a summons infinitely more authoritative. Conover was replacing the wallet when a sudden thought sparked in his still aching skull.

His right hand flicked to his shoulder holster and withdrew his gun. "Yeah," he said dryly. "Yeah! Brains and experience, huh? And you walked right into it, sucker!"

One of the .38 shells was exploded. And, guessing from the amount of blood Finn had spilled, a .38 could easily have done the job. It didn't take much imagination to figure it out. Conover began to whistle softly. Whistling didn't help much; nothing could help much right now, it seemed. But then it couldn't do any harm.

The merest hint of a rustling sound behind him made him whirl. He saw no one. But there was a closed door across the office, and Conover's smoky eyes narrowed sharply. He aimed his .38 at the door. "Come out!" he snapped. "Right now. Before I blow you out."

THE door opened slowly his way. A quite tall, red-headed girl stepped coolly forth. She was smartly and expensively dressed, and she most definitely did the apparel justice. She was by all standards a knock-out, a positive show-stopper. She eyed Conover levelly, and he saw that her eyes were green. She had poise to spare, yet he could sense the fear that she was trying hard to conceal.

They stood there handicapping each other for what might have been twenty seconds, then Conover said: "How long you been in there?"

"Possibly half an hour." The girl volunteered nothing further.

Conover flushed. "Look, lady! There's been a murder! Now, what about it? What gives?"

She hesitated a moment, then said in a swift rush: "I'm Jane Tallant. I came to collect the rent from Mr. Finn and—"

Conover interrupted: "You said rent?"

"For my employer. Mr. Muller, of Muller, Murphy & Gates. Mr. Muller owns this building."

Conover nodded. Nat Gates, the little lawyer who had hired him to serve the summons on Finn, was the Gates of that trio.

Jane Tallant continued: "We started to talk, Mr. Finn and I, when he heard someone coming along the hall. Mr. Finn always impressed me as being rather secretive; anyhow, he seemed quite agitated and he asked me to go through that adjoining room and leave that way. I heard the door to this office open, and then I—I heard a shot, and there was the sound of someone falling. I was too frightened to do anything, so I—just stayed where I was. After all, it wasn't any time to come out, was it?"

Conover was looking at her steadily. "It wasn't," he conceded.

Greenish light danced in the girl's eyes. "Were you in this room a few minutes ago?" she asked suddenly.

"You mean was I the guy that killed Finn?"

"I didn't say that. What I mean, after the killer left, he came back again, or someone else did. Quite definitely I heard the outside door open just a few minutes ago, and someone came in, and almost immediately went out again. Was that you?"

Conover thought that over, but he didn't answer her question. Instead, he asked one. "Miss Tallant, do you know a tall stoop-shouldered man with a long nose?"

The girl was jolted, but she covered up

quickly. "This is a big city. How could I recall—?"

"The question is . . ." Conover began peevishly.

"I know," the girl said coldly. "And I'm sure I don't know any such person. And, since this is a quiz, just who are you?"

Conover grunted. "Just call me Sonnyboy," he said. He scratched the side of his graying head. He wanted to know more about this babe, before he as much as told her his name. Her story sounded plausible, but he had no proof that it was true. "Where's your boss?" he wanted to know.

"I'm sure I wouldn't know. He hadn't arrived when I left the office. I have my regular schedule of collections. I just went ahead."

"Is this building owned by Muller individually, or by the firm?"

"Individually. May I go now?"

Conover countered with a suggestion: "Presumably you have a handbag?"

The girl hesitated a second or two, then turned, went into the adjoining room. She came out with a black small suede handbag which she handed to Conover. "The lipstick's in the compact," she snapped.

"I hope it's my shade," Conover grunted. He opened the bag. There were some business statements. A Social Security card and identification bore the name of Jane Elizabeth Tallant. The compact and a conservative silver cigarette case were inscribed with the initials J. E. T. It added up to the fact that she really was Jane Tallant, an office employee. She was probably out of the gun-moll class.

"How about the forty bucks you said you collected from Finn for rent?"

"I didn't say I collected it. I said I came here to collect the rent. Mr. Finn didn't get around to giving it to me before the excitement started."

Conover came to a decision. "O.K. Go ahead."

The girl took her bag, brushed by Conover coldly in an elusive wave of perfume. He watched the smooth ripple of her hips and decided that, in a way, it was nice to see her go. He waited until he heard her descend the final flight of stairs, then moved swiftly in her wake.

IT was hardly more than a hunch, and he didn't intend to tail her very far. He realized that his first move should be to call the police and lay it in their laps before they called him. But he didn't like his own position even a little bit, and he felt that if he could improve it, the delay would be worth it.

Tailing Jane Tallant was a simple job; the hardest part seemed to be keeping up with her. The redhead walked rapidly, almost trotted, along the shabby street, never looking back. She had something on her mind, obviously. And when she turned into a cigar store on the next corner, Conover broke into a run.

There was just one phone booth in the store, and the girl was already in it. But the rack of phone books was right next to it, and Conover made a great show of looking up a number while he strained his ears. The girl had just made her connection and the walls of the booth were not very thick.

"Hello, Anne? This is Jane. I want to talk with Mr. Muller. . . . But when *will* he be in? . . . Oh, but I've just got to talk to him, Anne! . . . Oh. All right, I'll try his home number. Thanks, Anne."

Conover heard her call another number and ask for Muller. There was a desperate note in the girl's voice when, apparently, she found that he wasn't at home. She slammed up the receiver and rushed out of the place without looking to left or right.

Conover grunted with satisfaction. Apparently, his hunch had paid dividends, but he wasn't quite sure in what way. Unanswered questions were snarled like snakes in his mind. One thing, though, was clear: That the mysterious Mr. Muller and his secretary were definitely involved in this murder melee somehow.

Conover recalled the sinister reputation enjoyed by Muller, Murphy & Gates. All three members of the firm were reputed to be keen, but ruthless, definitely on the shady side. Gates was the only one of the trio that Conover had met, and Gates was

undeniably a tricky little guy. Probably, at that, no more so than Murphy and Muller. Conover remembered Murphy as a former hot-shot criminal lawyer, who, for some reason, had gone respectable. "Mouthpiece" Murphy, he had been dubbed, and with good purpose.

However, it seemed unlikely that Gates would hire Conover to serve a summons on Finn and then kill the man. Or maybe it was very clever, since Conover was the patsy in the middle of the whole thing.

Making a show of looking up a telephone number, Conover strained with both ears.

Anyhow, it seemed to Conover that his next move was obvious.

THE offices of Muller, Murphy & Gates were just like innumerable other law offices throughout New York City. There was a receptionist's desk at one side, although no sign of the "Anne" of the telephone voice. A door to the left was labeled MR. MULLER, one in the center labeled MR. MURPHY, and a door to the right labeled MR. GATES. Conover went through this last one.

Gates looked up. "This is a private office."

"Yeah. I know. It's also after hours."

"Just the same, I happen to be very busy." Conover hadn't missed the scratch sheet which Gates had stuffed out of sight at his unheralded entrance.

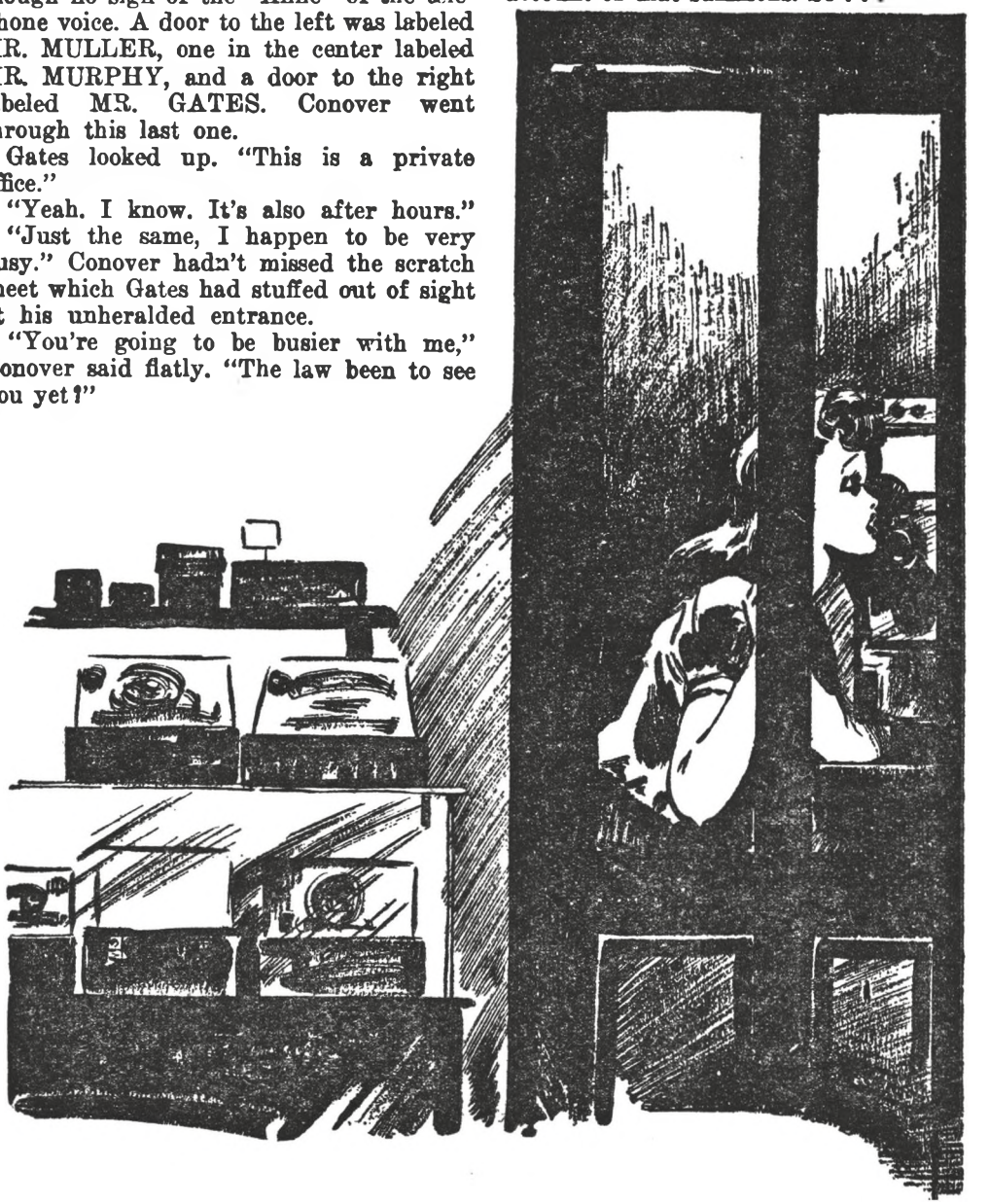
"You're going to be busier with me," Conover said flatly. "The law been to see you yet?"

"The law?" Gates looked annoyed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean murder!" Conover growled.

"Murder? Ah.h.h. . . Conover."

"Listen. T. J. Finn was shot to death this afternoon. He died in my arms. And you're in it up to your Adam's apple on account of that summons. So . . ."



Gates was on his feet. "Finn? But that . . . that is ridiculous!"

"Sure. Funny as all hell. But I'm right in the middle of it, and I'm not playing patsy for anybody. Not for murder, or whatever else is mixed up in it."

"But, Conover. . . . I can't become involved in——"

A prim voice came from the doorway. "By the way, Gates, about that—oh, you have someone. I didn't mean to intrude."

Gates was ill at ease. "It's all right. . . . Mr. Conover—uh . . . Mr. Muller."

Conover turned. And, while he could usually conceal his emotions pretty well, this time he slipped. He goggled at the tall, hunch-shouldered man in the doorwey.

"Oh!" Conover said. "Oh!"

This Muller was unquestionably the man he had seen stealing down the stairway in Long Island City. There could be very little doubt. There wouldn't be one man in eighty with that particular long-legged, stooped build. And for further evidence there was that thin, knife-like nose which Conover had spotted in shadowy profile as he lay there on the landing. Now Conover thought he knew why Jane Tallant had been making those desperate phone calls for Muller.

"Oh," he said again. "And I'm sure glad to meet you, Mr. Muller. You look nice and anemic, almost refined, but you sure do pack a punch—when you've got a gun in your hand."

Muller flattened prim lips. "I beg your pardon, sir?"

