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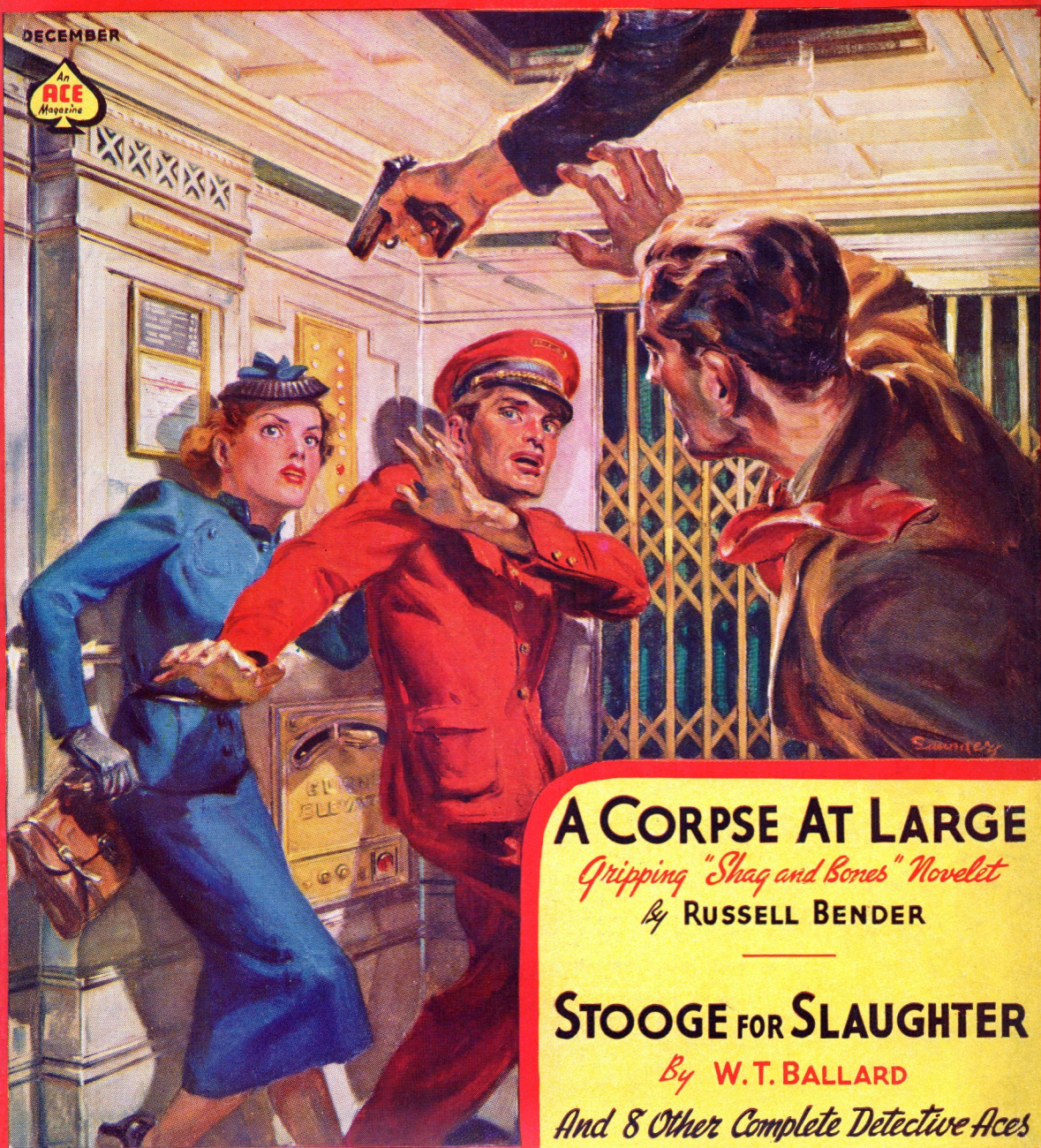
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DECEMBER

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DECEMBER, 1938

Vol. XXXIV, No. 2

★ **10 All-Star Stories** ★

All New, Different Stories—No Serials!

1. **A CORPSE AT LARGE** ("Shag and Bones" Novelet) Russell Bender 9
One good corpse deserves another.
2. **STOUGE FOR SLAUGHTER** W. T. Ballard 33
A small-time dip goes big-time in a big way.
3. **KID NEMESIS** William E. Brandon 42
G-Man, Jr., turns a World's Fair holiday into a killer picnic.
4. **DOC WALLOPER** ("Dizzy Duo" Yarn) Joe Archibald 51
Snooty Piper figures an itch in time will solve a mysterious crime.
5. **SCOOPS FOR SCANDAL** (Novelet) Carl McK. Saunders 60
A sensational scoop becomes columnist Duncan's obituary.
6. **DEATH'S-HEAD RENDEZVOUS** Maurice Phillips 76
The shackles of his past bind Cole Nesbit to an encounter with doom.
7. **HIS SON TO HANG** G. T. Fleming-Roberts 81
Sheriff Sam Norn teaches his son the gallows way.
8. **JAIL-BAIT JOKER** Russell Clark 89
Fate deals the last hand—with a joker running wild.
9. **SLICKERS ARE SUCKERS** William McAllen 97
An enmity of twenty years burns out in one crucial moment.
10. **THE PERCENTAGE IN MURDER** Harold F. Sorensen 101
Private Detective Staige Decker takes a long gamble on his neck.

Cover by Norman Saunders

This is an ACE MAGAZINE—See Page 6

Published monthly by Magazine Publishers, Inc.; office of publication, 29 Worthington St., Springfield, Mass. A. A. Wyn, President. Editorial and executive offices, 67 W. 44th St., New York, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter Nov. 14, 1928, at Springfield, Mass., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1938, by Magazine Publishers, Inc. T. M. Reg. U. S. Pat. Off. Manuscripts will be handled with care, but this magazine assumes no responsibility for their safety. For advertising rates address Ace Fiction Group, 67 W. 44th St., New York City. Yearly Subscription, \$1.00; Single Copies, Ten Cents.

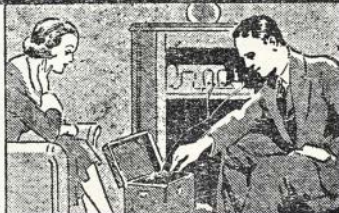


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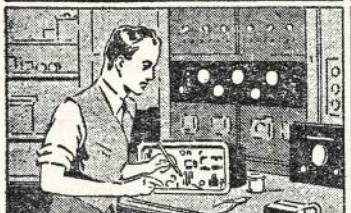
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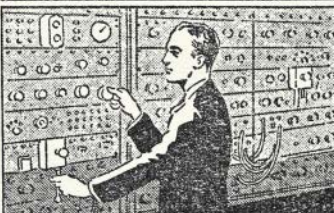
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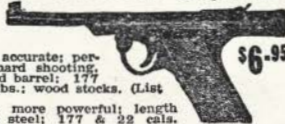
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| 21x3.00-19 | 3.15 | 22x4 1/2 | 3.40 |
| 22x3.00-20 | 3.15 | 22x4 1/2 | 3.40 |
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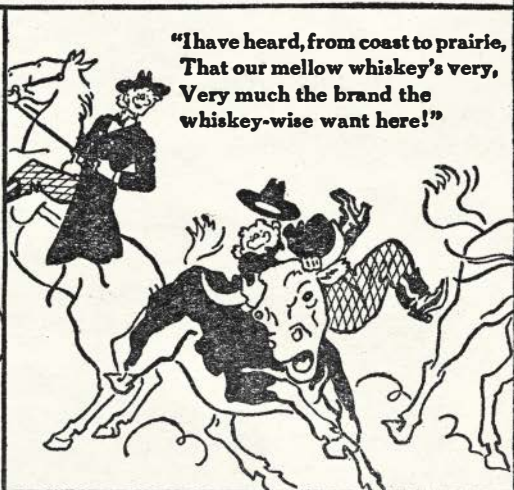
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CHAPTER I

MONEY SPELLS MURDER

HE was pressed back against the trunk of a huge locust tree, his thin body motionless, his hat brim pulled down obliquely over pale, blood-shot eyes when I noticed him. Bones and I had just gotten out of my coupé, and were standing looking around in the moonlight. I told Bones to wait, and walked over to the man.

But he stayed motionless. He wore a dirty white linen suit that might never

have been pressed, and a dirty white Panama that might never have been white. His eyes didn't seem to see anything of me but my throat. I looked back hard at him and asked:

"Could you tell me which of these mansions around here Katherine Kraft lives in?"

His eyes seemed to jump at me, but nothing else about him moved at all. He said in a surprisingly cultured voice: "I'm very sorry. I do not know Miss Katherine Kraft."

I thanked him and turned away.

When I got back to Bones, I whispered: "Do you notice anything funny about that guy?"

Bones screwed up his freckled face and glared at me. He's one of the crack investigators in the small-loan business, and our company usually puts us both on the same job. He whispered back nastily:

"Outside of having a bulge under his left arm that might be a baby howitzer, no, not a damned thing. Do you notice anything funny about me?"

I grinned. "Oh, you look all right."

Bones leered at me. "If you see my skin hop off and take it on the lam, don't say I didn't warn you. That nasty-eyed ghost of walking death has given me a lousy case of the creeps."

I took a quick glance back at the man to try to see if he'd overheard us. But he hadn't seemed to; he kept on being motionless. I shrugged and led Bones across the street. We went up a long flagstone walk to a porch almost big enough for a couple of tennis courts. All of the houses in the block looked like they were built for families in the Canadian Baby Derby.

I dug into the bell.

A beautifully groomed and snooty butler told us Miss Katherine Kraft lived next door.

When the door slammed in our faces, I grinned and looked at Bones. He grinned back at me. Then we both looked across the street.

There was nobody leaning against the trunk of the big locust tree.

I whistled softly. "Now you see him, and now you don't."

Bones didn't say anything. He made a growling noise.

KATHERINE KRAFT, answering her door herself, wore dark green gabardine slacks, a light green military blouse and green toeless beach sandals. She leaned indolently in the doorway and looked us over. The sleeves of the blouse were rolled up, showing soft milk-white arms, and in spite of her outfit, you didn't miss any of her curves. She had enough to make a big-league hurler jealous. Your grandfather would have kicked three holes in his buggy if she had showed him an ankle.

I closed my eyes for a moment, then wrenched them open, but Katherine Kraft was still leaning indolently in the doorway. I hadn't known they made women who were all-woman any more. I dug out a card and said:

"Misters Shaughnessy Roberts and Stanley McPherson. We're representatives of National Finance."

Katherine Kraft inspected my card, handed it back to me, then led us into a huge living room and found us chairs. In the brightness of the light inside, she was even more impressive. But she was not pretty. Her eyes—a light vivid green that blended with her clothes (she even used green cherries in Manhattans)—were set too close together and her nose was too long. Yet her face was the same soft milk-white as her arms, and her hair was a rich red-brown that fell carelessly over her forehead.

She sat down on a green settee near a Filipino chow-bench and picked up a gin drink. I noticed a man's lightweight summer felt on the edge of the chow-bench.

I looked at Katherine Kraft and said: "I suppose we might as well get down to business."

She nodded without speaking and looked at me attentively.

I looked at the man's hat again, peeped around to make sure he wasn't in a corner, didn't see him, and went into my act. I said: "Miss Kraft, just about seven weeks ago your sister, Margaret, got a

loan in our office. Since then we haven't seen her. Three days after she got the loan, she skipped out of Baltimore and didn't leave any address. We got a tip she was down here in Brighton City. In fact, we got a tip that she was living with you. So we came down."

I shrugged and spread my hands. "If she's here, we'd like to see her. We want our money."

Katherine Kraft said evenly: "Everybody wants money."

I stared at her.

She took another sip of her drink and added: "If you think Marge is in this house you're dippy as half a dozen loons."

A door in the far corner of the big living room opened and a tall black-haired man came into the room. He was dressed like a movie star making a personal appearance. His gray double-breasted suit fitted him very snugly at his narrow waist and his trousers had a crease sharp enough to cut a whisker. His thick curly hair looked like it had been lacquered. He was a little taller than I—which made him over six feet one—and he had heavy, solid shoulders and big, faultlessly kept hands. He looked like a guy who spent most of his mornings in a barber chair.

He was carrying one of those gin drinks, and his eyes settled on me.

I stayed in my chair impolitely. I didn't like his stare.

But the guy kept looking at me. He said: "Collectors, Kitty?"

Katherine Kraft explained briefly. "Finance company investigators. They think Marge is here."

The man's black eyes got narrow and darker. He kept his gaze on me and jerked a thumb toward the door. He said: "You better beat it, fella. She isn't here."

I LOOKED at him, but didn't move. I was trying to figure just who he was. "Well, thanks," I said, "for all the help." I wiggled a finger at him. "But we got a tip—and the tip said she was here. Look. Aren't you Wes Hearn?"

The guy said: "What?"

I grinned a little. "This is the third day we've been in Brighton City, friend. We had other work besides finding Mar-

garet Kraft." I wiggled my finger again. "In other words, since we've been working around, we've kept our ears open and picked up some nice gossip. Like this: Everybody in town seems to know you boss every horse joint where a guy can bet anything over a buck. What's the answer?"

The guy said coldly: "What're you driving at?"

I moved my shoulders. "Well, there's a dog track in town here that's been running about three months, and your take on the horse joints has dropped to practically minus nothing. Guys tell me they'd rather bet on the whippets and watch them run for their money than sit in a back room and get horse results over a radio. But Miss Katherine Kraft here owns and runs eleven dogs. She's made a young fortune since the dog track's been open—but lately you've been running here to see her every night."

I looked squarely at him. "That doesn't make any sense to me."

"Doesn't it?"

"Brother, not a dram of sense—unless you're trying to get her to stop running her dogs, and trying to close that dog track some way . . . Look." I grinned. "We know Margaret Kraft left this town fast. She must've—when she moved in a furnished apartment in Baltimore, she only had a small overnight bag. And how do we know she didn't leave fast because of some trouble between your horse joints and that dog track?"

"You see," I finished, "we know Margaret Kraft lived here before she came to Baltimore. This was the house where she left all her clothes."

Hearn said nastily: "In what drawer?"

"Be funny," I growled at him, "but use better cracks. Listen, friend. A little more gossip: There's a guy named Paul Geisler who's running the dog track, but people say he doesn't really own it. People also say that Paul Geisler is carrying a big torch for Kitty Kraft. In fact, gossipers tell me that Paul Geisler is the guy who bought Kitty Kraft her dogs. They—"

Katherine Kraft banged her drink down hard on the chow-bench. Some of it slopped over, but she didn't seem to

notice. She sat quite still, her eyes dilated and mean, and stared at me as if I had come to dump the garbage. She snapped:

"Paul Geisler wouldn't buy his grandmother a postage stamp. Don't get the idea he ever gave anybody anything."

I grinned at her. "He's plenty tight and strictly out for the dough, huh?"

"Strictly," she snapped.

I said: "Well, nobody talked about your generosity, either."

Katherine Kraft's eyes stayed small and mean. "I like money," she told me. "And when I get it, I hang on to it. That's my business. A girl's got to protect herself."

"From who?" I asked.

Katherine Kraft turned to Hearn and said: "Are you going to throw 'em out, Wes, or shall I call the cops?"

I kept my grin and leaned back in my chair. To my right, Bones was sitting forward, his bony elbows on his knees, his green eyes staring angrily at Katherine Kraft's green ones. Bones' face was a little pale beneath his freckles. He stuck out his chin and bellowed:

"The cops? Do you want *me* to call 'em for you?"

Katherine Kraft looked startled.

Bones stood up and shoved a long freckled finger at her. Tact is something he isn't quite familiar with, and he's also excitable, which makes a nice combination. He growled:

"Look, lady. Dog tracks are illegal in this jerkwater town. And you own dogs—we can prove you run 'em. Go ahead—call the cops. We're only here on business."

"And on legitimate business," I put in, still grinning.

Katherine Kraft's face was hard to read. Her eyes were still mean and mad, like she'd enjoy cracking our heads together, but there was only a slight pinch of irritation around her mouth. She looked for a moment at Bones, and then at Wesley Hearn. Slowly the meanness left her eyes, and I thought they began to look crafty.

She said: "You better beat it, Wes. I'll take care of them."

HEARN seemed to be studying her for a moment. His black eyes held a very faint glitter, and there was a slightly contemptuous twist to his mouth. He put down his gin drink and picked up his hat from the chow-bench, saying: "She'll sell you anything she knows if you've got some dough."

Then he turned and hoofed it out. His heels made noise in the hall, and we heard the door slam.

I sat and looked blandly at Katherine Kraft.

She was giving the living room door a black, murderous look. She said low in her throat: "I hate that guy." After a moment, she took a long drink from her glass and banged it down, hard. Some more of it slopped out and wet some cigarettes, but she still didn't seem to notice.

Her gaze came over to me and she inclined her head toward a far door. "Talk to you, handsome?"

I grinned. "Talk ahead."

"In there," she said. She kept her head inclined toward the door.

I turned my own head far enough to wink at Bones without her seeing it, then got up and let her lead me into a large green-and-white kitchen. She hadn't brought her drink along. She went to the kitchen shelves, opened their frosted glass doors, and I saw about two dozen bright labels announcing the same brand of gin. She took down a bottle that was open and got a lemon from the refrigerator.

"Drink?" she said.

"I'm working tonight."

She hacked the lemon in half and waved the stainless steel knife at me. "I wouldn't be cheap enough to snitch on you, handsome."

I grinned. "I'm still working. The two don't fit."

She shrugged her shoulders, saying, "Well, it's your loss," and poured herself out a quarter of a tumbler of the gin. Then she poured some salt in the crevice next to the joint of her thumb. She added: "A Swiss-hitch, handsome. Awful easy to take."

She tossed the salt into her open mouth

with a backward flip of her wrist, followed it up with the gin, and then swallowed quite easily. She wound up biting into the lemon and looking like she'd taken nothing but water. "You ought to try it some time," she told me.

I said: "I call it a switch-hitch. Let's talk about Margaret."

Katherine Kraft lifted her eyes to me and laughed. "So you did some drinking during the great dry era, too?" She was standing in front of me, and not far away. With the nastiness gone out of her eyes, she looked like four different people.

I shifted my feet and tried not to stare at her.

She took a step closer. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," I said. I shivered a little. The light was brighter in the kitchen than it had been in the living room, and you forgot her close-set eyes and long nose in the beauty of her coloring. She took another step closer, and I shivered a little more. She asked softly: "Has Margaret been murdered?"

I said: "Huh?"

She waved a hand. "Don't stall. I know you, Shag Roberts. I read the papers. You're the very tough man with the baby face, and you and your partner have cracked three murder cases. That name Shaughnessy threw me off for a little while. Has Margaret really been murdered?"

I was gawking at her. I gasped: "Not that I know of."

"You sure?"

I said: "How do I know when I don't know where she is?"

Katherine Kraft took one more step toward me. That put her right up against me, and slowly she raised her eyes. Her lips came up with them, and I tried not to notice. She whispered:

"How much would it be worth to you for me to tell you where she is?"

I didn't move. My palms felt moist.

She said: "A hundred dollars? Fifty of it now?"

I put my fingers against the base of her throat and pushed her away. My

mouth was dry and my stomach felt cold. I said: "Save it, sister. I'm not putting out a penny."

Just then there was the sound of a shot outside on the porch.

CHAPTER II

MORGUE STEPS



KATHERINE KRAFT took one swift step backward and brushed the hair absently off her forehead. Her vivid green eyes were wide and unblinking. Her teeth

were gritted tightly together, and her hands were small balls at her side.

She said through her gritted teeth: "If you were lying to me. . . ."

I simply gaped at her.

She picked up the stainless steel knife from the kitchen table. Her green eyes were still wide, unblinking, but growing furious. She waved the knife at me and her gaze settled on my throat. "If you were tricking me into admitting I know where Marge is—"

I weaved my body forward and caught the hand that held the knife. I hadn't quite lost my gape, but I felt it was time to move. I forced her arm down and back until I had it behind her.

Then she went crazy. Her skin grew blotched and faintly purple; she kicked wildly at my shins, and her breath hissed hotly through her teeth. I tried to twist her wrist and she sank her teeth into my shoulder. Trying to hold her was like trying to hold a python with the itch.

I put both arms around her and threw her down on the kitchen floor. I sat down on top of her and gripped her knife-wrist with both hands. I almost wished I had the same grip on her throat.

Then the swinging door of the kitchen popped open and Bones stood and stared at us. I kept my grip on Katherine Kraft's wrist. I growled:

"Don't stand there and gawk like an oaf, ninny. I wasn't trying to kiss her. Chuck some water in her face."

Bones said: "Yeah?"

I snapped: "Yeah. And if you don't get that skinny frame moving, I'll twist it into enough pretzels to go into the business. Get going."

Bones grinned at me. He said: "You always had a rough technique, boy." He went over to the kitchen sink, drew a glass of water, came back and stood over us, his freckled face still grinning. He added: "Maybe I ought to chuck half of it in *your* face. You look just about as sore as she does."

But he chuckled it all, and then another glass, in Katherine Kraft's face, and she sputtered and relaxed, and I took the knife away from her. I stood up and she sat up on the floor. The knot of the green scarf at her throat had been twisted up on her shoulder, and her hair seemed to be all down on her forehead. I got down a dish towel and tossed it at her. Bones was clucking his tongue and looking at me reproachfully.

I said: "Damn you. When we heard the shot, she went crazy. She thinks her sister's been murdered and we're trying to crack the case." I got out a handkerchief and mopped my face. "She recognized us, nunny. What was the shot?"

Bones was watching Katherine Kraft wipe water from her face. He said: "What was the matter with her?"