Conover put a finger to the back of his head. "This," he said. "It's a bruise. It was made by a gun—you know, one of those things you shoot, but which you didn't shoot in the instance I have in mind. You slugged me with it, instead. Kind of you, at that, I suppose."

Muller put up a thin, rather withered hand and made a gesture of futility. "Mr. Conover, I have never seen you before in my life. As for 'slugging' you. . . ." Muller glowered suddenly. "Just what the hell do you mean, sir?"

The hell sounded quite odd coming from the prim lips of lawyer Muller.

"You know just what the hell I mean!" Conover glowered at him. He realized he couldn't prove that Muller was the man who slugged him. But he'd have bet all he had—which just at the moment was little more than the fifty-dollar summons-serving fee—that Muller was the man.

He felt he knew people, Conover did. And this guy was acting—doing a pretty good job of it, too. Shakespeare was certainly right about all the world being a stage and the people merely players. Conover had seen a lot of that stage, and of the seamy backstage section of life. He recalled a sweet, scented, innocent-blue-eyed blonde who had cut her husband's throat while he slept; he remembered a lisping effeminate chorus-boy who, with feline fury, had turned on members of the cast who were baiting him and had gunned three of them. Sure, this skinny old guy was smooth, but it didn't go with Conover.

HE said: "Listen, Muller. Give me a 'Yes' to this question and prove it, and I'll call it a good draw. Can you prove—and I don't mean by someone like our friend Mr. Gates here, for instance—that you've been in these offices or anywhere else, continuously, for the past two hours?"

"This is not a courtroom, my good man."

Conover shook his head. "No, it's not a courtroom. But you'll see a courtroom before long, I'm telling you! You're stalling! So I'll put it this way: Where *have* you been?"

"That, my good man, is my business," said Muller. "However," he added, "since you seem to feel that I have done you some injury, I may say that I have been visiting a client on a business matter. That is as far as I'll go."

"Is it, now?" Conover was doing a slow burn. "Well, listen, Supernose! It's not as far as I'll go. This is a murder case. And when the cops get in on it, which will be soon, you'll be going a lot further. Probably to the Tombs. And later, like as not, to the chair."

Conover was practically snarling now. "Muller, I know just where you were.

About an hour ago you were in the offices of Timothy Finn. You pulled a little job of murder there. I don't think you turned out to be a very smooth killer, but you're a lawyer, and from what I hear around, a damned tricky one. You're too wise, I think, to stand there and try to tell me you weren't in Finn's office when *I saw you*—coming down the stairway there an hour ago. You go on from there, Mr. Muller."

"And you saw me in the Finn building, eh?" Muller looked thoughtful. "Well, I believe you. I was there."

"And a dead man was there when you left," Conover pointed out.

"Umm.m.m . . ." Muller nodded, unperturbed. "He was practically in that condition when I saw him. As you probably know, I own the building where Finn had his offices. He was slightly behind in his rent for some reason, and last night I told my secretary, Miss Tallant, to go there today and make the collection. Then, this morning I thought of another angle, something I won't go into right now. So I decided to go over and see Finn personally.

"He was not in any shape to discuss business, or anything else. He was dying, obviously, when I arrived. This law firm has not the best of reputations. I couldn't become involved in anything . . . and I'm still not involved. You can prove nothing that I have said. I am offering it for your own information. You very likely don't believe me—I don't really give a damn."

Conover grunted. "Huh!" He was about to say that he didn't believe Muller, when a stocky man walked from the law library into Gates' office. "What's all this bickering?" he demanded.

Conover stared at the newcomer. "This *is* a day of surprises, at that. Come in and join the brawl."

The stocky man was Mouthpiece Murphy, the third partner in the outfit. He glowered at Conover. "Who're you?"

"The name is Conover. Private peep. Don't remember me, huh?"

"I don't. Doubtless I've missed something."

"I wouldn't say that. Anyhow, we were just having a nice little academic discussion. About murder."

"So?"

"Yeah. Timothy J. Finn."

Murphy's eyebrows arched. "Your tenant, Muller?"

Muller nodded.

CONOVER licked his lips. "Yeah, murder. And it's quite obvious that one of you heels—and I do mean heels—did the job. Gates was pulling some phoney with that summons on Finn—probably blackmail of some kind. Muller, Good Samaritan that he is, claims he didn't kill Finn, but left him in a dying condition without making any attempt to help save his life, because he had the reputation of the firm to protect. Which is good for a laugh anytime. As for you, Murphy, I wouldn't put very much of anything out of your range."

He put one hand on the telephone. "So I think it's about time for the cops."

Whether he really would have called or not was doubtful. He had lighted the fuse to something, and he was rather waiting for the blast, if there was to be one.

It was delayed by the entrance of a new arrival. The outer door opened and Jane Tallant entered airily. She spotted Murphy who was standing nearest to the door first. "Why, Mr. Murphy!" she exclaimed. "Are you back already? When I saw you—"

Her voice trailed off as she saw Conover, and he pounced.

"Saw him where?"

"Why, in . . . in Long Island City," she stammered. "It . . . it was after I saw you. I went into the first bar I could find . . . I wanted a drink. . . . And I ran into Mr. Murphy. But, I mean . . ."

Muller cut in with authority. "Miss Tallant, business is over for the day. Yoy may leave. Please have the Bolling brief typed by eleven-thirty tomorrow morning. I'll need it right after lunch. *Good night.*"

"But, Mr. Muller . . ." Miss Tallant's voice trailed off. She looked around her somewhat belatedly, found no reassurance, turned and went out.

Conover chortled stagily. "This is good!" he gloated. "In fact, perfect. I'm very hap-

py. A guy likes to see his theories work out. Muller was at the scene of the crime, by his own admission. Now, according to the charming—though slightly dopey—Miss Tallant, Mr. Murphy was also in the neighborhood. That leaves only our little friend, Mr. Gates, out of the picture. How about it, Nat, old boy, were you there too?"

Gates got half up from his chair. He was not happy at all. "No, I wasn't!" he shrilled. "Really, I wasn't! I—"

"Keep shut, Gates," Murphy cut in. He turned to Conover. "Listen, shamus! Keep your nose clean. Or is it clean? You're not in such a hot spot yourself. You're only a down-at-the-heel private snoop. Your word with the real cops—"

"Would be strong as yours anyhow," Conover filled in. "That past of yours is slightly terrific."

Murphy's face flushed. "My past is my own business."

Conover chuckled. "Yeah. While you're out of trouble." he conceded. "But I'm beginning to think you're in it right now. Back in the old days, the boys used to say that crime didn't pay, because Mouthpiece Murphy took all the sugar for getting 'em clear."

"Yeah?" Murphy was really sore, now. "Well, listen, shamus! Maybe you're right. But at least I pay my bills—which is more than you can say!"

Conover looked at Murphy oddly. *"How do you know?"*

Murphy's eyes narrowed. He seemed suddenly tense. He said nothing.

"Yes," Conover's voice was soft. "It ties in very well. You saw that sheaf of mad dogs, when you dug that summons out of my pocket this afternoon. And then you put the slug on me so I wouldn't recognize you. And then you killed Finn, of course!"

THE fuse that Conover had been tinkering with ran out—prematurely. He'd succeeded in forcing somebody's hand, all right. But the hand had a gun in it.

"Okay, Conover," Murphy said quietly. "You've done a lot of talking. But how about yourself? You're in this picture, too. You were the last to see Finn alive. Your skirts are slightly more than tattle-tale gray, too."

"So?" Conover's voice was gentle.

"So," Murphy said, "it is my considered opinion—and I use the word considered advisedly," he chuckled—"that you killed Finn. In fact, I'd be willing to bet money that *you have the murder gun in your pocket right now!*"

Conover's voice was still gentle. "And how in the hell would you be knowing that?"

Murphy kept the gun levelled carefully at Conover as he looked briefly at his partners. "What is your opinion, gentlemen? This man is obviously the murderer of Timothy Finn. He has the murder gun in his pocket. He was at the murder, he has no alibi. With that evidence, Fallon and Earl Rogers and Liebowitz, all together could not clear him." He looked at the gun in his hand a trifle ruefully. "Yes, it's the only way, really. It will be self-defense and there will be no repercussions. Am I right?"

Muller looked abstractedly out the window. "I'm afraid you're right, Murphy," he said. "This man is dangerous, undoubtedly."

Conover's stomach was reacting queasily. This cold-blooded approach to a murder didn't set so well. Especially since it was his own murder. He was definitely in a spot. He had one recourse left, and a slim one at that. Nat Gates. Gates was the weak sister of the trio, so it seemed, and he still had something to lose by Conover's murder.

"How about it, Gates?" Conover asked. "The set-up should be clear to you, now. Murphy killed Finn—and quite cleverly, too, since he killed him with my gun. Muller didn't kill anybody, but apparently murder—my murder—won't keep him awake nights. But how about you? You're still involved, whether I live or die. You'll have a hell of a lot of explaining to do in any event."

Gates looked sick. "Ah.h.hh . . . Conover, I don't know anything about this murder. . . ."

"Probably not—about the murder," Conover granted. "But you'll be in it deep, if

you play along with Murphy. You figured out a nice legal way of blackmail with that summons business. But when Finn's estate is probated—well, ten years is a long time, Gates. So what'll it be? Ten to fifteen for blackmail, or a clean bill? I don't like blackmailers, but I care for murderers even less."

Gates was silent for what seemed to be a long moment. At least it was a long moment to Conover, whose life was involved. Gates' mental processes were obvious, as was the strain the little man was going through. His little pink tongue was racing over bloodless lips in an endless circle. He turned, almost pitifully, Conover thought, to Murphy.

"Ah.h.h . . . Murphy, I can't . . . can't become involved. . . ."

Murphy was silent, his gun balanced, studying Gates oddly.

Gates whispered then to Conover: "All right, Conover. You win!"

Conover had been watching Murphy out of the corner of his eye. He leaped as Murphy brought up the gun.

The slug caught Nat Gates in the chest, but not before Conover had deflected the aim. He drove Murphy to the floor, holding the lawyer's gun wrist, smashing brutal blows into Murphy's face. Finally, he twisted the gun away. Holding it by the barrel, he brought the butt down in a hard, fast arc across Murphy's temple.

Conover felt satisfaction with that blow. It made them even now. . . .

NAT GATES died—but not before he had talked his head off, and his life out, in the presence of a police stenographer.

"It was this way," he gasped. "Murphy was backing Finn in this scrap metal and rubber racket. But the scrap wasn't going to the government. They were selling it wherever they could get the best prices . . . and it added up to plenty. I found out about it when I was going through Murphy's desk one day." He added apologetically: "That's the kind of office we ran. I guess we are heels, at that."

Gates was about through, but he still had a bit of strength left. "I started to shake down Murphy through Finn," he said. "Murphy never knew it was me, until he saw that summons. He killed Finn because he figured the demands Finn was making on him were a chisel—that was really a smart way of blackmail, though, that summons business. If Finn didn't pay, all I had to do was take it to court; if he did, I'd drop it. And he always did. . . .

"I guess he was about through with Finn anyhow, and when he saw that summons—well, he probably figured he would have to kill me eventually, so . . ."

Nat Gates lapsed into a coma then, and died two hours later.

Conover was shaking his head sadly as he left the room. He had been right . . . but that was about all. And, actually, that was about all he had acquired in this case.

The strength of his own convictions, fifty bucks, and a badly worn summons paper that could only be served in the morgue.

By LAWRENCE de FOY

People who live in hotels seldom lock windows. At least that was the insurance investigator's theory, and, based on that theory, he risked his job, even his life, to trap a murderer

STREETLIGHTS glowed in the mist before the big man, crumpled on the front seat of the sedan, stirred. He groaned and tenderly fingered a lump on the back of his head, sitting up.

"Slugged," he grumbled. "Not bleeding now, anyway."

Another question occurred to him; he fumbled on the seat, then on the floor. Mooshkin grunted, "Hah!" as his hand touched the briefcase he had been carrying on his return to the car. He clutched it and dizzily sat erect. Just to make sure he zipped it open, felt inside. Then he switched on the ceiling light, felt and peered inside. His little eyes began to redden with anger.

The long manila envelope was gone!

The investigator sat still for a long moment, thinking. Across the street, on the corner, a red neon sign spelled DRUGS. Mooshkin hunched out of the car and trundled his huge body toward it. . . .

Twenty minutes later Mooshkin was padding down a green-carpeted hotel corridor. Walking on the balls of his feet, oversized head between bulky shoulders, he resembled nothing so much as an amiable dancing bear—except for his lowering glare which was not friendly. Distinctly not friendly.