I growled: "Didn't I just tell you? When she gets sore, she goes into a tantrum. One of these days she'll never get out of one of 'em and wind up stark, raving mad." I scowled. "What about that shot?"

Bones said: "Oh, that." He spoke still looking curiously at Katherine Kraft as if he'd hardly heard me. Then he looked up at me and grinned. "How do I know? I heard it like you did, and ran to the window. There's a guy lying outside on the porch."

I said: "A guy?"

"Sure. What'd you expect—Margaret Kraft? This guy's lying half on the top step and half on the porch, and doesn't seem to be moving more than a thousandth of an inch at a time. In other words, I haven't seen him jelly a muscle. You want to go out and look?"

I growled: "Do you?"

Bones snorted. "I should stick *my* neck out. I don't see any killers hanging around outside, but maybe that guy on the porch didn't see any, and look what *he* got. Not me, son. You're the screwy fellow around here. You see if you can help him."

I GAVE him a look that would have soured a jar of cream, poked open the swinging door, and went out into the hall. At the front door, I opened it about a foot and peeped through the crack made at the hinges.

The man, dressed in a neat white drill suit with a fancy pleated back, was still lying half on the top step and half on the porch. I didn't see any part of him move. There was a small dark spot just under his left shoulder.

I said half aloud: "Somebody in this burg knows which way they're shooting." I tried ranging the street with my eyes as much as that tiny crack permitted.

There was nobody leaning against the big locust tree. The pavements were empty, and there weren't any parked cars but mine. All I could see was a quiet macadam street with a white stripe down the middle, and a lot of moonlight making bright patterns through the trees.

Footsteps pattered behind me, and Katherine Kraft touched my arm.

I turned around slowly and peered down at her. She wasn't showing any remorse or apology or any guilt in her green eyes. She merely looked back at me and smiled a little. I was still wondering whether or not she *would* have knifed me.

She said softly: "Give a friend a gander. If he was on my porch, I ought to know him."

I noticed Bones leaning against the wall at the end of the corridor. He looked composed and amused, and was smoking idly, watching us.

I stepped away from the door and Kitty Kraft took my place. Light from a green shaded wall-lamp played softly on her hair.

She turned suddenly, and I thought she looked slightly pale. Her eyes were wide again, and unblinking, and once more

they began to stare at me. At that moment the house was so quiet, you could have heard a fly yawn. She said huskily: "It's Paul Geisler. . . . Heavens! Who'd want to kill him?"

I stared hard at her and tried to read her face. I couldn't tell whether she was trying to bluff us or not. I said slowly: "The Geisler who runs the dog track? The guy I still think bought you your dogs?"

She nodded absently. "Yes," she almost whispered.

I growled: "We wouldn't be running into Wes Hearn's war to try to close that dog track, would we?"

Kitty Kraft started. Her gaze came up to me quickly. "What do you mean?"

"Mean?" I snapped at her. "A few minutes ago you just told us you hated Hearn. Yet he's been running here to see you lately. Why would—"

She blazed: "I hate *him!* He goes for me!"

"Oh," I said. "Is that—"

I broke off and stared at her. My spine suddenly felt cold.

At that moment, the telephone rang.

But I didn't pay any attention to the phone. In the kitchen there was a faint sound, like a suppressed curse, then a clatter like a load of scrap iron on a roof. I must have stood stock-still for almost ten seconds. Then, working with the same intelligence that'll make a baby crawl into a blast furnace, I shoved Kitty to one side and legged it toward the kitchen.

It took me about ten good strides to reach that swinging door. I was hardly through it—still standing straight up and sprinting—when a bullet kissed the wall about a foot above my head.

I took one more long stride and dived forward on my belly. I landed near the row of shelves alongside the kitchen table, my nose pressed into the linoleum, my body stiffer than a fried fish. I got a glimpse of a pair of pale, bloodshot eyes measuring me coolly over the barrel of a big blued-steel pistol.

I don't even remember having time to be scared. I was jerking at the leg of the kitchen table, trying to tip it over in

front of me, when Bones came storming through the door. I would have liked to have seen his face, but I only heard him.

His lanky feet pounded across the linoleum; he yelled like a Comanche, and that drew those pale, bloodshot eyes. I saw the barrel of the pistol swing quickly away from me. I noticed the dirty white linen suit and dirty white Panama behind it.

BY THIS TIME I had the kitchen table tipped over at a pretty steep angle, and there was a sudden rain of gin bottles down on my neck. They were Katherine Kraft's gin bottles—the cause of the big original clatter when they'd tumbled from their shelf to the porcelain-top table.

But I didn't realize it then; I just grabbed one. All the noise they were making drew those pale eyes my way again.

I didn't have time to sit up; I pushed my bottle at him like a basketball. It didn't go hard—it looked like a feather floating—but it did get to his chest and knock him a little off balance. That gave me a chance to grab another one and sit up. But before I could throw it, Mr. Pale Eyes had faded out of the kitchen door.

I heaved up to my feet and reached it in time to see him sprinting across the back yard, his coat-tail out so nice and flat behind him that he might have been a sailfish. I stopped and glanced back at Bones.

He was getting up from the kitchen floor—he'd dropped a few feet from where I'd been—and I yelled at him to follow me, and jumped off the back porch. I was still using that same brand of intelligence that makes the kiddies love the furnaces. I got through the back gate and into the narrow alley as he whisked around a corner.

I took a few deep breaths, and made that corner in three seconds flat. This time Mr. Pale Eyes was hopping into a car. I got about thirty yards from it before it roared away from the curb, then stopped and watched its twin tail-lights disappear into the darkness.

I sat down on the curb and tried pulling some air into my lungs. I was really working hard at it when Bones came sprinting out of the alley.

He stopped at the curb, then saw me half way up the block, and came charging up to me, his own breath wheezing. When he saw I was all right, he sank down wearily beside me. We sat and panted at each other like a couple of dogs for almost half a minute.

Finally I got a little breath into me. I said: "He had—a car. Got away. Couldn't—see the number."

Bones nodded. "Plant—I guess."

I said: "Yeah. And what about Katherine Kraft's phone ringing?"

Bones scowled. "I don't know. Anyway, the whole damned thing is just too pat. A shot in front—then he slips in the back. Think so?"

I said again: "Yeah."

"Me, too. He must've been fiddling around in all those gin bottles. Left the car out here because he knew he'd come out the back. What's the answer?"

I shook my head. "Couldn't guess."

Bones said: "Maybe he just went in for a drink."

I scowled at him but didn't say anything, and started looking around to find the effects of our war. We were on a different street, but still in a big-time neighborhood. All the houses sat back in nice huge lawns, and none of the occupants seemed curious about any shots. The street was quiet as a Quaker town on Sunday afternoon.

I grinned at Bones. "Maybe an earthquake would shake 'em up a little.

He snorted. "It might be different around in front of that Kraft woman's house."

We got up, lit ourselves cigarettes, walked to the corner and took ganders up and down the street. There was still a lot of bright moonlight and big buckets of quiet. My coupé was still parked across the street from Katherine Kraft's house, and we couldn't see anybody parading on the sidewalks.

We crossed the street to try to see Katherine Kraft's porch. It was hidden

from us by a row of big sycamores along the curb and a lot of overhanging locust trees that grew on the front lawn. But there was a big car parked in front of the house that we hadn't been able to see from the other side.

I reached out and grabbed Bones' arm. The car was parked without lights, and didn't look like a prowler car. I breathed: "Visitors."

Bones licked his lips. "Ah . . ."

WE dropped our cigarettes and stepped on them, grinned at each other, then found nice protective tree trunks about five yards apart. We poked our heads around and watched for maybe thirty seconds. Nothing seemed to be happening, and I didn't like just standing around.

I stage-whispered to Bones: "I'm going up and catch a look at that license number. You stay here and cool your heels."

I waved a hand to him and slipped across the street.

That row of sycamores gave me plenty of protection, and I sneaked from tree trunk to tree trunk until I could see the license number. Then I memorized it and started back by the same route.

When I had gone about five trunks and was starting on my sixth, a man came down Katherine Kraft's walk and climbed into the car. I hopped back to that fifth trunk and shoved out my nose. The car purred softly out of the block without showing any lights.

I hadn't been able to see much of the man.

I whistled a little and ran back to Bones. He was leaning against the tree, looking sourly at me.

I scowled. "It was too dark to get a gander at the man," I said. "But I got the license number. Think we can check it?"

Bones scowled back at me and moved his skinny shoulders. "The devil knows what you can and can't do in this jerk-water town."

I laughed at him, and we walked across the street, moved cautiously up the pave-

TDA

ment to Katherine Kraft's long walk. The big locust trees in the front lawn still hid the porch from us. We were halfway to the house when Bones gripped my arm.

He leaned in close to me. "That's funny."

"What?"

"No lights in the house."

I frowned, and we moved on slowly. All the windows in the house were dark, and even the green light in the hallway no longer showed. I couldn't figure it, and I didn't like it. Fireflies were winking against the big dark trees.

We reached the porch steps, still watching the house, then stopped and gaped at what lay in front of us. Maybe our eyes almost bulged out; I don't know. The body of the man still lay where it had fallen, but there was another body beside it and this one didn't wear pants. This one was a girl in a blue dress with marks on her throat, and glassy vacuous eyes that were mercilessly open.

This was Margaret Kraft and somebody had strangled her, and Bones was passing his hand over his eyes as if he couldn't quite believe it.

I managed to gasp: "Yeah. It's Margaret."

He yelled: "What are these porch steps—the city morgue?"

CHAPTER III

HARD COMPANY



I HAD a nightmare that night in which it rained bodies and gin bottles, and in the morning I felt like a mountain climber who'd slept hanging by his chin. I got out of bed slowly and gently held my head. There was a note on the writing desk from Bones saying he'd gone out for a little work, and a morning paper lay beside it with headlines tall and black as a Zouave general.

I picked up the paper and sat down heavily on the bed. I couldn't have taken

a shock like that standing up even if I'd had my breakfast. I read:

BODIES OF MAN AND WOMAN FOUND IN VACANT LOT MAN SHOT; WOMAN STRANGLED

I screwed my eyes tight, let that bang around in my brain, then opened them again and stared at the pretty hotel wallpaper. Bones and I had left that neighborhood two minutes after we saw the bodies, and we hadn't tipped the cops because we just didn't want to get mixed up in the two murders. But here was something else screwy, and I couldn't figure it.

I started to light a cigarette, remembered they made me dizzy before breakfast, stuck it economically back in the pack, and slowly read the story. There wasn't much to it that the headlines didn't tell.

The bodies had been found by a milkman at four o'clock that morning, and nobody had heard any shots or could throw any other light on the situation. The cops believed the bodies had been dumped in the lot, and the rest was the usual police handout. The boys were investigating, and promised a very early solution.

I had chicken livers sent up—we had an expense account—and was just finishing my coffee when Bones came back. He was wearing a neat double-breasted brown gabardine suit, and a maroon tie with a gold tie-pin snug under the knot. He looked fresh and very clear-eyed—nothing worried Bones.

He grinned at me after closing the door and said: "What do they do in this jerkwater burg—play drop the handkerchief with bodies?"

I scowled at him over the coffee cup. "Don't tell me they found Katherine Kraft's, too."

He shook his head. "Nix." He walked over to my twin bed, sat down, and stretched his skinny legs. "But if the cops talk to her and she tells them we were at her house, they'll probably toss us in the bastille and throw the key away."

He grinned again. "And they'll talk

to her, all right. We were bright boys."

I put down the coffee cup. "Bright boys about what?"

"About not reporting those two bodies to the cops, my son."

I laughed. "Oh, that." I reached for the coffee cup again, and then stopped my hand in mid-air. I looked up obliquely at him. "What do you mean they'll talk to her?"

Bones snorted. "She's Margaret Kraft's sister, isn't she? Wouldn't they naturally question her?"

I said: "Do they know where she scrambled to last night?"

Bones grinned at me. "Ah . . ." he said. His green eyes looked merry. "Listen, boy. Here's one bright guy who doesn't think she *did* scam."

He thumbed his chest. "I called out there on the phone this morning, and her voice was the one that answered it. So I just hung up without speaking and did a little thinking. Maybe we *thought* she had scrambled just because the lights were out. Maybe she was there all the time and just doused the lights to make us think she'd scrambled."

I growled: "Why?"

He waved a hand. "That's one for you to answer."

I scowled a little and stared thoughtfully at him. Katherine Kraft trying to trick us didn't make much sense to me. I said: "Well, you think up an answer. I'm tired. . . . Look. We've landed right in the middle of Wes Hearn's little war to try to close that lousy dog track. That's the McCoy—the one right answer."

"And don't think he's been going to see Kitty Kraft just because he carries the torch for her. She hates him, and she used to keep him away. But now she's letting him come, and for one simple reason. He's trying to buy the information about who owns that dog track and she's holding out for plenty of dough for it. Catch on?"

Bones looked hurt. He said in a sad sing-song voice: "I have something in my hand from a lady in the third row, O Swami. She'd like to know if her husband's off the booze. Could—"

I growled: "Don't be a clown. You're

not in an act. . . . Look, son. All we've got to find out is who moved the bodies from Katherine Kraft's porch, who put Margaret's body *on* that porch, and why. Then we'll have the case all solved." I snorted. "Then we'll have our pictures in the paper again."

Bones grinned. "And you'll be run ragged by girlies wanting locks of your hair for souvenirs." He paused and his face lighted up. "Hey! Maybe we can even collect our dough."

"Yeah," I said. "I'd sort of forgotten that. We still work for a loan company, don't we?"

BONES was grinning broadly and I was muttering under my breath when a light furtive knock sounded on our door. Bones got up and crossed the room. He put his freckled hand on the knob and frowned over his shoulder at me.

Still frowning, he called softly: "Who's out there?"

There was a short pause. Some colored hucksters down in the alley were yelling their heads off selling watermelon. A very hushed, guarded voice said:

"My name's Reynal Patterson. It mean anything to you?"

Bones kept his frown, his eyes now questioning me.

I whispered: "Wait a minute." I bounced out of my chair, yanked open a dresser drawer, got out my little .32, and went over to the bed. I sat down on the edge and put the .32 under the pillow. I kept my right hand under the pillow with it, played with the safety with my thumb. I added:

"Go ahead. Bring him in. But if it's our nasty-eyed boy friend, just you duck."

Bones' face tightened but he turned the knob, opened the door quickly, and then stepped back. The man on the threshold was not our nasty-eyed friend. This man was of medium height and lean and flat-muscled, and wore clothes that smacked of snooty, exclusive clubs.

He came into the room and just stood arrogantly and peered at us. His mouth was thin and cruel; he didn't look like

he'd ever had much fun; and light from our windows glittered on his rimless glasses. I wondered how often he browbeat his servants and kicked little puppies out of his path.

He said in that same hushed, guarded voice: "Roberts and McPherson?"

Bones winked at me. "McPherson and Roberts."

"I see," the guy said. He frowned darkly. I made him for about as much sense of humor as a crippled duck.

He took off a Panama that must have cost him twenty-five bucks and placed it upside down on the glass top of the writing-desk. Then he sat down in the chair I'd vacated and hitched up the legs of his trousers. That showed us black silk socks with fancy ivory clocks.

He leaned forward and tapped his fingertips together. He couldn't have been a day over thirty, but he had the habits and nervous mannerisms of an ill-tempered guy of fifty with the gout. He said, not changing that careful voice:

"I'd like to talk to you. I'm here from Miss Katherine Kraft."

I don't think I started or showed any signs of surprise. Over by the door, Bones' eyes widened just a very little. I said: "You mean you don't want us to tell the cops that she moved a couple of bodies last night?"

That got to him. He didn't start, or make any floozy movements at all, but he sat so still he might have been petrified. Out in the alley, the colored hucksters were still yelling their heads off about watermelon. The guy said:

"I don't quite follow you."

I grinned a little. I said: "The police commissioner in this town is old Tucker Patterson. He's got a son named Reynal who's pretty strong politically himself. Reynal's friendly with Katherine Kraft." I made my grin broader. "Hi, there, Reynal."

For the first time in a full fifteen seconds, Reynal Patterson managed to move. He tapped his fingertips together again. Otherwise he was still the petrified fossil, and I couldn't tell how he was taking my guess. He said slowly: "Sorry. Afraid I don't quite follow you yet."

I made myself more comfortable against the foot of the bed. I was worried a little, but not too much. I growled:

"Look, fella. You're here from Katherine Kraft. She sent you for one reason. We know the bodies of Paul Geisler and her sister were on her porch last night, and we know the bodies were found this morning in a lot. She sent you here to ask us to keep quiet about that porch angle. Now didn't she—or are you going to keep stalling around?"

I couldn't see Reynal Patterson's eyes. The light from the windows still glittered on his glasses. He hitched up his trousers again and frowned slightly at the floor.

He said quietly: "Aren't you being just a little presumptuous?"

Bones said: "A little *what?*"

Reynal Patterson didn't look up. He said slowly: "I mean, taking a little too much for granted?"

I stared at the guy. "Look," I said. "You're a friend of Katherine Kraft's. Last night when Paul Geisler was shot on her porch, she wanted to get rid of the body—she didn't want her name mixed up in the murder. So she called you. You were the guy to move the body because you've got plenty of pull. So when we ran out to chase a guy who was in her kitchen, she phoned you, and you told her you'd be over. Then she doused her lights to make us think she'd scrambled."

I spun around and jabbed a finger at Bones. "Call the cops, son. This guy's an accessory after the fact. We'll turn him in and get out of this town."

REYNAL PATTERSON knew some beautiful cuss words. They sputtered over his lips like angry hornets, most of them so close together they weren't quite plain. But I laughed at him. I would have bet all the cartridges and bayonets in Europe that he had moved those bodies now.

Then he came out of the chair, his face blotched and furious, and Bones stepped in and grabbed him, gripped his elbows from behind. I didn't take out my gun; I just sat and watched. I didn't think

Bones would have trouble handling him.

Reynal Patterson bent forward from his hips, pulling Bones forward, then snapped erect and broke Bones' grip. I sat there and gaped at Patterson. He spun, weaved under Bones' long arms, straightened and butted him squarely on the chin.

Bones staggered, took a long time to fall down. His legs collapsed slowly, like boneless legs, and his skinny body sank down, then keeled over gently. He didn't make any more noise than a couple of atoms colliding in the air.

The Patterson guy swung toward me.

I bounced off the bed, leaving my little gun behind, fainted high with my left and pulled up Patterson's guard. I hooked my right into his chest, trying hard for his solar plexus, missed by a few inches and caught him under the heart. He went back on his heels, and I hooked my left into his stomach. He doubled forward like he had a spring in him—and then we had company.

The door of our room came open slowly and a tall thick-set man stood on the threshold. I didn't have to look twice to know he was used to authority. He had shaggy gray brows and fine gray eyes, and his carriage was erect and vigorous without being stiff. He might have been any age between forty-five and sixty.

His eyes grew bright with surprise, and he stood and stared at us.

I was a little excited. I growled: "Tickets for this fight are downstairs on the mezzanine. Don't you read the papers?"

The fine gray eyes blinked at me. "What was that?"

"Skip it," I said. I stepped away from Reynal Patterson. I was scowling; I didn't like the interruption.

Reynal Patterson was looking hard at me. He had his lean brown hands pressed tightly against his diaphragm, and his face was the color of cold dry ash. He made noises like an air-pump, tried to get his breath. Then his glance strayed slowly past me, settled on the man in the doorway.

Reynal's face grew a little yellow and sallow.

The thick-set man came inside slowly,

but did not bother to close the door. His face was tightly set, showing deep clefts obliquely above his mouth corners, and his lips were a thin, implacable line. He said, moving nothing in his face but his lips:

"The more I see of you, Reynal, the more I despise you. I think I understand quite a lot now."

I growled: "Lay off the riddles. Understand what?"

Those fine gray eyes moved slowly in their sockets. They looked oddly at me and glittered a little. "Are you Roberts?"

I said I was.

The thick-set man pointed down at Bones. "And he's McPherson?"

I said he was.

The thick-set man frowned very slightly. He said, still moving nothing but his lips: "I'm Tucker Patterson, Police Commissioner."

I must have started, but I don't remember it. I stared a little, blinked a little, got out my handkerchief and mopped my face. We were having too many visitors from the Patterson family. I growled:

"Your dad isn't coming too, is he?"

Then we had a little more company.

I saw the nasty eyes beneath the dirty white Panama as I looked at Tucker Patterson after my crack. The man stood in the open doorway, still in his white linen suit, the knees baggy and dirty, the coat pockets bulging with his hands. I didn't need to look twice to know that his hands had things in them. Both pockets had peaks in the dirty linen, and one of them pointed at me.

CHAPTER IV

SKRONTCH POINTS A GUN



I STOOD very still, the back of my neck feeling cold, remembering that this guy had probably shot Paul Geisler cold-bloodedly from behind, and remembering

how quickly he'd shot at me when I barged into Kitty Kraft's kitchen. Be-

sides, I was a good ten feet from my twin bed, and I couldn't remember if I'd left the safety on my little gun on or off. So I just stood and made sure nothing about me moved.

The nasty-eyed guy came inside slowly, then closed the door and leaned against it. He kept both of those peaks in his pocket pointing very steadily at me.

I let my eyes swivel around just a little. Over near the writing-desk, Bones was slowly sitting up, shaking the stupor out of his green eyes and trying to get his bearings. Near him, Reynal Patterson still held his diaphragm and did not move. In front of me, old Tucker Patterson was looking over one of his broad thick shoulders, his face quite cool and composed, like he was watching an infield single by the visiting team when the home club was fourteen runs ahead.

The nasty-eyed guy said in his cultured voice: "Why, Tucker, imagine seeing you."

I was watching old Tucker Patterson pretty closely, and nothing about his face seemed to change. He said casually: "Hello, Skrontch." But I noticed that he kept his eyes on Skrontch's pockets, and took elaborate care that he did not move.