FOUL PLAY YOU SAY?

When he was released, he collapsed face down on the carpet.

The druggist's iodine still smarted in the cut in his scalp, he hadn't had his evening meal, and last but not least he had been maltreated by a punk who—

At a door bearing a gilded 824 the big man stopped. He listened, then tapped lightly. Inside there was a stir.

"Who's there?" a man's voice demanded.

Mooshkin said, "Ice water," thinly—and butted the door open the instant the latch was released.

A ferret-faced individual staggered back, right hand flicking upward toward his lapel. He changed the gesture to smooth thinning hair, and said, "Howya, Moose. What's all the rush?" His eyes blinked nervously.

"Hand over that envelope, Whalen . . . Quick!"

"Envelope? What envelope? Moose, I swear—"

"You've got about one second, rat! Before I begin working you over." Mooshkin glowered malevolently, hands flexing.

"Honest, pal, I don't know what you mean." Whalen let his uneasy glance slide over the big man's shoulder. His fearful, placating smile widened, became assured. Mooshkin was puzzled. He turned.

THE door to the adjoining room was open. Against the jamb leaned a swarthy, coarsely handsome character caressing a sideburn negligently with the stubby barrel of a revolver. "Got company, Albert?" he inquired languidly.

Mooshkin's growl mingled with Whalen's relieved giggle. Pettishly the big investigator lashed out with a kick. His foot came up under a small coffee table. It sailed across the room to crash against a wall.

Almost automatically the liquid eyes of the swarthy man followed the table's flight. When they jerked back it was to find Mooshkin shielded by a dangling Whalen, a blued steel automatic—plucked from Ferret-face's shoulder holster, protruding from Mooshkin's big fist. It wasn't that the big detective moved fast; he knew what he wanted to do and wasted no time doing it.

"I don't know where you figure in this, Vaselino," he growled. "Suppose you toss that gat onto that couch there, and then duck back in your own room. Now!"

The dark-haired man hesitated, then shrugged eyebrows apologetically at Whalen. He tossed his gun onto the davenport cushions, executed a burlesque about-face and retreated. The spring lock of the door *snigged* behind him.

Mooshkin shoved the automatic in his pocket, dropped Whalen to whirl about and grasp coat and shirtfront in one paw. Up in the air again went the sharp-featured little man, tips of glossy black shoes scrabbling at the carpet. Mooshkin slapped him heavily twice, first front- and then backhandedly. Whalen's head rocked.

"I want them policies, rat—and fast! After that we'll talk about the headache you gave me. Me! Who's given you more jobs than—?"

"Wait, Moose! What makes ya think I took anything off ya?" Whalen's whine was panicky. His hands pushed futilely at the big man's chest. "Ain't I always been square with you and George, Moose? Why ya pickin' on me?"

Mooshkin rocked the ferret-face with a series of slaps. "Think you're invisible?" he grunted. "You were seen hanging around my car, punk. Hanging around so long I got a rogues' gallery description of you. Now, come clean, before I—I—"

The investigator stopped suddenly. Whalen's head was lolling forward strangely; his hands fell slack to his sides. When Mooshkin released him, he collapsed face down on the carpet. A tiny thread of blood emerged from the short hair at the base of his skull to trickle down and around the scrawny neck. He was dead.

Mooshkin's little eyes darted around the room in bewilderment. The connecting door was still closed—and besides he had been facing it. The shades of both windows were drawn, one completely, the other to within six inches of the sill. The big man stepped over the body and eased aside the latter. He found the sash behind it slightly raised. Little tendrils of mist blew into the room at intervals.

Switching off the bright ceiling light, Mooshkin peered out. The Onondaga Hotel

was, above the second floor, U-shaped. Room 824 was near an inner corner of the U; just one removed from the transverse section, in fact. Pursing thick lips, the investigator estimated the line of trajectory of whatever had hit Whalen. The seventh floor, on the opposite of the court.

Mooshkin considered the windows of the rooms on both the wing and the cross section. Nearly all were lighted, ruling them out—since the killer wouldn't take a chance on being seen. The only possibility was a small opening next to the back of the building. The big man eyed it balefully. The sound of a distant police siren sifted through the mist.

The bear-like detective clicked on the light again, after drawing the shade to the sill. Scowlingly, he got to his knees and examined the wound in the dead man's head. The hole looked to be about the size of a .22 slug, but even a gun as small as a .22 would have sounded like a cannon in the partially enclosed court.

One thing was certain. Whoever had knocked off the little rat could see him, Mooshkin realized; therefore he could see Mooshkin manhandling Whalen. Why, then, had Whalen been killed at just that moment—with a witness to the killing? The scream of the police siren, closer, drifted through the window. An answer?

The big man moved. Fast. First he frisked the dead man, without success. The holster reminded him of Whalen's pistol. He took it from his pocket, together with his handkerchief, and wiped it free of fingerprints. He stooped and replaced it under the stiffening arm, then padded about the room rubbing at surfaces he remembered touching. Finally he opened the door, looked out. Still wiping carefully, he closed the door softly behind him and ambled hurriedly down the corridor.

"Let me out on the mezzanine," he growled at the elevator operator, stepping into the car. "And whereabouts can I get a room plan of this joint?"

"Desk, maybe," yawned the youth at the controls. "Room clerk might have one . . . Mezzanine. 'Tcha step, please."

Mooshkin looked down on the lobby floor, pushing aside the potted palms which lined the rail. His small eyes wandered over the shifting crowd below—service men, gay if not strictly respectable women, a few salesmen. He nodded to himself when he recognized two men crossing toward the elevators, flanked by a couple of uniformed policemen:

Tall, serious Lieutenant McCorkle, of the police homicide bureau, and his inevitable companion, cocky, swaggering Sergeant Leggett, a chunky figure draped in loud tweeds. Mooshkin knew they were headed for the room he had just left—and he wished he knew how they had arrived on the scene so quickly. Who had sent in the call?

Scowling, the big man remembered that he hadn't found what he had come for. And find it he must, if the Carkin Agency was to collect its fee—come hell or high water!

Avoiding the promenade staircase, Mooshkin descended to the lobby by means of a service stairs. Crossing to the desk he asked the clerk for two nickels for a dime. Getting them, he started to turn away, then snapped his fingers.

"By the way, you happen to have a plan of your room lay-out? I'm thinking of making a bid for the decorating contract here and I'd like something to go on, know what I mean?"

"Why, if you'll see Mr. Gannett, the manager, I'm sure he—" the clerk began.

"Oh, I don't want to bother him. All I need is an idea of the place. You must have something here to show room locations to undecided customers, haven't you?"

The clerk smiled and produced a printed sketch. "If this will be of any assistance to you . . ."

Mooshkin took it. "Thanks. I'll look it over and bring it right back." He turned away.

SQUEEZING his bulk into a telephone booth, he dialed the office. George hadn't gone home. "Listen, George, I'm at the Onondaga. Somebody got Bert Whalen to highjack the policies and—No, wait a minute. I tried. But somebody—maybe the

Shielded by the dangling little man, he whirled, gun pointed at the other.

same somebody—took a shot at him and knocked him off."

Frowning, Mooshkin listened to the tinny squawks in his receiver. "All right, George. Now listen to me. I've got a hunch this thing's more than a petty insurance case. To get those policies back, I may have to find out who killed Whalen. . . ." He told his partner his movements and how nearly he had missed being nailed by the police. George's interruptions were frequent; George always had more advice to give than a lawyer. Mooshkin had to use his second nickel.

"Well, unless you can give me more than gab—" the big man started to growl. Then he caught sight of a figure passing the booth. "Call you back, George. There goes a guy I want to see." He hung up on a startled query.

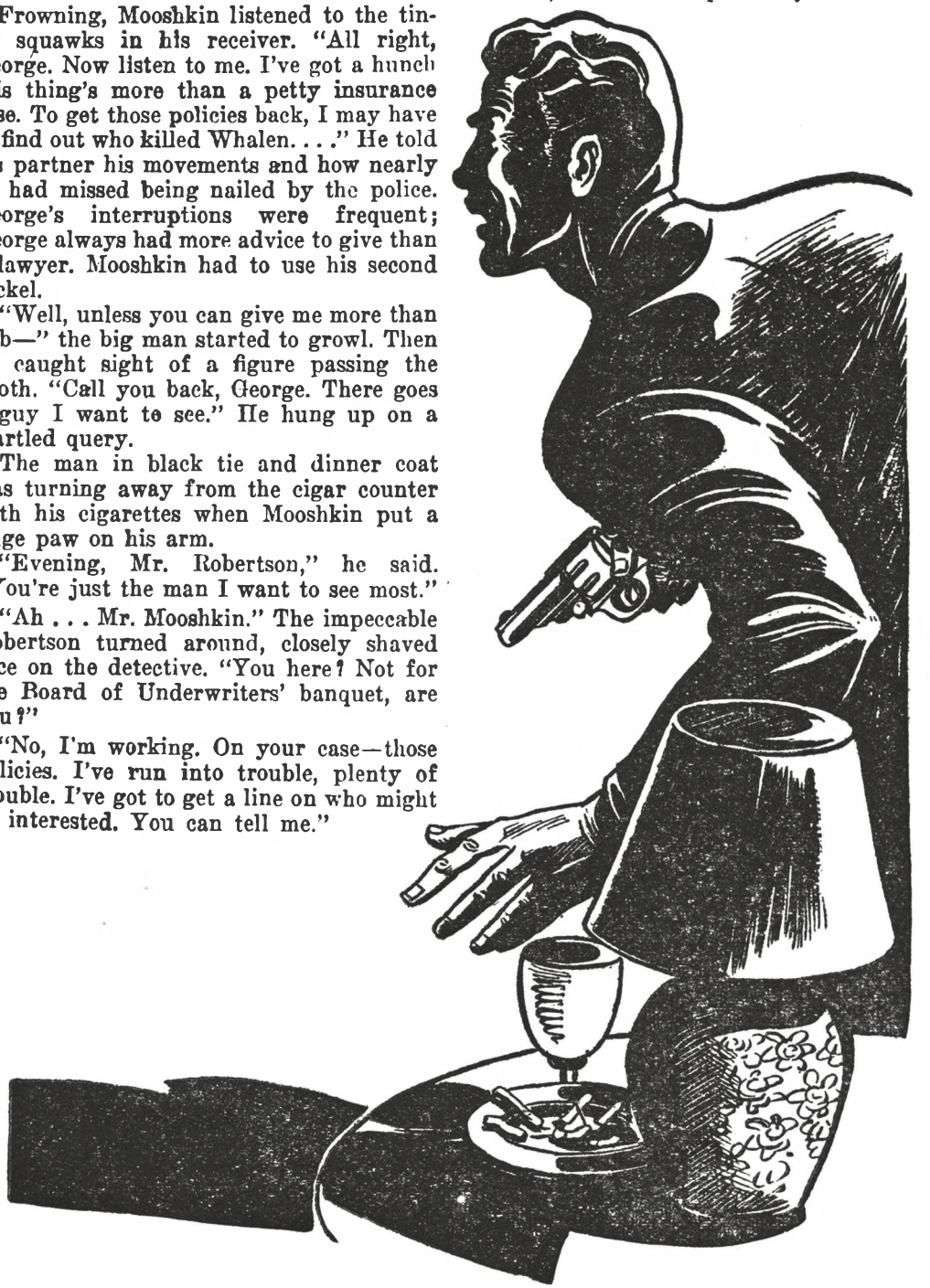
The man in black tie and dinner coat was turning away from the cigar counter with his cigarettes when Mooshkin put a huge paw on his arm.

"Evening, Mr. Robertson," he said. "You're just the man I want to see most."

"Ah . . . Mr. Mooshkin." The impeccable Robertson turned around, closely shaved face on the detective. "You here? Not for the Board of Underwriters' banquet, are you?"

"No, I'm working. On your case—those policies. I've run into trouble, plenty of trouble. I've got to get a line on who might be interested. You can tell me."

"My dear chap, I don't know. Without a doubt, some of the policies you were to



pick up were forged, but until we have a chance to inspect them—Well, how can we tell who's responsible?" Robertson looked around. "Is the trouble here? I've just noticed there seems to be an unusual number of policemen about."

Mooshkin looked to where the insurance executive gestured. Two bluecoats lounged by the main doors, another was peeking into the dining room.