Bones climbed to his feet slowly.

I took one quick glance in his direction and the back of my neck got cold as a glacier. Bones' face was growing tight

and rebellious. All of the stupor had left his eyes, and they were staring sultrily at our nasty-eyed friend. I said quickly:

"He's holding the top cards, son. For cripes sake let him play the hand."

Bones just said nastily: "If he can."

I took another quick look at the nasty-eyed Skrontch. He was still leaning against the door, showing a small and humorless grin. All of his front teeth were broken off and looked jagged, almost like splinters of old slate that had been weathered black. He said brightly, running his tongue over the dark teeth:

"I could play this hand with my eyes closed tight."

Nobody said anything, and Skrontch added more brightly: "You won't object to *how* I play it, either, will you, Tucker, old boy? How would it be to have the story spread around that our police commissioner bought Miss Katherine Kraft her whippets? Wouldn't that be nice? A nice illegal dog track, and you buying dogs? Tch, tch.

"And as for our two friends"—he looked at Bones and me—"you'd like to go back to Baltimore still beautiful and whole, wouldn't you?" He wiggled the peaks in his pockets at us. "Well, wouldn't you?"

Bones growled: "Would we?"

"I think so, my freckled friend."



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I was staring a little, and maybe gaping a little, looking hard at old Tucker Patterson. I didn't say anything. I was wondering why he'd bought Kitty Kraft her whippets, and wondering if he was the dog-track owner. The whole business seemed to be making less and less sense. I couldn't even figure why Skrontch had visited us.

I wiped some perspiration off my forehead without drawing a shot, and screwed my eyes around until I could see Reynal Patterson.

He had stopped holding his diaphragm and stood erect. His face was slightly pale, and his cruel mouth twisted arrogantly. For the first time his back was to the windows and no light glittered on his glasses, and I could see his cold pale eyes staring hard across the room. His gaze seemed to be fastened on Skrontch.

But Skrontch was still showing his dark broken teeth to Bones. And Bones was saying: "What you think don't mean a damned thing to us, guy."

I started a little and clenched my hands and got my leg muscles ready to move me fast. Bones' jaw was jutting out slightly. He stood with his fists clenched and his eyes bright and gleaming, and then he even lifted his right fist and licked his knuckles. That meant he'd cleared his decks for action. He actually looked a little happy about it.

Skrontch said: "Damned if you're not tough, at that."

TWO BIG BLUE GUNS came out of his coat pockets so quickly you hardly even saw him move. But he kept leaning casually against our door and looked as calm as if he'd pulled a handkerchief. He showed his broken teeth to Bones again and jiggled the barrels of the big guns at him.

He said pleasantly: "You're tough, but you're not a fool. I'm up here on a kidnaping job." He poked the barrel of one gun quickly at Reynal Patterson. "Come along, my friend. We don't want any gun-play."

I was still standing with my leg muscles tense, and I looked quickly at the younger Patterson. His face didn't change. He

looked levelly at Skrontch and then at me, and his cold eyes began to glitter. He picked up his expensive Panama and clapped it on his well-groomed head.

He said to me: "It's a damned shame you thought you were so smart."

I said: "Huh?"

"If you'd have let me have my say before you started all those accusations, all of us around here would be a damned sight better off."

I looked at Skrontch. "Maybe you would, Reynal."

Reynal Patterson's cold eyes kept glittering at me. "So would you, man. Take my word for it. If Hearn thinks you know who owns that dog track, he'll be after you, too—mark my words. I'm only one person he's going to torture in his effort to find out who owns that track."

I snapped: "Like he tortured Margaret Kraft?"

Reynal's eyes still didn't change. He said coldly: "He only threatened Margaret with torture."

I moved my shoulders. "And then she lammed out of town?"

The younger Patterson frowned irritably at me. He said: "Of course, she did. And I don't blame her. Any young girl would have been half scared to death."

Bones growled: "I wouldn't've. Not of this Skrontch guy. Don't tell me he *works* for Hearn."

Reynal Patterson's thin mouth twisted contemptuously. It was an expression that looked as natural on his arrogant face as a smear of jam on a baby's cheek. His cold eyes began to glitter again. He said coldly: "Tell them, dad."

Old Tucker Patterson merely moved a thick shoulder. He said: "Skrontch's worked for Hearn for the last three years."

Reynal Patterson's thin mouth twisted a little more, and he walked slowly across the room and Skrontch opened the door. I stared at old Tucker Patterson. His son was being kidnaped right under his nose, and he didn't look like he was going to do any more about it than if he was going out to lunch. I shuffled my feet and clenched my hands. I rapped:

"What kind of a burg is this town, anyway? What the hell kind of families do they raise down here? Is the water around here thicker than the blood?"

Old Tucker Patterson didn't move for a moment. When he turned, it was very deliberately, and his fine gray eyes seemed to bore into me. Then I saw something. Behind the clear gray color there was something dark and shadowed, like pain was twisting through his brain behind those eyes. And his mouth was very faintly lined at the corners; there was hardness along the stubborn line of his large thick jaw.

He said slowly: "Some of our children seem to have that viewpoint. Heaven knows we didn't instill it in them."

I saw Reynal Patterson stop almost at the door—stop as though he'd rammed a wall. He turned swiftly, and his hands were clenched. Once more I couldn't see his eyes; light from our windows had caught his glasses.

He said in a tight, very strained voice: "No, you didn't instill it in me. You simply had one filthy love affair after another and drove my mother straight to her grave. You didn't instill anything in me—except a hatred for you and your weakness for women. Why, you stayed away for weeks at a time, just—"

Bones yelled: "The gun, Shag! We can take him!"

I might have known that the skinny stiff hadn't licked his knuckles for nothing. Skrontch was standing in the doorway with Reynal Patterson in front of him, and Bones charged across the room and drove his head into Reynal's belly.

Reynal's glasses leaped up high on his forehead and his body was driven backward into Skrontch. I spun around and dived for the bed. I got the pillow in my left hand and my little gun in my right, then spun around again and tried to cover the room. But I was too late. Skrontch hadn't been knocked off his feet and he staggered in behind Reynal and swung a long arm around him.

One of his big gun barrels whipped Bones across the cheek. Bones stumbled backward but didn't fall, and Skrontch

put an arm around Reynal and hauled him out into the corridor. Then one of those big blue guns levelled at me.

I ALREADY had my little gun up, and I fired but didn't aim at Skrontch. Reynal was still in front of him and I didn't have much target. I fired at the door, kicked loose lots of splinters—and I think that spoiled Skrontch's aim. It's a whole lot different shooting when you think somebody's shooting at you. His bullet nipped a window behind me, and the colored hucksters stopped yelling about watermelon.

Then old Tucker Patterson leaped forward, grabbed my gun-wrist, and clung to it as if it was his last two bucks.

He breathed hoarsely: "You'll hit Reynal, you fool."

I'll bet my eyes bulged about forty inches, but then I snarled at him like a few battalions of wild men. I twisted my arm and tried to pull loose. Bones charged into both of us and keeled us over on the bed—afterwards he said to put us out of Skrontch's line of fire. But Skrontch didn't make any more attempts to fire. When I wriggled out of the mass of arms and legs, there was nobody at all standing in our doorway.

I hopped to my feet and slammed out into the corridor. There were plenty of people there, but no Skrontch or Reynal; most of the people were peeping out through cracks in their doors. A lot of them ducked back at sight of my gun. But a tall, stately blonde wrapped in a pale blue negligee leaned casually in her doorway and looked me over.

She said in an offhand manner: "They took the automatic elevator, handsome. What's the matter? They steal your toothbrush?"

I scowled at her and started for the stairs. A lot of the heads poked out again, and I shoved the gun in my pocket and began to sprint. I took the stairs three at a time. I must have looked like a wild man when I hit the lobby—even the salesmen at the slot machines stopped playing to stare. I reached the street in time to see a car whisk around a corner, then

spun around and buttonholed the big darky doorman.

He was wearing a uniform that would have shamed a czar. The whites of his eyes bulged and his mouth hung open. He said: "Huh?"

I growled: "I haven't asked you anything yet." I scowled and described Skrontch. "You see a guy like that with another guy with glasses?"

He just gulped at me. "Huh?"

I said: "Don't you know anything else?"

"Huh?"

A newsboy standing by said excitedly: "Jeeze, mister! Two guys like that just left in a car. Aw, jeeze!"

I thanked him, dug out a dime and flipped it, and stalked back into the ornate lobby. The salesmen had almost abandoned the slot machines. They were in small groups, whispering low but furiously, rubbernecking at me. I didn't pay any attention to them.

I noticed that the redhead on the switchboard was yelling in her headset for cops, and that the desk clerk was chewing nervously on a freshly dipped pen nib. I went hard-heeled to the automatic elevator, pressed my floor button, and shot up fast.

Our corridor was choked with a lot of people, and my casual blonde was still at her post. She waved indolently at me. I scowled at her again, pushed my way through the crowd, found the door of our room closed, and promptly pushed it open. I found myself with Bones, old Tucker Patterson, the hotel manager and the house dick. I closed the door behind me and looked sharply at Bones.

He was sitting on the bed, gently rubbing his cheek and jaw. "They get away?"

"Yeah," I said.

Old Tucker Patterson looked blandly at me. He said slowly: "I'd rather you didn't give any details, Roberts. This has been private police business, and—well, we want to keep it private."

I stared at him but didn't say anything. If he wanted us to keep quiet because Skrontch had threatened to squeal on his dog-buying, there didn't seem to be much that I could say. So I nodded and

went over to the bed. Bones and I sat and waited while he mollified the manager and the house dick, kept our seats when he ushered them out.

OLD TUCKER PATTERSON turned from the door and just looked at us. His clear gray eyes had that shadow again back of them, and I thought his cheeks sagged a little. But the large thick jaw was square and set. He said slowly: "I suppose you'd like to know why I came here."

Bones bounced off the bed like a snake had bitten him. I didn't even get a chance to stop him. He yelled: "*Like to know?*" His lack of tact stuck out all over him like bristles. His skin was red and angry under the freckles. He roared: "Just try to get out without telling us, guy!"

I grabbed him and pulled him back on the bed. He was breathing like a mad elephant. I said: "Whoa, son." I looked at Tucker Patterson. He was flushing and clenching his huge gnarled fists.

I got Bones quieted and told old Tucker: "Just go ahead. We're calm now. We're listening."

The old fellow didn't even look at Bones. His big hands were still clenched, his face still flushing slightly, and he kept his gaze squarely on me. He said slowly: "Katherine Kraft sent me here."

I know I started. I yelled: "You, too?"

He blinked his gray eyes. "*Me—too?*"

Right then I thought I caught on. I laughed a little. I said: "You were sent here by her to tell us to keep quiet about the bodies, weren't you? About the bodies being on her porch?"

He nodded slowly. "*Ye-es.*"

I said: "Well, so was Reynal."

He put his large head to one side. "What?"

I stared at him. "Look," I growled. "Either you're lying or Reynal was lying. Katherine Kraft wouldn't send both of you here. Now, which is it?"

Old Tucker Patterson slowly clenched his fists again. He said in a very level voice: "Miss Katherine Kraft telephoned me last night. She told me that Geisler had been shot, and if I didn't keep her name out of the murder that she'd make

it public that I bought her litter of dogs for her. So I went over to move the body. But when I got there, she and Reynal were just arriving—she said that Reynal had phoned her and asked her to meet him on the corner.

"But I don't know why Reynal met her on the corner. I don't know how Margaret Kraft's body got on the porch steps, and neither Katherine nor Reynal seemed to know, either. As far as I could see, both of them were almost shocked out of their wits when they saw Margaret. All I know is that Reynal was engaged to Margaret, and that he and I moved both bodies to a vacant lot. Then Katherine told me to be sure to come down and see you two fellows."

I growled: "What corner did Reynal meet Kitty Kraft on?"

"What? . . . Oh." He frowned at me. He named one of the northern corners. Bones and I had been on one to the south.

I looked at Bones. I snapped: "Well, let's go."

"Where?" Bones asked.

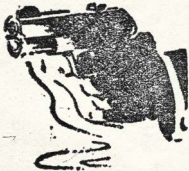
"To Kitty Kraft's, dope — not the aquarium." I spun on old Tucker. "And you're going with us."

He said: "What?"

I growled: "Don't they make police commissioners take hearing tests around here? You're going with us, and don't think you're not. Seeing as what we're liable to run into, a police commissioner might come in pretty handy."

CHAPTER V

DEATH STALKS SILENTLY



THE BIG LOCUST TREES, shaped like gigantic mushrooms, shaded Katherine Kraft's neatly kept lawn and porch. I paused on the porch steps and shuddered a little. Both the steps and porch were blocked from the neighbors' sight by clusters of the trees at both porch ends. I frowned at Bones, tried to think, and let old Tucker Patterson ring the brightly furnished bell.

Again there were no parked cars on the street but mine.

Katherine Kraft, dressed in an emerald housecoat with soft golden stripes, opened the door a few inches and looked out at us. We evidently weren't quite who she was expecting. Her lips were framed as if her speech was rehearsed, but when she saw us, her face went to pieces. I think she was ready to slam the door.

But my foot sliding in stopped that idea, and my torso following it made her draw back. I took another step, and that put me in the hall. I held the door open for Bones and old Tucker Patterson.

They came in, and I said: "It's a very pleasant and surprising morning, isn't it, Miss Kraft?"

Her close-set eyes, bright and shiny, settled on my chin and wished I would rot.

With his white linen suit now so dirty it might have been a baggy pepper-and-salt tweed, Skrontch slid quietly into the doorway to the living room, leaned there, and showed us his broken teeth. I remember blinking, then staying carefully still.

His thin hands were again in pockets that had sharp sinister peaks, and his tongue was running back and forth slowly, licking his teeth. His nasty eyes were shadowed by the bannister of the stairs. He said mockingly:

"A very pleasant and surprising morning to you."

I had a little lip for that, but choked it back, slid my eyes around and studied Katherine Kraft. She still looked as mean as an old-fashioned melodrammer villain. Then Skrontch stepped out of the doorway, made gestures at us, and we filed quietly into the living room and looked around.

Reynal Patterson hitched up the legs of his carefully pressed trousers, adjusted his glasses arrogantly, but otherwise didn't move. He was on the settee beside the chow-bench and didn't show any signs of being tortured. Katherine Kraft—still looking mean—sat down beside him and glared at me. Skrontch came through the doorway and wiggled the peaks in his pockets at us.

"Have seats, won't you?"

"So nice of you," I said. "Where's Hearn?"

He showed his dark broken teeth again. "Oh, he'll be here, my pretty friend. . . . Also, I think you've had that little gun of yours just about long enough. You wouldn't mind standing for one more little moment, would you?"

I scowled at him but didn't say anything, stood still, and let his thin hands frisk me. He got out my little gun and dropped it into a hip pocket. Then he frisked old Tucker and Bones, found no guns on them, went back to the door, and leaned casually against the wall. He kept running his tongue over his teeth, and looked slightly amused.

Katherine Kraft kept her green eyes on me.

I looked hard at her. I grinned a little and said: "Look, lady. We know you met Reynal last night on a corner. We know he phoned you, and asked you to meet him there. You didn't turn your lights off when you went to meet him, did you?"

Katherine Kraft's eyes blinked once, then stared at me. Very slowly, they began to grow nasty. She snapped: "Yes, I did. What's it to you?"

I moved my shoulders, but kept my grin. "Nothing," I said. "Bones and I came back, found the lights off, and Margaret's body was on the steps then. But before we came up and saw the body, we saw the man who put it there. He came down your walk and drove off in a car. And the car had Maryland tags—109698."

Old Tucker Patterson turned white and gasped.

I spun around in my chair and looked quickly at him. Bones half got to his feet. Dimly, out of the corners of my eyes, I saw Katherine Kraft's fingers leap to her lips.

The doorbell rang.

KATHERINE KRAFT sprang up from the settee, her face alert, and I noticed a quick glance exchanged between her and Skrontch. That was something that was hard to figure. She went out into the hall, I heard the door open,

and then heard her voice and Hearn's, talking quietly. I glanced over at Bones, and he looked puzzled. Skrontch wiggled the peaks in his pockets again and licked his teeth.

He whispered very softly: "You will not make any noise, please."

I sat down in a chair and stared at him, then could feel my eyes bulge just a little. He had taken one of his hands out of a coat pocket. The gun he held was not big and blue, but big and black and flat, an automatic. There was a compact silencer fattening the muzzle. It was an automatic with a fixed carriage—other types won't take silencers.

I was staring at it and swallowing hard when Hearn walked briskly into the room.

He had discarded his beautifully fitted light gray suit, but still had not lost his sleek movie-star look. He was dressed now for the very late morning lounge. You've seen a million of those outfits in the fan magazines—loud shaggy sports coats, scarfs knotted at throats, soft white flannels and buckskin sports shoes with thick soles. He looked ready to tell any interviewer the soul secrets of his love life. Then he saw Skrontch and stopped so quickly it startled me.

Skrontch merely levelled the silenced automatic and said very quietly: "So long, Wes, the handsome. Hope they have good tailors in hell."

The automatic leaped in his thin hand three jerky times, and there was a slight wisp of lazy smoke and three hollow sounds like a popgun.

Hearn put his hand to his breast pocket and his eyes rolled around glassily. I think he was dead after the first shot. He took two steps, sat down heavily, then keeled over on his right side and stayed quite still. The three overlapping triangles of his breast pocket handkerchief seeped up blood very slowly, almost like a blotter.

Skrontch showed his teeth again and said quite sadly: "Poor old Wes. I ruined his coat."

My mouth was dry as a prohibition platform, and I squirmed around in the chair and tried not to be scared. On my

right, Bones was gaping wide-eyed. Old Tucker Patterson had his hands over his eyes, and Reynal's skin now looked like white sand. But Katherine Kraft stood in the doorway, her close-set eyes glittering scornfully.

She said in a low throaty voice: "I always did hate that guy."

I looked up at her but didn't say anything, and she stepped over the body as if it was a gutter of trash. Her own body, large and rounded and breathlessly shaped, moved liquidly under the emerald-and-gold housecoat, and it was hard to connect it with her nasty mind. She walked over in front of Reynal, got a cigarette off the chow-bench, and lit up casually.

She said through smoke to Skrontch: "Give it to the others. Let's get it over with."

I was squirming before because I was scared—but now I couldn't squirm; I was paralyzed. But Bones just stuck out his tongue and licked his lips. I managed to get my gaze around and see old Tucker Patterson, and there was that shadow again behind his eyes. I gathered that he thought he was to be included among what Katherine Kraft termed the "others." Somehow I found what was left of my voice, and it felt as if I was lifting it way up from my knees.

I growled at him: "109698 doesn't happen to be your license number, does it?"

He nodded slowly. "Y-yes."

I snapped: "But you didn't use that car last night."

This time he shook his head. "No." His deep voice was very strained. "I have two cars. I used the other one."

"And Reynal used the one with 109698?"

Old Tucker Patterson nodded again. "He must have. When I went out to the garage after Kitty phoned me, the other car wasn't in."

I looked at Katherine Kraft and said: "Don't be a sap, lady. Don't be so anxious for Skrontch to kill us—because after he finishes that job, he's going to kill you.

Why do you think he came in the kitchen last night?"

Katherine Kraft's eyes hated me. "Why?" she snapped.

I grinned at her. I don't know where I got the grin—it must have looked like a petrified skeleton's. And now it seemed like I had to lift my voice all the way up from my ankles. I said:

"Why? Look, lady. Reynal Patterson owns that dog track, but he was worried because his dad might close down on it. So he came to you—his dad's your sweetie—and offered you dough if you'd keep him from raiding it. And you not only kept him from raiding it, you even coaxed him into buying you some dogs. Am I right on that?"

BUT I didn't look at Katherine Kraft. I wasn't bothered about her reaction or answer; I knew I was right, and I was worried about Skrontch. My eyes moved sideways, and I looked quickly at him. He was holding the automatic loosely down by his thigh.

His face showed nothing, and I went on: "You see, lady"—I was looking at Katherine Kraft again—"Margaret lammed out of town because Hearn had threatened her; she wouldn't tell him who owned the track, because she was engaged to Reynal and wanted to protect him.

"But when she got to Baltimore, Reynal didn't stand by her. He either didn't send her much money, or didn't send her any, because pretty soon she was broke and had to come to our company and borrow some. And finally she got sore at Reynal, and came back to blackmail him. You see, I know everything about this mess."

Katherine Kraft snapped: "Then get around to Skrontch and the kitchen."

Somehow I got another grin on my face and waved a hand at her. But out of the corners of my eyes I was still watching Skrontch. He was fondling the automatic and playing with the safety. It made sharp ominous clicks as he pushed it on and off.

I gulped and said to Katherine Kraft: "I'll give that part to you in just a minute . . . Listen. Reynal's dog track was

making all the money in this town because it was taking everything that had formerly been bet in Hearn's horse joints. So Reynal had more dough to offer Skrontch than Hearn, so Skrontch came over and started working for Reynal. So—"I stopped and looked hard at her. "Or did you know that?"

Kitty Kraft said angrily: "I just found it out today."

I hadn't stopped looking at Skrontch from out of my eye-corners, and now for the first time in almost two minutes, I looked over at Reynal Patterson. He was sitting forward on the edge of the settee, his lean hands tightly gripping his knees. His cold blue eyes glittered behind his glasses. His mouth tightened and he said quietly:

"Don't you think he's talked enough, Skrontch?"

Skrontch showed his teeth once more. "Any time you want to stop him, Reynal, all you have to do is give the word."