"Yeah, the trouble's here. Up in 824." Rapidly the investigator explained the situation. "You can see what it means to me," he finished. "If McCorkle discovers I was in that room any time within the last month, I'll wind up in the can. You must suspect some one agent or group of agents. Give me a hint."

Robertson shook his sleek head. "Sorry, old man. It isn't to the best interests of the Acme Mutual Casualty—"

"All right, all right," Mooshkin cut in. "You pay us to do a job, but you refuse to give out with any help." The big man turned away. "Insurance investigating. What a way to earn a living!" He stamped toward several leather easy chairs, fuming.

HIS little eyes were still red with anger as he sat down in the lounge, spreading the hotel room plan on his knees. With a blunt forefinger he drew a diagonal from the rooms ending in 24 to a point across the open court. The diagram showed a long, narrow room marked L.C.

A hand wearing a diamond the size of an acorn slid over Mooshkin's shoulder and picked up the paper. Mooshkin compressed his lips and turned. Leggett was grinning down at him.

"Hiya, Fatso. Lookin' over a plan of the hotel, eh? Thinkin' of buildin' one, maybe?"

"Maybe," the big man grunted.

"Maybe it'll have to wait a few years. The elevator operator has been tellin' us some very interestin' things about you."

"Such as?"

"Such as you being one of the last visitors to the room of the diseased."

"You mean 'deceased'," Mooshkin growled—and saw his mistake in Leggett's widening grin.

"Whatever it is, it means dead," the detective sergeant chuckled. "And I'm tickled to find you know all about it. Now, if you'll just come along with me to see McCorkle . . ."

Mooshkin got up and ambled toward the elevators, muttering curses under his breath. The least he could expect from the literal minded McCorkle would be a restricting period in jail. If he could only get an hour or two to himself—

"What was you talkin' to Robertson about, Fatso?" Leggett was in fine fettle. He waved airily to one of the cops, winked appreciatively at a passing blonde. "Saw you gabbin' from upstairs on the magazine balcony. What's his soup-and-fish for?"

"He's at a banquet, here. Just happened to meet him."

"Banquet? At this robber's roost?"

Mooshkin shrugged. "What's wrong with it. Maybe the food's good—I wouldn't know." His empty stomach rumbled agreement.

"Yeah," Leggett said, stepping into the elevator. "Eight, bud . . . Yeah, and maybe Robertson had something to do with bringin' it here, too. His brother-in-law's manager, I hear. And Robertson ain't one to miss a fast buck, for all his dough."

Mooshkin scarcely heard the homicide sergeant. His mind was ponderously weighing and rejecting schemes for escape. The elevator operator reached across, opened the grill and floor door. The big man started to step out, then turned slightly to let Leggett go first. The move was so natural, the detective sergeant strode into the corridor. Mooshkin seized the youthful operator by the arm, whirled him after the startled Leggett; the two crashed against the wall in a tangle of arms and legs.

The big man caught power at the controller as the inner grill slid shut. The car was far down the shaft before Leggett could use his service revolver with any effect. The air of the eighth floor corridor was slightly blue with his curses. . . .

THE resident members of the Onondaga had rooms on the second floor. Mooshkin knocked on a plaque having HOUSE-KEEPER on it. "Police," he growled at the female scare-crow who opened the door. "Give me your keys to the upper floor linen closets . . . Manager's orders," he snarled when she seemed disposed to ask questions.

The woman drew herself up primly, but handed over a ring of three keys. "Them's master keys, for openin' any door. Be careful of them, now."

On his way back to the service stairs—the elevators were out of the question—Mooshkin passed an intersecting hallway and got a blast of laughter. He stopped a' ' peered in. The banquet hall-ballroom was filled with white-covered tables, and odors of food and good cigars set the big man's stomach to rumbling again.

The long speaker's table was on a dais. Standing on it, facing him, was Robertson. He was talking to a man in an ordinary business suit, and sliding something down in the inner breast pocket of his well-cut dinner coat. Mooshkin knit heavy brows at the vaguely familiar look about the other man's back. He started to move closer, then bethought himself of the job in hand and turned away. . . .

The door of the seventh floor, east, service closet responded easily to the master key first tried. Mooshkin, still winded from his climb, stepped inside and switched on the light. Neat shelves of bed-linen lined one wall and brooms, mops, dusters were stacked in the corner. Something gleamed dully under the small square window and Mooshkin stooped to pick up a tiny goboon-shaped bit of steel, frowning in perplexity. Then he shrugged, dropped it in his vest pocket and started to search.

"Hah!" the big man exhaled in a few minutes. He lifted a stack of blankets and withdrew a short, carbine-shaped gun. A Crosman compressed-air rifle! He hadn't seen one in over ten years, but the one-time cop knew it to be one of the hardest-hitting, straightest shooting of any air-operated weapon. No wonder there had been no sound of an explosion.

Suddenly Mooshkin sensed a presence behind him. He raised his head just as the light went out and, for the second time in a few hours, something landed on his skull with a terrific display of fireworks. . . .

There was an alarm clock ringing in his ears. Somebody was trying to shake him awake. Mooshkin groaned and rolled over on his side. A stab of pain raced through his head, blossoming redly in back of his eyes. He groaned again and tried to sit up. Hands pulled at him and Leggett's voice was near his ear.

"Nice place to come for a nap, Moose. Now we'll continue our little trip to see the lootenant. Get up!"

Mooshkin opened his eyes and climbed to his feet. A quick glance told him the Crosman was gone. Holding his head, he allowed Leggett and two uniformed cops to lead him away.

McCORKLE of Homicide was icy in anger. "Mis-ter Mooshkin," he enunciated menacingly. "Licensed by the state and sworn to aid constituted authorities. Well, behind bars you won't need that pretty license."

Mooshkin sat in an easy chair, looking at the sheet-covered body. The room was filled with cops, headquarters technicians, newspaper reporters, hotel authorities. McCorkle crooked a finger at a lad in uniform.

"Ever see this man before?"

"Sure," the kid said. "He rode with me a couple times tonight. First time he ast me the way to 824. Looked mad, too; plenty mad."

Leggett sauntered over. "That's normal with Moose. He's got an even temper—always mad."

Mooshkin tenderly fingered his sore scalp. He looked up to scowl at the elevator boy. "Who's in the next room, kid?"

The lad drew away slightly. "N—nobody. 826, you mean? That's been vacant for a week. Radiator's on the bum."

"Stop that. There was a slick looking punk in there when I first came up here. He opened that door, right there!"

The kid shook his head and looked at McCorkle. "He's nuts. Even if there was

anybody stayin' in that room, the connecting door can't be opened except by master keys—and Mr. Gannett, the manager, don't let nobody but him and the housekeeper have 'em."

McCorkle stared coldly at the big investigator. "What are you trying to pull? According to the time we were called, you must have been in this room when Whalen was killed."

Mooshkin grunted. "According to the time you got here, you were called *before* Whalen was killed. Who called? The punk in the next room is the only one I can think of."

"Why not the angel Gabriel," McCorkle sneered distantly. "The point is, Mis-ter Mooshkin, you know more about this than you've told. Come clean!"

The big man rubbed a weary palm over his face. "Okay, I'll tell you all I know. I've been working on an insurance case. Forged casualty policies—"

"For what company?"

Mooshkin's small eyes glared. "That's my business! I don't have to reveal clients' names to you or—"

"I got the dope from his partner, lootenant," Leggett cut in smoothly. "They're workin' for Acme Mutual. I figured as much when I saw you talkin' to Robertson, Fatso."

"All right, go on," McCorkle said.

Mooshkin said disgustedly, "Well, Robertson gave me a list of policies one or more of his agents have been forging. I picked them up. A little while ago, when I went back to my car, someone hiding in the back slugged me and took them. . . ." Mooshkin opened his eyes wide. "Say! Maybe it was the same one who just sapped me again, down on the seventh. Then it couldn't have been Whalen!"

"Not that time," Leggett grinned. He indicated the body under the sheet. "He's been here right along."

MOOSHKIN shook his head gingerly. "Still, the druggist across the street who fixed my head described Whalen. I knew he was living here at the Onondaga, so I came over—"

"How'd you know that?" snapped McCorkle.

Mooshkin looked embarrassed. "He's worked for us."

"You private dicks," McCorkle said. "You use more petty crooks and gangsters than we catch."

"You cops don't use stool pigeons, I suppose?"

The phone shrilled loudly. Leggett got it. "Gogarty's holding Ciaccia down at the door," he reported to his chief. "Says the kid's kinda anxious to get out."

McCorkle thought. "Ciaccia, eh? Better have him up here. Maybe he's clean, but on the other hand, maybe he isn't. Won't hurt to find out." He turned back to Mooshkin as Leggett passed along these instructions. "All right, go on, you."

Mooshkin grunted out a detailed but not too accurate account of what had passed in 824. He was just finishing when, after knocking, a cop ushered in the swarthy, slick-haired youth.

"That's the punk!" Mooshkin sat up. "From the next room."

The newcomer looked at him insolently. "The guy's a screwball," he said. "I'm never in this trap before in my life." He turned his back on Mooshkin and faced the lieutenant. "What's the idea, pal? I'm dropping in to get some smokes when this flatty puts the arm on me. . . ."

Mooshkin listened to McCorkle's questions, his brow wrinkling in thought. There was something about the young punk's brown-suited rear elevation that—

Suddenly all the pieces clicked into place. The big man knew the story. He looked up, caught Leggett's eye, jerked his head at him. Leggett followed him across the room, away from the crowd.

"Look, Leggett, that greasy-haired punk's lying. You can prove it, if you want to."

The detective sergeant was skeptical. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. You boys found a revolver on that couch when you got here, didn't you?" Mooshkin barely waited for the other's nod. "Ciaccia's fingermarks're all over it, take my word for it. Tell the lieutenant to

spring that on him, and see if he don't break. Go ahead."

Leggett looked closely at the big man, then turned and hurried toward his superior. Mooshkin saw him draw McCorkle aside, whisper in his ear. A quick glance showed him no one else was paying him the slightest attention. He leaned back against the connecting door, pudgy fingers fumbling hurriedly with the housekeeper's master keys.

Lucky they hadn't frisked him, Mooshkin thought, easing the door open and slipping through. He paused to see that his escape had been unnoticed, then closed the door silently.

Feeling his way across the dark room—826, did the elevator lad say?—the big investigator knew that everything depended on getting in touch with Robertson, getting the insurance man to do what Mooshkin wanted—and quickly. It was a much longer shot than the bear-like man liked to play, but it was his only chance.

HE found the phone on a stand near the door. "Give me the waiter in charge of the Underwriters banquet," he growled to the hotel operator. He hung on, hoping the girl wouldn't come to and realize 826 was vacant. Then a polished, subservient voice came through the receiver.

"Waiter, you know Mr. Olin Robertson? Good. Now, listen closely and give him this message." Mooshkin talked for a short time, then listened while the subservient voice repeated the message. "Okay. Give it to him exactly like that, you hear? . . . Huh? Oh, never mind the name; he'll know who it is. I spoke to him a little while ago."

Hanging up, the big man crossed to the door and put his ear to a panel. Outside there was sudden movement. Heavy voices passed the door, big feet pounded mufflledly on the carpeting. Someone rattled the knob.

Mooshkin straightened. The need to get to the seventh floor east service closet again was urgent, but one step outside the door and he'd be nabbed, and back facing McCorkle—with no chance of getting away this time. There must be some other way out, he thought. He padded toward one of the windows.

The room was on the corner of the court. He raised the sash and leaned out into the fog. About four feet away was the window of the adjoining room on the cross-corridor.

Wedging his bulky body out onto the sill he stood up. A quick lunge took one foot to the ledge of the other window. He breathed sweatily as he pushed on the sash, then sighed as it slid up. People who live in hotels seldom lock windows, he thought, and in this instance it was a good thing. A slight struggle and he was standing inside a third room, getting his bearings.

Mooshkin opened the door cautiously. The transverse corridor was empty for the moment—and directly across it was a fire-door, a red-lighted EXIT sign glowing above it. In two ponderous bounds, the big man was through it. He dodged down the stairs. At the floor below he was kept fretting impatiently while a cop loudly questioned a giggling maid as to the whereabouts of a big dangerous gorilla of an escaped murderer.

"Honest, officer, I ain't seen him," the giggler insisted. "Was he han'some? Like you?"

Mooshkin stamped in a small, silent circle. He was ready to wring the necks of all cops and hotelservants when they slowly moved away down the hall. The big man emerged from the fire stairs, grumbling. If he was too late. . . .

Rounding the corner by the linen closet, Mooshkin checked himself and dodged back. The door was swinging outward. A man came out and, looking back over his shoulder, moved steathily to the corner where the insurance investigator waited.

Mooshkin sprang!

THEIR bodies collided and the two crashed to the floor, rolling against the wall. Mooshkin struck once, twice. The man under him relaxed, groaning. The big man got to his feet and hauled the limp figure erect, using one hand to find and

(*Continued on page* 96)

By LEW MERRILL

Thirteen years in prison on a life sentence, and most of the hope is gone out of a man. But Syd had a girl who loved him and believed in him. Then the prison grapevine brought him some news

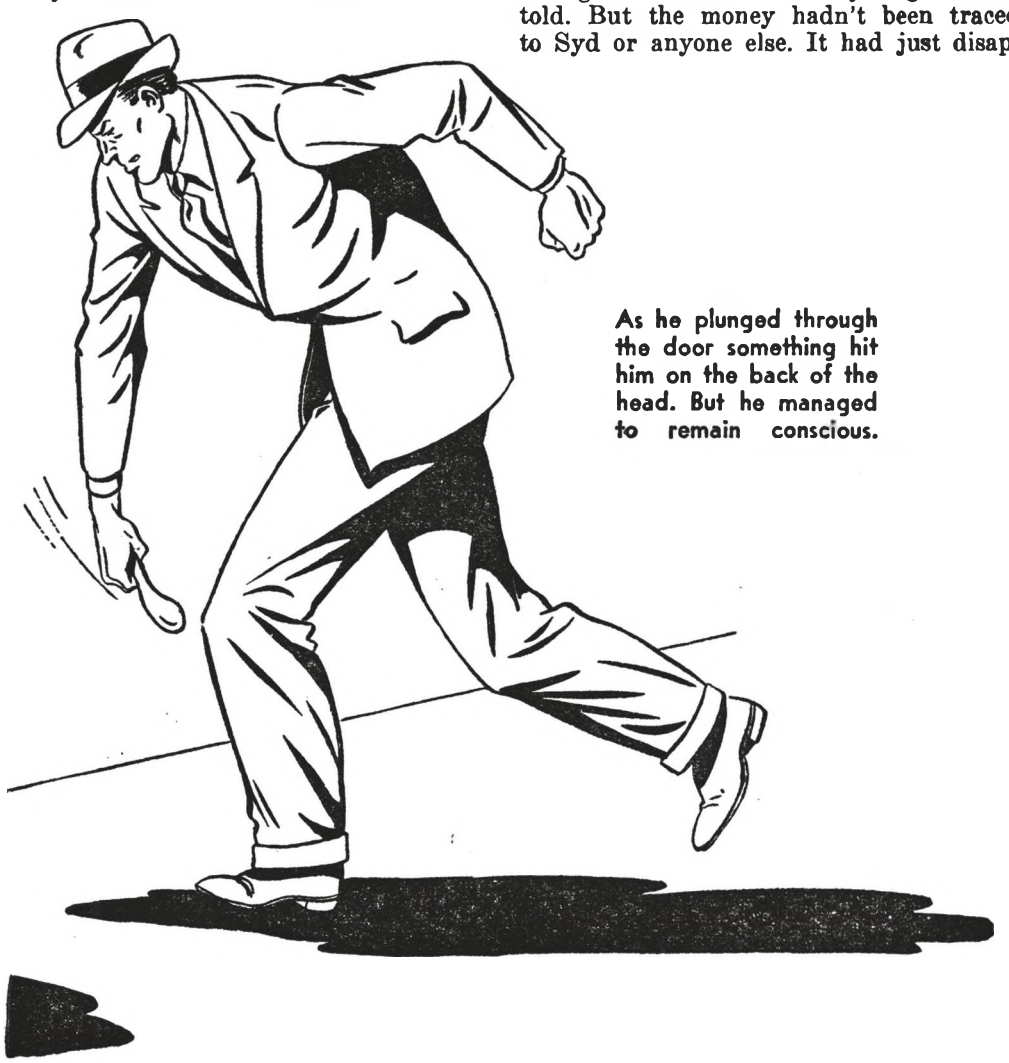
THIRTEEN years ago Syd had been in love with Shirley, and so had Mort Johnson and Bill Hoskins. And Bill Hoskins had been discovered dead, with a thirty-eight slug through his heart. Syd had been out with Shirley and Bill the night before. Bill had had a little too much liquor, and Syd had taken him home.

That was all there was to the business,

BROCCOLI BURLESQUE

but a clever prosecuting attorney had woven a convincing case against Syd. He and Bill had been rivals for the hand of Shirley, hadn't they? The twelve good men and true listened to the summing up, and brought in a verdict of homicide.

They added a recommendation of mercy, because they hadn't been told—the State laws didn't allow them to be told—that the dead man had drawn twelve thousand dollars, his savings, from the bank the day before. The jury had been sent out of the courtroom while lawyers wrangled over whether they ought to be told. But the money hadn't been traced to Syd or anyone else. It had just disap-



As he plunged through the door something hit him on the back of the head. But he managed to remain conscious.

peared. So the judge decided that the jury had no right to learn about this, and Syd got a recommendation of mercy. That meant life imprisonment instead of the chair.

All this had happened thirteen years ago, and now Syd had got a message through the prison grapevine. Maisie Crothers had something to tell him. A boy friend of hers, who was serving four years for burglary, passed the news on to Syd.

Thirteen years take most of the hope out of a man. He goes in, remembering his past, the fellows he's known, the girls he's known, his hopes of jobs, and the program that he's constructed for the future. Getting married, buying furniture, taking out life insurance, having kids. Then he realizes that life has taken quite a different turn for him, and that he's not going to get married, or have kids, or buy furniture or life insurance.

There comes a period of despair, a period of adjustment. Then he gets used to being shut up in a cell at six o'clock every night, and after a while the new life begins to have reality, in place of the old one.

Syd had served thirteen years, and was a trusty. He was in charge of the vegetable garden. There was little to stop him from making a break, because he was unobserved for several hours each day. But Warden Byles trusted him, and he wasn't going to get the old man in bad..

Syd knew Mort Johnson had killed Bill Hoskins. Some day, in the definite future, he had planned to get even with Mort. But now the news that Maisie had a message for him reached him. He hardly remembered Maisie, except that she'd been one of the girls who hung around Dutchy's saloon.

ONCE a month Shirly came to visit Syd. She had been doing it for thirteen years. They talked through a wire mesh, with a guard watching, to see that Shirley didn't slip Syd a file, a knife, or a capsule of cyanide.

Shirley said: "We'll soon have you out of here, darling. My lawyer's going to see the governor, and have the case reopened." She had been saying that for thirteen years.

Syd answered: "Yeah, Shirley? That will be fine." He had been saying that for thirteen years too.

She said: "You know I love you, Syd. I know you're innocent, and we'll get the goods on Mort Johnson. He came back that night and shot Bill Hoskins."

Syd said: "I'll be glad to get out, so as to marry you, Shirley."

"Darling, you know there will never be another man in my life but you. I don't care how long I have to wait."

Sometimes Syd was tempted to break his parole, after those talks with Shirley. Once he even suggested it to her.

"No, darling," she told him. "My lawyer thinks the Court of Appeals will review the case. You mustn't do anything rash."

"Okay," said Syd, and the guard indicated that visiting time was ended. Of course, after thirteen years, Syd knew it was only talk. He'd just got that message about Maisie, but he hadn't told Shirley about that.

He watched her walk away, and his heart swelled with love. He was sure what Maisie had to tell him had to do with getting the goods on Mort Johnson. Shirley didn't like talking about Mort, but Syd had gathered that he was living, and married, and holding down a good job with the express company.

Now, with that message from the girl, Maisie, Syd felt that the time had come for him to do something.

HE said: "Yeah, warden, I'm going to raise you a fine crop of broccoli this Summer. You know, I started the seeds too late last year. That seed book calls broccoli an eight-weeks plant, but it's more like sixteen."

"I wasn't thinking about broccoli, Syd," said the old warden. "There's something I wanted to talk over with you."

"Yeah?"

"Yep. You know, Syd, you don't belong in this house. I overheard something that Mr. Haynes, of the Pardons Board, was saying at the last session. If you was to

make an application, I'm inclined to think you might get your parole."

Syd's heart began beating hard. "Yeah, but you know—" he began.

"I know what you're going to say, Syd. You're going to tell me a fellow's got to confess himself guilty before the Board will consider his case. Syd, you've always insisted you were wrongly convicted. And I don't mind admitting that I'm almost convinced of it, though all my boys say the same thing. Well, supposing you are an innocent man, that don't make any difference.

"The Pardons Board has got that rule that a fellow's got to confess himself guilty. Then why not say you're guilty, and ask for clemency at their next session."

"But I'm not guilty," said Syd.

"Well, what difference would that make? It's only a form. Those fellows don't care if you're guilty or not. But, you see, the State's got to be right. It can't admit that an innocent man was put in the pen. Why don't you do it, Syd?"

"I didn't kill Bill Hoskins. I took him home, and went away. They found him dead, and put the guilt on me. I didn't kill him, warden, and I'll never say I did, even to go free."

"You're talking foolish, Syd. Me, I'd say or confess anything to get out of this place."

"Not for me, warden. But, if I could go free for twenty-four hours, I believe I could clean up this mess, and prove who killed Bill Hoskins."

"How'd you do it, Syd?"

"I dunno. I've just got a feeling I could do it."

"Well, Syd, you're talking foolish. You are here, and you got to stay, unless the Pardons Board lets you out."

"I s'pose that's so, warden. I'm going to grow you a fine crop of peppers this Summer. They're Chinese Giant, all meat and little hole. Lookit how they're sprouting."

"I wasn't thinking of peppers, Syd," said the warden.

"Look, warden," said Syd, "you know me pretty well, after thirteen years."

"I sure do, Syd. There's not a fellow here I trust more than I do you."

"And I answer just one roll-call, in the evening. And these long days, you've ticked me off for the evening roll-call because I got to work in the garden."

"What are you driving at, Syd?"

"What I mean is, suppose you ticked me off for the evening roll-call, assuming I was in the garden. Only maybe I would not be there. And then next day you'd see me working in the garden, the same as usual, helping along those Chinese Giants—"

"I couldn't do that, boy," said Byles. "I've got my duty to do."

"Okay, warden. But just supposing you ticked me off, the same as you always do, and you saw me back on the job next day. You wouldn't have to find out whether I was really in my cell the night before, just so long as you saw me on the job—"

"You're making it hard for me," said Warden Byles.