I didn't say anything, and I could barely breathe. The base of my spine was beginning to feel like a big hunk of dry ice. Skrontch was still fondling the gun, and his bloodshot eyes were looking at me. I got my voice up—this time from around my heels. I said:

"What I'm telling Katherine Kraft now is all mailed in a separate envelope with my daily report. If I don't show up at the office sometime tomorrow, then that envelope'll be opened, and you know what that'll bring. If you want to stop me from talking, just go ahead. My death warrant is yours too, and don't you forget it."

Reynal Patterson's cold eyes were hard to read. They were fastened steadily on me, and they didn't even flicker, and I couldn't tell whether my bluff had gone over or not. I just sat there and tried to outstare him. My hands felt cold and clammy like a dead man's hands, and I kept imagining that all sorts of guilt was showing up in my face. I know my mouth was drier than a toasted cracker. My tongue felt like it was four sizes too big.

Then Reynal Patterson nodded his head at Skrontch.

CHAPTER VI

HEAD FIRST TO HELL



I BOUNCED out of my chair just as Skrontch's eyes swung toward me, and went into a dive that any fullback would have been proud of. But successfully jumping a gun on a guy as experienced as Skrontch

was about as likely as hopping to Mars on a cheap pogo stick.

He skipped backward just about ten miles from my hands and ripped a slug past me that scorched the hair off my left ear. But his second slug merely scooped plaster from the ceiling.

Lying on my belly with my chin dug into green carpet, I wasn't in position to give her much help. I swung up to my knees as Skrontch whirled on her, watched him chop his left fist down savagely across her cheek. She went stumbling backward and smacked squarely into Reynal, then turned on him and rammed him back on the settee.

He hit on the side of his hip, bounced off stiffly to the floor, rolled against the chow-bench and sent that toppling. By that time Katherine Kraft was charging back at Skrontch.

This short bit of by-play had occupied only a few seconds, and over my shoulder I saw Bones with his jaw sagging almost to his chest. Then he heaved out of his chair with a bellow, skimmed over my back like a low hurdle, and drew a slug from Skrontch that kicked carpet lint up at me. Skrontch was between two charges and I think he almost went cockeyed. Anyway, by the time he decided which way to shoot next, Bones and the girl had him sandwiched.

I got to my feet just as he gun-whipped Bones with the silencer, and Bones staggered back into me, blocking my progress. I remember thinking that this was probably the end, and wondering if our company would send us flowers.

But I knocked Bones out of the way for one more effort, and he stumbled

around crazily but stayed on his feet. Skrontch shoved Katherine Kraft away but only at arms' length, and then dimly, like from a distance, I could hear her yelling.

She screamed: "Don't stick all our heads in a noose, Skrontch!"

The fat end of the automatic was swinging up toward me, and I think for once in my life I played smart. One move from me in any direction would have sealed my doom tighter than a mummy's mouth.

I didn't see anybody else's reaction but Skrontch's, and he blinked his bloodshot eyes very slowly, twice. After another moment that was long enough to sink four shafts through to China, he blinked once more—and then suddenly frowned.

He said slowly: "Hell, Reynal, how do we know whether he's bluffing or not? The girl's right; why take a chance on sticking our heads in a noose?"

I tried to get a grip on myself and not relax too fast, but I might as well have tried to get a grip on some mercury. I found my chair and collapsed in it like a guy caught up by the heat. I rolled around in the chair, wiped my mouth with my sleeve, then found I barely had enough strength to sit up again.

I blew out some breath and looked around at Reynal Patterson.

He was just getting up from the floor and his breath was flaring angrily from his nostrils. His cold eyes were looking swiftly from Skrontch to me. He snapped suddenly at Skrontch:

"Just what would you suggest?"

FOR ONCE Skrontch didn't show his broken teeth. He shrugged and said: "I'd let Roberts talk, and then we'll see how much he does know. If he knows it all and can prove it, then we can talk compromise with him. If he doesn't know it all and can't prove it—well, what the hell, why worry?"

Reynal Patterson turned to me and said tightly: "All right, talk ahead—and be sure to include your proof."

I suppose you can only be scared just so long. After a while you get to the point when you feel like yelling that what-

ever somebody's going to do to you—well, for cripes sake do it. That was the way I felt, and my voice came out with a snap.

"Okay. You'll get it, and you'll get it with proof." I scowled. "Just listen.

"You killed Margaret Kraft because she was trying to blackmail you. And you planted Skrontch outside this house with orders to kill Paul Geisler when he showed up last night. And here's why.

"You knew Paul Geisler and Katherine Kraft were planning to sell your name to Hearn. You knew it because Katherine Kraft—always looking for some extra profit—told you they were going to sell out. You knew it because Katherine said that she and Geisler wouldn't sell if you'd pay them *not* to sell more than Hearn would pay them *to* sell. Is that straight?"

I saw Reynal Patterson glance swiftly at Skrontch. He frowned before he turned back to me. Then he snapped: "Keep right on."

"Remember, bud," I said. "You asked for it . . . Now." I wiggled my finger. "After Skrontch shot Geisler, Skrontch went to a phone and called you. He told you exactly what time he was going in Katherine Kraft's kitchen, and you were to phone Katherine Kraft at that time. Skrontch also told you about Bones and me being in the house, but"—I wiggled my finger again—"you decided to go through with your plan, anyway. And your plan was for Skrontch to plant a bottle of poisoned gin in the kitchen, so you could kill Katherine Kraft, too.

"So Skrontch came in the kitchen but he made a lot of noise, and we ran in, and he ran out. But just before we ran in the kitchen, you called Katherine Kraft; I heard the phone ring. Then she told you what had happened and you had to change your plans.

"You'd originally called Katherine to keep her busy while Skrontch was in the kitchen, and also because you were reasonably sure she'd tell you about Geisler's murder. That would have given you a chance to come over—apparently to help Katherine. You wanted to bring Margaret's body with you, leave it in the car, come in and persuade Katherine to have

a drink as a bracer, which would've killed her.

"Then things would've been dandy. You could plant the bottle of poison itself and make it look like suicide, like Katherine killed herself in remorse after killing Margaret and Paul Geisler. And everybody would think she killed them in one of her terrible tempers. You were going to make her the fall guy—and try to get out of that."

Reynal Patterson said coldly: "You're doing the talking."

Out of my eye-corners, I was watching Skrontch again, watching him still fiddling with the gun's safety.

"Well, you had to change your plans. So you told Katherine Kraft over the phone that you'd help her if she'd get rid of us, and for her to meet you on the corner whether you got rid of us or not. And it was right here you took your long chance. You came right over, dumped Margaret's body on the porch—you knew Katherine couldn't see you; that she'd be on the corner waiting—and trusted to luck that Bones and I wouldn't be around to see you, either. But we did, and we got the license number of the car. It was your dad's—you'd lent yours to Skrontch.

"So then you met Katherine on the corner, and she told you she'd called your dad—Katherine was getting all the help she could get. And that made it necessary for you to change plans again. Your dad would see Katherine drink the gin and die, and know damned well she didn't commit suicide.

"But you came back to the house with Katherine, anyway. You didn't care whether or not Bones and I saw you then—you'd told Katherine you cared before just as a stall. So you came back, registered the proper surprise when you saw Margaret's body, then helped your dad move both bodies, and pretended helpfulness all around." I scowled at him. "How'm I doing?"

Reynal Patterson's eyes were glittering again. He snapped: "You haven't finished—and you haven't showed any proof."

I grinned at him just a little. The grin was easier now, because Bones and I had one chance to live—a chance slim as a

grass blade, but still a chance. Then I took one more look at the nasty-eyed Skrontch. He was caressing the gun as though it was something he loved very dearly.

I swallowed hard and said: "Well, here's the rest of it. This morning you came down to see us because we'd seen Skrontch get away in your car, and you were afraid that we'd gotten the license number. You wanted to find out just what we knew. And you planted Skrontch out in the corridor in case we got tough with you and you needed help. Which"—I grinned again—"you happened to need.

"So then you pretended that Skrontch was still working for Hearn because we'd seen him at the house, and seen him in the kitchen. Then when you left the hotel, you realized you were in a spot. We knew you had moved those bodies. So you came over here to see Katherine Kraft and cooked up another scheme with her. You promised her dough if she'd lure Hearn over here, where you could kill him in a nice safe spot. Then you planned to kill Katherine, then Bones and me, and leave the town all to yourself.

"You had a strong hold over your dad because he had helped move Margaret's and Geisler's bodies, and you could make him go light on the police investigation. Which would have made everything ducky for you." I spread my hands. "And that's the crop."

Reynal Patterson snapped: "But not the proof."

I moved my shoulders. "The proofs in the kitchen," I said. "Just lead me to it. I'm rarin' to go."

REYNAL PATTERSON frowned very darkly, then looked over at Skrontch and nodded his head. Skrontch pushed himself away from the wall. He walked to the kitchen door, swung it open, and we all filed through it, moving noiselessly.

I stood and looked around thoughtfully for a moment, then walked over to the kitchen shelves.

They were built like they are in the majority of kitchens, in reality one very large kitchen cupboard with drawers at the bottom and shelves at the top. In front

of it, the porcelain-top kitchen table had been set upright again.

I reached up to the frosted glass doors, swung them open, and showed Katherine Kraft's gin cache. All the bottles that had fallen had been put back. I said, looking at Katherine Kraft:

"When we heard Skrontch out here in the kitchen, we heard a devil of a clatter, didn't we? All right. That was the gin bottles falling—you'd opened the frosted glass doors, remember? We were out here and you took a switch-hitch.

"Well, this porcelain-top table is kept almost up against the bottom of these shelves. And half of your gin bottles are directly over it. So when the bottles fell, they landed on the table and made a racket like a lot of scrap iron on a tin roof. I know darned well you remember that.

"So here's what happened. Skrontch came in here with a bottle of poisoned gin, put it on the table—in place of the one you had open. I suppose you always have one open, and that would be the easiest way for him to do it. You seem to use one brand of gin, and Reynal could simply have bought a bottle of that, poisoned it, and told Skrontch to leave it. You see, the bottle that you had open could just be dumped. I hope I'm making myself nice and clear."

Katherine Kraft's face was blotched and mottled.

"Just go on."

"Okay." I took a long, deep breath. "But how did those bottles happen to fall if Skrontch merely put your poisoned gin on the table?" I looked slyly over near the door at Skrontch. He was still caressing the gun. I gritted my teeth hard; this was the payoff. I added huskily:

"Well, I'll show you."

This time I didn't bother to look at Skrontch. I just pointed at two large drawers beneath the shelves. Then I bent down quickly and grabbed the handles of the top one. I yanked and the drawer stuck, and the shelves above shimmied. There was a rain of gin bottles down on the porcelain-top table.

A lot of sweat was standing out all over my hands, and I found the handles of the

drawer hard to grip. But I kept tugging at that drawer with all the strength that was in me. More gin bottles fell, making more clatter, then the drawer pulled open, and I glanced inside of it. I didn't stop to look around. I couldn't afford to do that; I had to take a chance.

My hand plunged down into the drawer and my fingers folded around the smooth butt of a revolver. The gun was a long-barrelled .45 and weighed half a ton. But I jerked it out and spun with it, praying as I moved. I was praying that all those gin bottles had caused lots of confusion.