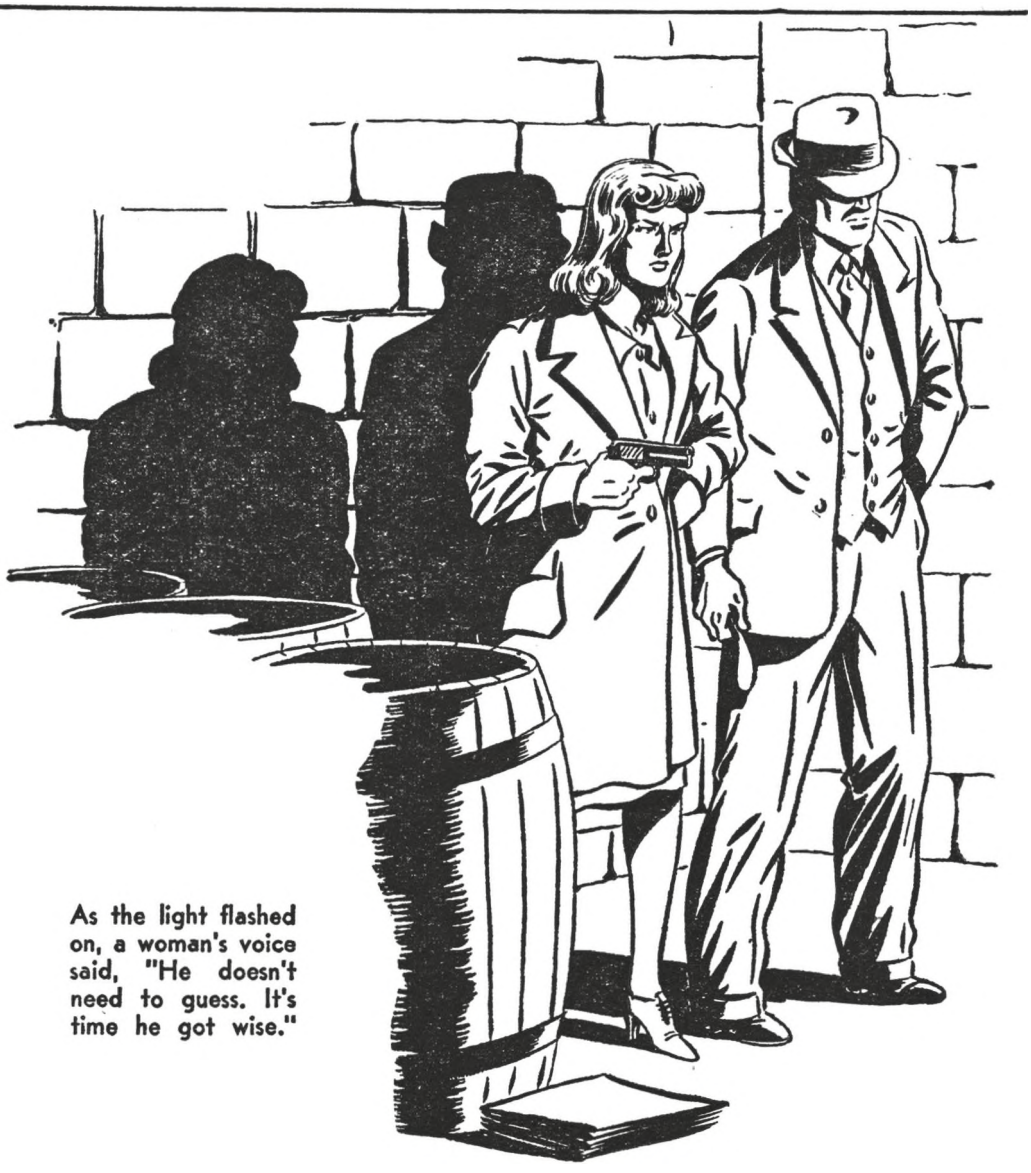
"Yeah, I know. But twenty-four hours would mean a lot to me. I'd rather have twenty-four hours to do my own investigating than make a lying statement to the Pardons Board. I couldn't do that. Those smug-faced reformers, warden—"

"Yeah, Syd, I don't like some of them myself. But all the same I think you ought to play the game the way they want it, instead of—well, just what are you aiming to do, boy?"

"You don't think I'd let those Chinese Giants down, do you, warden? Lookit, they're as sturdy as little rocks, ain't they? But you've got to keep the soil stirred up around peppers. They're a tropical plant; you can't just leave them to Nature in this climate."

"I was telling you to forget the peppers, Syd," said the warden.

"WELL, it's this way. You know my girl, Shirley. She's been coming here every month these past thirteen years, and it's always the same story: she's going to have the case reviewed, and get me out of here. But it's an old story, warden, and it's got so that it's screwy. I want to find out what's behind it."



As the light flashed on, a woman's voice said, "He doesn't need to guess. It's time he got wise."

"Syd, if I was to accomodate you, you know what I'd be staking."

"Yeah, warden, but you know I'd never let you down. You know me well enough for that."

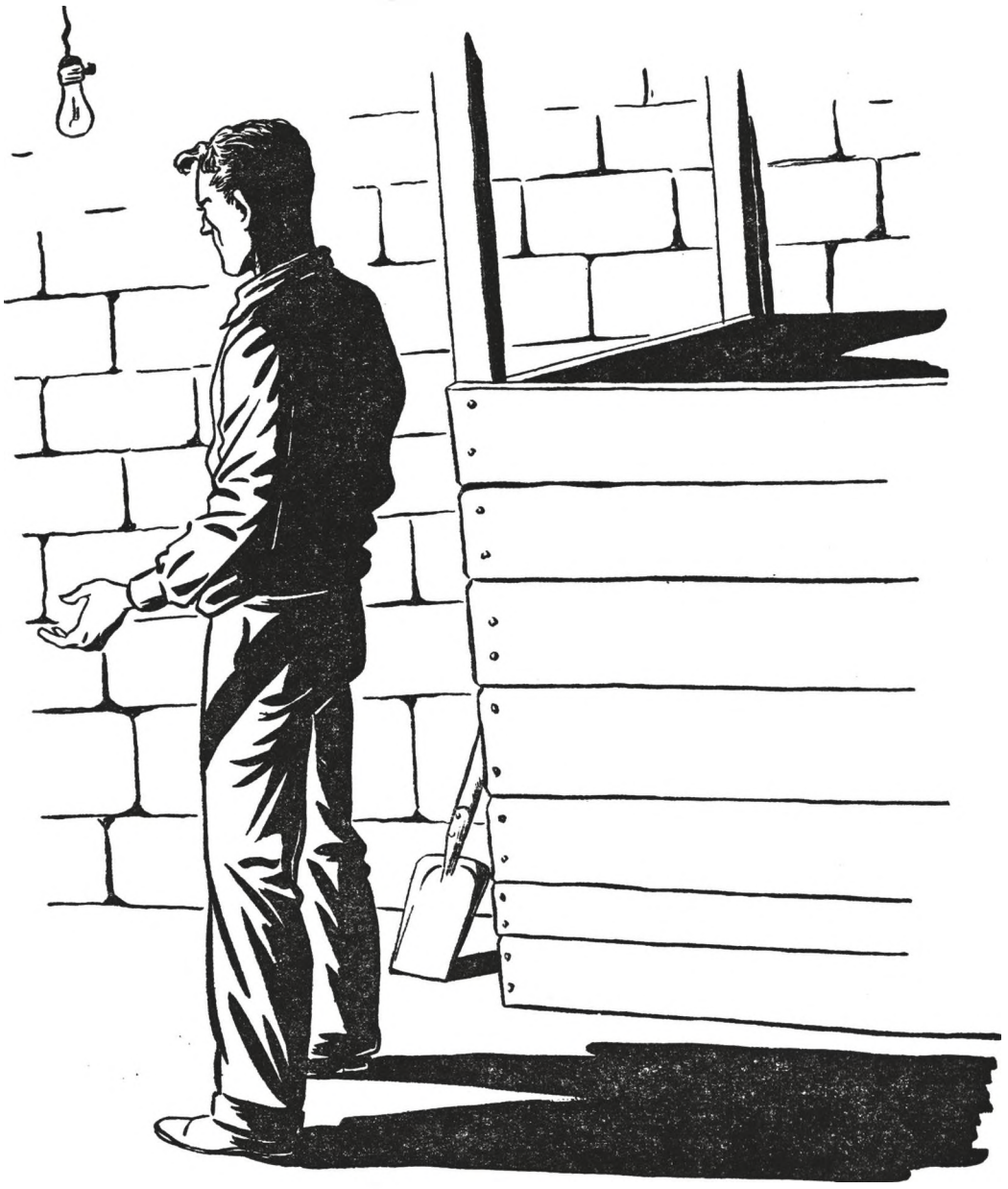
"Syd, don't be a fool. You go before the Pardons Board and tell them that you killed Hoskins. Act sorry. I'll stand by you, and so will the Reverend Grigg."

"Not me, warden. I didn't shoot Bill Hoskins, and I'm damned if I'll ever say I did."

"Then you can go on raising those Chinese Giants, and I wish you luck with them," snorted old Byles.

"But you'll tick me in for roll-call tonight?"

"Oh sure. I'll do that. I can't have routine interfering with the vegetables. But I'll expect to see you on the job to-



morrow. Hell, Syd, if one of my boys was to get away, you know what that would mean. I'm considered too lenient here, and some of the newspapers have got their knives sharpened for me."

"Warden, you know I'd never let you down," said Syd. "Say, this herb bed is coming along fine, don't you think? I've planted it alphabetical, from basil to tarragon."

BEING a trusty, Syd didn't have to wear stripes. He had a sweater, a pair of flannel trousers, and tennis shoes, and all he had to do was to walk across the grounds of the penitentiary, strike the

road, and make his way into town.

He hadn't much idea how he was going to find Maisie, unless she still hung out around Dutchy's, and of course he had made no reference to her in his talk with the warden. But, apart from Maisie, he wanted to see Shirley, and find out why she had been telling him the same story every month for thirteen years. And then, if he couldn't find Maisie, he'd probably kill Mort Johnson. Somewhere, he felt, something was going to break.

Syd finished cultivating his Chinese Giants, and then just strolled across the grounds about the middle of the afternoon, and hit the road. The warden would tick him in that night, at roll-call, and by next day he would be on the job again.

It was a dozen miles into town, but Syd could take that in his stride. He walked along the road, making abour four miles an hour. Cars went whizzing past him, but he didn't thumb any of them. He was enjoying the novel sense of freedom. For the first time in thirteen years he was a free man, with no guards to order him around. If it wasn't that old Byles was so white, he'd remain free. But of course he meant to be back next day.

It didn't seem quite real, strolling along the road into town. It was almost as if the whole thing had never happened. He was free to go into Dutchy's, where he and Mort and Bill used to have their beer, and where Maisie and some other girls used to hang out, and sponge for drinks.

Although Syd had envisaged the possibility of killing Mort Johnson, that had been the last alternative, and he had started off feeling calm in his mind. Now, however, as the town drew nearer, a certain bitterness began to creep into Syd's thoughts. Thirteen years is a good piece out of a fellow's life, and there was Mort, the killer, free, married, and holding down a good job, and there was Shirley, coming up to the pen month after month with the same story. . . .

NOW he was in the town, and Syd was astonished to find that it had changed so little. All the while he had been sweating in the pen, the town had just gone on its accustomed way, as if he hadn't existed. Syd's first directive was, of course, the district in which Shirley lived. She still had her job as bookkeeper for Smart & Co.

He hadn't made up his mind whether he was going to see Shirley before or after Maisie, but he wanted the "feel" of the place where she lived. And here was the house. It was an ordinary tenement apartment house, not slummy, nor yet pretentious. A cat was basking on the steps, and two children, a boy and a girl, were playing with a kiddy-car.

The boy said: "Hey, mister!"

Syd felt a strange tickling in his throat. Now it occurred to him that it was thirteen years a child had spoken to him, although he had never thought about the matter.

"Hello, kids!"

"Mister, you ain't got a dime that ain't working, have you?"

"Why, no," said Syd.

The little girl jeered and the two turned away, sniggering, and watched the passers-by in the hope of better success. Syd was confused and ashamed. He had forgotten all about money. You didn't carry money in the pen. You had credits, and you thought in terms of credits. Syd felt out of his depth. First having kids speak to him, and then not being able to spare a dime. And then he saw a woman coming along the street, and realized that this was Shirley.

She didn't seem to recognize him for a moment; of course ho was the last person she would expect to see there. Then she stopped dead.

"Syd!"

"Yeah, Shirley, it's me."

"How did you get here? You—you—tell me quick, Syd. Did they let you out, or did you run away?"

"Well, it's a sort of parole," said Syd. "I thought I'd find Mort Johnson——"

"No, Syd, no! No, darling!" Her hands were on his arms. "Oh, Syd, why did you do it? You've run away. Go back! The Court of Appeals——"

"I've been hearing about that court quite awhile now," said Syd.

"You're spoiling everything. Syd, for

God's sake go back, and trust me. You kids get out of here!" she screamed at the children, who had drawn near, to see what it was all about.

"SHIRLEY, you still living here, I s'pose."

"Yes, still living here. Living for you, Syd. If you'll only be sensible and go back. You're spoiling everything, all I'm trying to do for you."

"You ever see Mort?"

"Not if I can help it."

"Is Dutchy still running that joint of his?"

"I don't know. I don't go to those places any more. Leave Mort alone, and go back. Won't you listen to me?"

"I dunno, Shirley. I'm kind of tired of everything. I'm going to see Mort Johnson."

"Syd, you're crazy. You're spoiling everything I've been doing, trying to get you free. Won't you listen to reason?"

"No," said Syd. "I'll listen to Mort—nobody else. I'm tired of being kidded, Shirley."

He heard her calling after him. The children added their voices to the clamor. Syd walked away. He was trying to figure it all out. Shirley had been stalling him for thirteen years, and there had never been any chance of his going free. His only chance was through the Pardons Board. But Shirley had never talked about the Pardons Board. It was always about a court review of the case. Something was screwy, and Syd couldn't figure that out.

But he knew now what had always been lying lurking in his mind. He wanted to kill Mort Johnson. He was tired of taking the rap for Mort.

Shirley was running along beside him, but Syd was only vaguely conscious of this, because he was absorbed in his own problem. A bus came rolling up. In the old days there had been trolleys, picking up power from a wire strung overhead. That line had gone. The bus was odd. Syd got on, and Shirley was standing on the sidewalk, still calling after him.

Syd was glad when the bus rolled on, leaving her behind. He hadn't thought about not having any money until the

conductor asked for his fare.

Syd was put off, but that didn't bother him, for he would be at Dutchy's in a few minutes.

DUTCHY'S place was still standing, exactly as it had been thirteen years ago. It looked a little shabbier, but that was probably due to the contrast of the imposing buildings that had sprung up along the street on either side. Dutchy's had been an average bar, but now it was a sort of hole in the wall, with buildings of several stories to the right and left.

Dutchy was in the bar, and he looked pretty much the same as he had done thirteen years ago, except that his hair was gray, and he had grown a paunch. He was standing behind the bar, but he wasn't serving drinks. He had a white-jacketed assistant for that. Dutchy was playing the host, and he seemed reasonably prosperous.

There were men and girls on the high stools in front of the mahogany, drinking. The change had been absurdly small since the old days.

Dutch sized up Syd with a quick professional glance, and Syd realized that Dutchy hadn't recognized him. Maybe Syd had changed during those thirteen years. More likely, Syd was the last person whom Dutchy expected to see in his saloon. Suddenly Syd realized again that he didn't have a penny in his pocket. He couldn't order a drink. Of course, he didn't want a drink. He only wanted to trace Maisie.

And there she was. A rather drabbled little creature, sitting alone, at one end of the bar, with an empty glass in front of her. And instantly the recollection of her came back to Syd. She had never had any kind of intimate place in his life. She'd just been one of the girls who hung around Dutchy's. He'd forgotten her, but now he remembered her, as if her personality had been new-etched in his brain. He recalled her pose, her listlessness.

He moved toward her, and she looked up at him hopefully. "Hello, big boy! How about buying me a drink?" she asked.

Syd grinned. Of course Maisie didn't recognize him either, would have only the haziest memory of him, if any. "No, sister, it's you who's going to buy me a drink," he said. "I'm busted, Maisie."

"How d'you know my name?" she countered. She screwed up her nose, and again Syd remembered that little trick of hers that he had forgotten all those years.

"I know you," said Syd.

"Maybe you do, but why should I buy you a drink?"

"Because I came here to see you. Because your boy friend in the pen gave me a message for you. Look at me hard, and see if you remember me."

"Gawd!" whispered Maisie. "I thought you was up for life."

"Well, here I am," said Syd.

"What'll you have?"

"Nothing here. I want to go somewhere where we can talk. You sent me that message, didn't you?"

"Go slow, big boy. Dutchy didn't recognize you?"

"No, I've been away a long time, Maisie. Seen anything of Mort Johnson?"

"Yeah, he comes in here sometimes, the——! I can tell you a lot, Syd."

"That's what I'm here for," said Syd.

Maisie held up two fingers to the barkeep. "Ryes," she said. To Syd, "I never thought I'd see you. I sent that message to you when I was mad at that——. But now you're here, I guess we can talk things over."

THEY went out after their drinks. Maisie had a small and cheaply furnished room, not far from where Shirley lived. It wasn't difficult to guess that Maisie was on the skids, nor how she earned her bread and butter. But that wasn't Syd's business. He sat down in the chair with the broken arms, and Maisie sat down on the bed, facing him.

Syd said: "Well, Maisie, I got that message you sent me, as I told you. I've had thirteen years in stir, and I was interested, not having killed Bill Hoskins."

"How d'you get here?" asked Maisie.

"I got leave. Never mind how. I'm due back in the pen tomorrow. But I came to find out what you got to tell me."

"It's about Mort Johnson and Shirley—"

"Now just a minute, Maisie. Shirley's

my girl, and she's been swell. Been coming out to see me once a month all these years. And some day, when I get out, she's going to marry me.

"I don't want to hear anything about Shirley. But if I could get the dope on Mort Johnson, I'd be sure glad of any information you've got."

"I've got plenty of it, Syd, and I know you took the rap for Mort. He killed Bill Hoskins that night. You see, he knew Bill had drawn twelve grand out of the bank. It was his life's savings, and he was aiming to buy a farm, down in Maryland."

"How d'you know this, Maisie?"

"Because I was with him."

She went on: "He wanted Shirley and hated you. But you told me to say nothing about Shirley. Okay, we'll leave her out. He wanted her, and he knew she was sweet on you. He knew you'd seen Bill home to his room, and he figured he could slip in and get that money. Well, Bill wasn't as drunk as Mort thought he was. There was a fight, and Mort killed him."

"You were with Mort?"

"Yeah, I went along. Mort was going to marry me. But after he got that twelve grand, he changed his mind. He had another girl, and he married her. He's been sitting pretty ever since, with his wife and his job and his kids. But he couldn't shake me as easy as that!"

"Yeah, go on Maisie."

"I played him for the sucker he was. It cost him plenty to keep my mouth shut. And now he's been getting the idea that he don't have to pay me nothing more, because it happened so long ago, and you're in the pen, and Mort thinks he'll take a chance on my not being able to prove anything."

"You willing to tell the public prosecutor you were with Mort when he killed Bill Hoskins?"

"I might be. I'd do more than that to get even with that——! But you see, Syd you might be sorry if I did. I've only told you half the story."

"That half's enough," said Syd. "I'm obliged to you, Maisie. I guess you know I can't do anything for you."

"I wasn't looking for anything," said

Maisie. "I just want to get even with Mort Johnson."

"You willing to come with me to the prosecutor's office in the morning?" Syd asked her.

"And how!" said Maisie, and the second word turned into a sort of grunting whine.

THERE must have been a silencer on the gun, because there was only a little phut as the plug ploughed its way into Maisie's brain. Syd was conscious that the door of the room had opened softly, and closed again softly, and that the phut had sounded in the interim.

One moment he was sitting, talking to Maisie, and the next, the girl had crumpled on the bed. Syd didn't realize what had happened to her, until he bent over her, to investigate, by the light of the lamp across the street.

Maisie had been killed instantly, for the whole frontal portion of her head had been shattered. And for about six seconds Syd just stared at her, unable to make his mental process coordinate. Then he realized that Mort Johnson must have trailed them to Maisie's room, and had shot the girl to stop her mouth.

Syd leaped to his feet, and hurled himself at the door. It gave, and he went staggering into the dark hallway. He could hear the footsteps of someone running down the bottom flight of stairs. But nobody was in evidence when he reached the squalid entrance. He stopped, looking out, and the implement that struck him on the back of the head wasn't so much a hurt as a surprise. Syd stumbled, but he kept his wits, and grappled for his attacker. He caught him, eluding the monkey-wrench. Mort Johnson lost it, and it clattered on the floor. The two men traded punches, grappled, and went plunging down the lowest flight of steps that led to the cellar.

It was those two last broken steps that were too bad for Mort, who was underneath. He went limp, and Syd dragged him over toward the empty furnace, near the window, that admitted a little light from the street. He felt for Mort's gun, but there didn't seem to be one. As he bent over him, Mort opened his eyes and groaned.

"You dirty, murderous rat!" Syd said. "You killed that girl, and you killed Bill Hoskins thirteen years ago, and you're going to the chair. See?"

It was odd, looking into Mort's face, waiting for the ultimate surrender. They'd been good friends, thirteen years before. Syd couldn't figure out what had happened to them, that he should have been in the pen, and had to go back, with Shirley waiting for him, and that Mort should have committed those two murders.

It was all just as incredible as most of the things in life. Those broccoli, for instance. You planted a tiny seed, and in about twelve weeks you were eating the blue-green buds of a great plant. That had never made sense to Syd. No more than squatting over Mort, waiting for a cop. Syd wasn't a philosopher, but any fellow could tell you that life was screwy.

Mort gasped: "Listen, Syd. Maybe we can fix things up somehow."

Syd answered: "Not after those thirteen years I've done for your killing of Bill. And not after that cold-blooded murder of Maisie. She's lying on her bed, with the front part of her head blown to bits. I'd sooner let a mad dog go than you."

"Maisie? What d'you mean? I didn't kill Maisie. You're crazy, Syd."

"Lying won't help you. You knew I was in her room with her, and you knew she was going to turn you in for murdering Bill Hoskins, because you'd stopped giving her money. And you sneaked into the room and shot her. I dunno why you didn't take a shot at me. Maybe you were too scared, you dirty sneak-thief——"

But Mort's reaction was too genuine not to impress Syd. "I don't know what you're talking about," Mort shouted. "Listen: Dutchy recognized you in his joint, and he guessed you were hunting for me. Okay, maybe I killed Bill Hoskins, and maybe Dutchy knew, and was my pal. Maybe I didn't kill Bill. Anyway, Dutchy recognized you, and told me you'd been in his place with Maisie, and gone home with her.

"And maybe I aimed to talk things over with both of you. But you're crazy to say

that I killed Maisie. I don't believe she's dead."

"Okay. Then why were you laying for me with that monkey-wrench?" asked Syd.

"You can go on guessing," sneered Mort Johnson.

The cellar light flashed on. "He doesn't need to guess," came a woman's voice. "It's time he got wise."

AND that was Shirley, standing under the light, with a gun in her hand, covering Syd. "You fool, I told you you were spoiling everything," she said. Her eyes and face were ironic with mirth and bitterness. "Get up, Mort. And you stay there," she screamed at Syd. "This is the time you're listening to me."

Syd looked into the muzzle of the gun and grinned crookedly. This was the screwiest part of all. He guessed now that it was Shirley who had killed Maisie. And his own life hung on his listening.

"Go ahead," said Syd.

"Thirteen years—God, to think of it! Thirteen years, once a month, which makes more than a hundred and fifty times, me coming out to the pen and handing you that stuff about getting your case reviewed, or interesting the governor——"

"I knew it was all screwy, Shirley," said Syd, "but don't blame it on me. That's why I came into town——"

"It was a living hell I've been through, having to hand you out that line, pretending you were going to be set free, and that I was your girl, and hoping you'd die in the pen, and that I'd never see your face again."

"You didn't have to come."

"I didn't, eh? I didn't have to do all I could to keep you from getting free, and sending my husband to the chair? I didn't? I'm damned if I know why I'm not shooting you now, except that I once liked you. You didn't have to break away, and put me on this spot, but now you've done it."

"Just who is this husband you're talking about, Shirley?" asked Syd.

"Mort Johnson! We've been married eleven years, and he's the father of my children, who you saw in the street today. He's got a good job, and I'm damned if

you re going to break into our lives and take their dad away from my kids!

"Thirteen times twelve—I don't know how much that makes, but it's more than a hundred and fifty times I've been out to that damned pen. Once a month, to protect Mort and the kids. Do you begin to get it now, Syd?"

"Yeah, sure I do." said Syd. "It must have driven you nuts."

"Never mind that. What are you going to do? I'd shoot you like——"

"Like you shot Maisie? Well, I'm getting wise fast, Shirley. I've been in the pen a long time, and it's got to be quite homelike to me. I guess I'll just go back."

"If you ever come near me again, I'll shoot you, like the rat you are!"

"I guess we won't meet again," said Syd. "So you can stop worrying, Shirley. Swell kids you've raised. I'm sorry I couldn't drop in once in a while and see them, but——"

"Why don't you shoot the sucker, and get it over with?" asked Mort.

"No, I guess he understands. No, Mort, I'm kind of fond of him. And it's a load off my mind, not having to go out to the pen any more, and tell him his case is going to be reviewed. Okay, Syd, get the hell out of here!"

WARDEN BYLES grinned happily when he saw Syd at work in the garden. He'd never done anything like that before. He'd never let a convicted man take a holiday in town, and he'd been a little scared, even about Syd. But there was Syd, hoeing his rows of vegetables.

He walked up to him. Syd didn't look up, just kept on hoeing. At last the warden said: "Any luck, Syd?"

"Yeah," said Syd, resting his sweating hands. "And, again, no. I mean, it hasn't helped me like I'd hoped. I'd thought I might be able to clear myself. That part was a flop. But I've got rid of Shirley."

"That so? I thought she was your girl, going to marry you some day. Why, Syd, that's what touched the heart of Haynes, of the Pardons Board. He said a fellow couldn't be all bad, if he had a faithful, trusting woman coming to see him, month after month, and working for him——"

"Well, I found out she'd been married for eleven years, and raising a family. I'm sure glad you gave me that break, warden. I've got that woman off my mind, and that means a lot to me."

"Well, boy, that being so, I guess you'd best forget your principles, and put in an application to the Board, telling them you're guilty, and that you've reformed. You know, Syd, we've got to take life as is comes, and principles never helped anyone yet."

"Maybe I'll do it, warden. This place has become a sort of home to me, but I'd like to go free. Maybe I'll get me a job, and find some girl. . . .

"You know, warden, life's just the screwiest thing that was ever invented. Take me, now. Here I am, jailed for a murder that I don't know a thing about. And I know who the murderer is, and he don't worry me any more.

"And look at these broccoli. Look just like little cabbages, don't they? And the joke is, they're not cabbages, and they know they're not. Instead of forming into a ball, they're going to throw out those bluish buds.

"And we're going to eat them. That's the screwiest part of it, as far as they're concerned, and it's not in their comprehension. Yeah, warden, life's screwy enough for me to put in an application to the Pardons Board. Only don't tell old Haynes that Shirley won't be coming here any more. That might give me a black eye—him not understanding how crazy life is.

NEXT MONTH——

"DEATH JOINS THE STRIKE"

By ROGER TORREY

DEATH IS ELECTED

(*Continued from page* 35)

"You mean thinking I'd go in with him on the steal, if we got the dough?"

"Well, yes, to be honest."

"Probably. I'll be honest too. If it had been Klasson who had the money, maybe I would have. I'd have figured that robbing the Brothers wasn't really theft. That they'd donated the money to a poor cause and that they deserved to lose it."

"Well, you're frank, anyway, Mr. Donaghan."

"Crowley figured it was too much for him to handle by himself, that's the only reason he wanted me. And it turned out it was too tough for him to handle with me along. That's all."

Shires sighed and said he could see a lot of work looming up—but that they'd check it out if it took them the duration. And that if the other branches of the Brothers of Man had all collected campaign fees for Vanderwort's running for President, the checking would take them all over the country.

And I said I'd be interested to hear how it all came out and gave him my office address in the city so that he could tell me about it.

THEN I didn't hear a word for almost six months—until I opened up one morning and had Shires for my first visitor. We had lunch together and then dinner—it took him that long to give me the dope, which boiled down was simple enough.

The Brothers of Man were disbanded, lock, stock, and barrel. A few of them, the ringleaders, were facing prosecution as enemy aliens. Most of them had collected money, using the 'Vanderwort for President' scheme as an excuse, and the money was being confiscated. Klasson had turned Government witness, which had helped, and he would get out of it with not more

than ten years to serve. Half a dozen sailors had done the same, which was enough to prove that my idea of helping Nazi prisoners escape had reason behind it.

And the Government had the hundred and twenty-two thousand that Klasson had collected from the Melville brethren, less what he and Colclough had spent with Al Ringer, of course, and Ringer and his pal had lost out on a murder charge and had been sentenced to twenty years to life on it.

There was one more thing that bothered me and I was almost afraid to ask about it. In fact I didn't, not until I was dropping Shires at his hotel, late that evening.

I said: "About Jim Crowley. These trials were held behind closed doors so I don't know. Did it come out about him? I mean about him going haywire at the end like that?"

"It did not. We made it look as though he was giving the Government a helping hand. For that matter, Donaghan, we white-washed you the same way. Those two deputies got the credit for the actual arrests, of course, so there was no need of dragging you in."

I said that was fine and meant every word of it. I'd helped break up a rotten thing, all right, but I hadn't done any of it on purpose. At least I hadn't right at the start—I'd just been going along with a friend.

It had worked out all right, but I wasn't too proud of myself in any way.

THE VAGABOND BLONDE

(*Continued from page* 57)

THE moments sped by. Finally Sam said, "You'd better take my car and go to town and catch the late train for New York. Use your real name, take your radio chance, and forget about Newkirk. You'd better go now. Maybe they won't bring you back. Because your story is lousy, baby!"

He took two hundred dollars out of his drawer and gave it to her. She said falteringly, "You want me to go . . . now?"

Sam said, "Yes. I'll pick up the car later."

She said, "But . . . Well . . . maybe you're right."

She paused by the door and looked back at him. Her eyes were large and innocent. She said, "I don't know why you're sending me away, but I'll see you again, won't I?"

"Indubitably!" said Sam and Hattie together. She went out.

Hattie said, "She shot Pattner!"

"Sure," nodded Sam. "Denziger could not have got out there and back. I'm pretty sure of it. But Pattner was in on the deal and was going out to handle the silk end. That was his specialty, silk. Everyone in town knows he started in that business. Denziger was double-crossing him on the jewel deal. But Denziger was using Zelda, who was crossing him up by trying it on Joe Saperstein. Joe was the fall guy while he held those stones. . . ."

Hattie said, "You're turnin' loose a murderess!"

Sam said, "I knew it was an inside robbery job when I tried their alarm. . . . I know that type and it's actually burglar proof. Zelda was the real tie-up . . . and I was lucky there. You see, the reason I quit playing with Zelda was because I found she was two-timing me with Denziger. . . ."

The phone rang. Sam picked it up. Jack McGregor's voice said, "It was the gun, all right! The one Denziger held on you! And whattaya think? The jerk claims it ain't his gun!"

"You can't blame him," said Sam. "Has he talked at all?"

"I think we got him pinned on the Keer dame kill," said Jack. "The other ain't so kosher. . . . But the D.A. will try him on the dame, on account of it's more sensational!"

Sam said, "Fine, Jack. Don't forget that hundred I owe you!"

Hattie scolded, "Two hundred to Carey. One to Jack. Two for the blonde hussy. You only got one thousand from Pattner!"

"It'll cost me the other five hundred, too," said Sam. "Now I wonder how Marigold planted that gun on Denziger? It must have been when she was out, that time she got away from here, when you were supposed to be watching her. Denziger was willing to swap Keer for her, even then, before Marigold informed him that Keer was crossing him on the jewels."

"She did that?" asked Hattie.

"Marigold admitted she saw Denziger this afternoon, in his office," said Sam. "She is a very bright girl. She also saved my life, when Grange, Denziger, and Gypsy Dugan chucked me into my car and turned on the gas. . . . She probably killed Simon Pattner in self defense."

The phone rang again. Jack's voice said excitedly, "It's broke. The gun is Simon Pattner's own gat! Denziger must have stole it from him!"

Sam pronged the instrument very gently. He said, "There you go, Hattie. Marigold took the gun away from Simon Pattner and it went off. No doubt about it."

Hattie said, "And you'll be going to New York to see her the first chance you get!"

Sam pushed back his chair. He said, "The nice thing about it is that Joe Saperstein is innocent and now he'll be sprung and I collect a thousand from him—clear profit. . . . What did you say? Go to New York to see a blonde as smart and capable as that one? Am I simple-minded, woman? Go to bed!"

FOUL PLAY YOU SAY?

(*Continued from page* 79)

withdraw from the inside breast pocket a long manila envelope.

"You double-dealing, yellow-livered weasel!" Mooshkin drew back his arm to deliver a looping wallop. The blow never fell. His arm was seized and the envelope snatched out of his hand.

"What goes, what goes?" drawled Sergeant Leggett. Mooshkin opened his fist and allowed his captive to fall back against the wall, holding his jaw in both hands.

"There's your murderer, Leggett," he said moodily.

"Him?" For once Leggett was at a loss. "Not—not *Robertson!*"

"Yeah. Getting so you can't trust anybody nowadays. Robertson. He and Whalen and Ciaccia were in it together. Whalen and Ciaccia got the policies from me and Robertson double-hired the greaser to get the policies when Whalen tried to hold them out for more money. Then, to make sure Whalen didn't talk—as he probably threatened to do—Robertson arranged to get keys from his brother-in-law, Gannett, to get into that linen closet and plug the ferret-faced little chump. My arriving at 824 and slapping him around was unexpected, but Robertson figured it to pay off if he phoned you boys before he shot Whalen. The plan was, you were suppose to catch me fiddling around up there."

"We nearly did, too," Leggett nodded. "But how did you manage to catch Robertson, just now. Some luck!"

"Luck, my foot," growled Mooshkin. "I figured it was Ciaccia who slugged me in the service closet and took the Crosman I had just found hidden there. Well, if Ciaccia hadn't had a chance to tell Robertson, I thought, before your cop put the arm on him, Robertson would bite. I called the ballroom and told the headwaiter to tell him the cops were after the gun and he better get it out of the closet pronto. He fell for it, thinking it was Ciaccia who called, and rushed up here."

"I want my lawyer," Robertson mumbled dazedly.

"You'll probably need him," Leggett agreed. He raised an eyebrow at Mooshkin, grinning sheepishly. "I still don't get the motive behind all this, big boy."

"Easy enough to figure. Robertson's been knocking down from the sale of unregistered policies—policies supposedly issued by his company, but never listed. When the state auditors started checking up, Robertson was in a spot. So he cooks up the tale that the policies in question must have been forged; even hires our agency to pick them up for examination. Yeah—but when I do pick them up . . . Wham! I'm slugged. Home-made evidence that his idea was right, but nothing to use in court. Except my testimony as to what happened. How would I be expected to know whether the policies were actually forged or not?"

Leggett's jaw dropped; he turned to look at the disheveled insurance executive with something like awe. "Whaddya know?" he said. "The guy almost had a crime that paid!"

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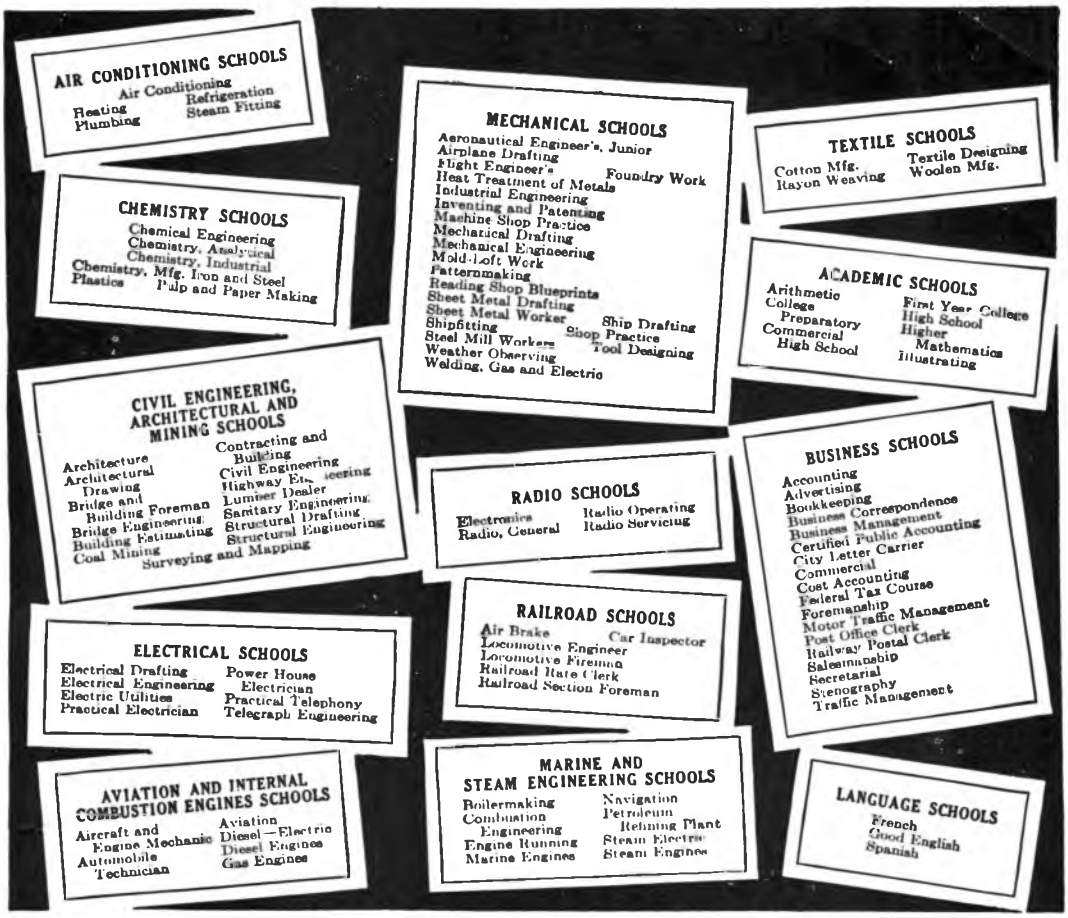

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