MAYBE I figured right; I don't know. When I spun, Skrontch's big automatic was swinging up, the muzzle following me like Uncle Sam's finger on a poster. I remember at that instant I tried to catalogue the room. Katherine Kraft was staring at me, old Tucker was wide-eyed, and Bones was charging across the floor at Skrontch. I squeezed the trigger of the long-barrelled gun.

My first shot must have missed Skrontch a good ten feet. I saw his gun jounce, saw a small jet of blue flame, didn't hear any noise, but felt something nick my neck. The nick felt like a fly bite.

I fired again and my wrist felt numb, but the slug keeled over Skrontch as though he'd been hit by a truck.

Then I slid my gaze around, saw Katherine Kraft dig a small automatic out of her housecoat pocket.

You hardly heard the noise the little gun made, but the smoke floated away lazily and I saw her flinch from the recoil. Then I saw Reynal put his hands to his belly. A little blood came out over his fingers, and he seemed faintly surprised, then he folded up like a jack-knife.

And at that moment, old Tucker Patterson stepped up to Katherine Kraft. He socked her squarely on the button with the prettiest right you've ever seen.

I stood and watched her stagger back across the floor, step on one of her gin bottles, and spill sideways to her hip. But she wasn't out, and she suddenly went crazy. She threw the gun away, picked up the gin bottle, smashed it on the floor and began rubbing her hands into the

broken glass. Her shrieks sounded like something horrible out of a medieval torture chamber.

She took her hands, cut and streaming with blood, and rubbed them back and forth across her cheeks, as if the blood was a face cream. Then she rolled on the floor, making sure she rolled on the glass, and screamed with delight, clenching her bloody hands and waving them.

Bones stood up and just gaped at Katherine Kraft. I gaped, too; I knew this was one tantrum she'd never get out of. I said to Bones: "For cripes sake, let's get her off that glass."

Bones nodded and we both swallowed hard, then reached down and got good grips on her. It took all our strength to carry her into the living room. Finally we found a clothes line and tied her down on the sofa. Back in the kitchen, we could hear her babbling.

Then old Tucker Patterson came back, his face looking gray.

Bones looked around and wagged his head. He said: "I don't know what you think about it, Shag, but I'm going to cover these bodies and go out for a drink. I wouldn't touch that gin with a ten-foot pole." He shuddered. "You game?"

"I said: 'Wait a minute.'" I looked at old Tucker Patterson. He was leaning against the kitchen sink, his fine gray eyes closed wearily. I went over and touched his arm. I added: "Not to bring up an unpleasant subject, but are you going to call the cops, or do you want us to?"

But he just said in a tired voice: "You call them. I'm done—I'm through. I'm going to admit my part and take what's coming to me."

A HALF HOUR later, waiting for the cops, Bones and I sat on the porch over beer that he'd gone out and gotten. Old Tucker Patterson sat moodily in a swing. It was still not quite noon.

Bones grinned cheerfully at me. He said: "Aw, Swami, it wasn't so tough to figure. That is, all except that gun-in-the-drawer action." He wiped some foam off his lips with the back of his hand. "Me no able to figure that, Swami."

I looked at him over my glass. I said: "This isn't bad beer, son . . . Look. That gun *had* to be in there—it was the one right thing. If they had planned to poison Katherine Kraft and make it look like she killed Geisler, they had to plant the murder gun here in the house on her, didn't they? And I couldn't figure why those gin bottles fell. So when I let the two thoughts bang around in my mind together, I got the idea that maybe one of those drawers was the place.

"Nine out of ten of the damned things stick—try your own house some time. And Skrontch would be in a hurry—he'd pull like the devil on it. So that would bring the gin bottles down, and I figured that added up. The thing that worried me was that I might pull the wrong drawer."

Bones growled: "What the hell? It'd be natural for him to use the top one, wouldn't it?"

I said: "Well, that's the way I figured it. It'd be closest and easiest, and so most natural. But—"

I broke off and stared at him.

He blinked. "What's the matter?"

I said: "What's the *matter*? Do you know we haven't collected our dough? Do you want to be getting Unemployment Compensation this time next week?"

Bones grinned and waved a hand. "Hell, we can collect our dough from Margaret Kraft's insurance. I wouldn't let a little thing like that worry me."

I looked suspiciously at him. He looked a little too smug, a little too complacent. I growled: "How do you know she's got insurance?"

He waved a freckled hand again. "Look, Swami. You're not the only guy who sees all, hears all, knows all, and tells all."

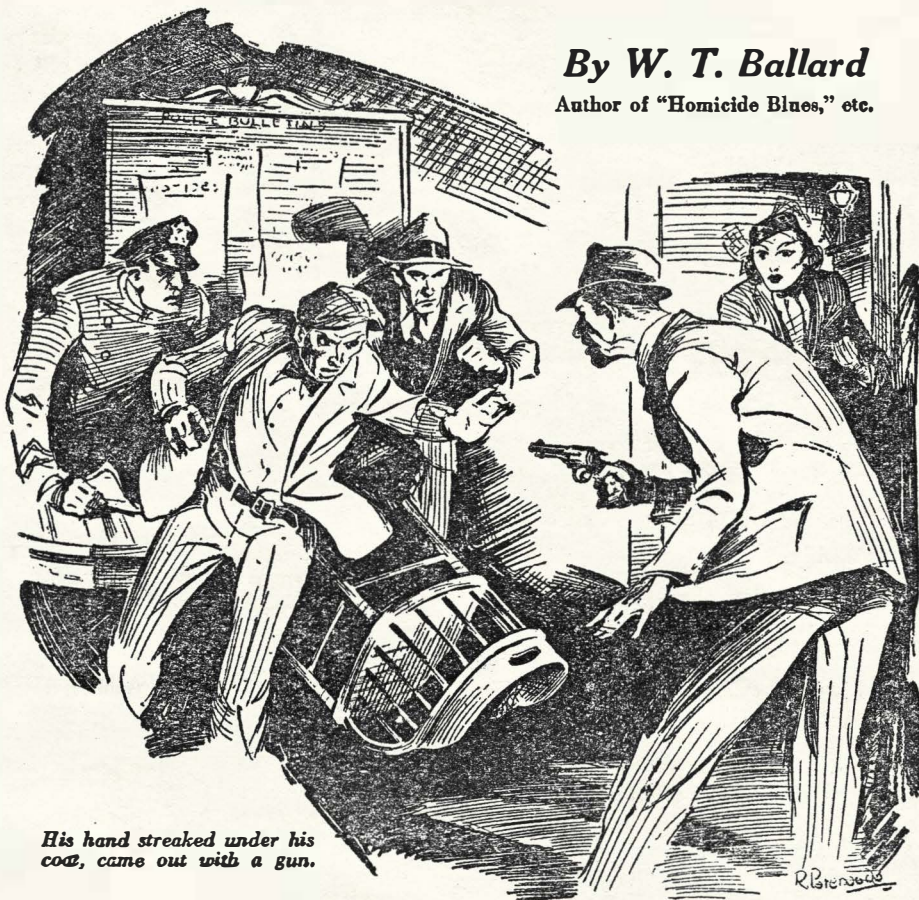
He grinned. "I'll lay a week-end in Ocean City to a short bus ride that Katherine Kraft took out insurance on Margaret as soon as she was threatened. Like to bet that that money-grabbing dame didn't?"

I just scowled at him.

He laughed and pushed a bottle at me. "Refresh yourself, boy, and ask the new Swami questions. Come on, Shaggie, have a little beer."

Stooge for Slaughter

By W. T. Ballard
Author of "Homicide Blues," etc.



His hand streaked under his coat, came out with a gun.

Ernie Paulo was a small-time dip who didn't have the nerve or the brains to go big time. But nerve and brains aren't everything. There is a third ingredient that outweighs the other two. Fate. Fate was the third chip. And Ernie found that three's a crowd—in more ways than one.

ERNIE PAULO was a pickpocket, a dip, a minor criminal who hung on the outskirts of the underworld gathering in what few crumbs fell his way. He was not above working the race-track crowd, seeing what he could glean from the well-filled wallets of the gamblers. He lacked the nerve to be big-time and he knew it, but he got along fairly well so long as he stayed in his own class.

He sat on the stool before the soft drinks stand outside the door which led to the betting ring and drank coke from a bottle as he munched a hot dog.

Bob South came toward him from the betting ring. Bob South was big, good-

natured, his shrewd gray eyes looking out levelly from beneath sandy brows. Bob was a gambler and a square one, a nice guy—a right guy in anybody's language.

Ernie Paulo set the coke bottle on the counter and swung around, calling his greeting. South stopped, turned and walked toward him.

"Hello, Ernie!"

The shriveled thing in his left breast which passed for Ernie Paulo's heart expanded under the warmth of South's smile. Bob South was the only man he knew who ever acted genuinely glad to see Ernie. It always puzzled the little pickpocket. He couldn't figure why a big shot like South should bother with him. He never had been able to understand it, for Ernie knew himself well.

No one had more contempt for the little pickpocket than he had for himself. He smiled, twisting his small, peaked face into a grimace. "Lo, Mister South. How're they breaking?"

South shrugged. "Lousy. I can't pick one to save me. But look, kid. You better lam. I just saw McNulty, the track dick. They're rounding up the boys as they go through."

Ernie bobbed his head. "Thanks, pal."

SOUTH moved his shoulders. "Why don't you get next to yourself, Ernie? You'll sure wind up behind the eight ball if you keep touching other guys' leather. Look. I can get you a job down at the Palace. It won't be hard and it'll make you thirty bucks a week."

Ernie whitened. The thought of work always made him extremely ill. He stalled, trying desperately to think of a way of turning down the job without hurting the gambler's feelings.

South grinned. "Okay. Okay. You don't have to take it to heart. But some one's going to land on you and land hard."

Ernie's head bobbed again. The word that the cops were out picking up the boys worried him. He watched South go, then he swung around and ducked toward the main entrance. As he went he saw two Pinkertons dragging a rat-faced

tout between them. South's warning had come none too soon.

He rode downtown disconsolately. He'd expected to pick up at least a hundred bucks at the track that afternoon. As it was, he hadn't picked up a cent. There were three lone, limp one-dollar bills in his pocket as he left the car and started to walk down Broadway. He'd covered two blocks and was passing the Craig Jewelry Company when he saw old man Craig standing in the doorway.

He knew the head of the jewelry company by sight. Craig had had his picture in the papers at least a dozen times as chairman of one civic committee or another. Ernie paused. Craig was talking to one of the store's guards.

"That's all right, Roberts. I've got them here in my inside coat pocket. They're perfectly safe, I tell you. I'll deliver them to Mrs. Hynes myself."

Ernie Paulo stiffened. He'd read in the morning paper that Marvin Hynes had just purchased the famous Whalhoon diamonds for his wife and that the Craig Company had served as agent. Could it be that old man Craig was carrying the necklace which was valued at better than two hundred thousand dollars in his inside coat pocket? It didn't seem possible, and yet. . . .

The palms of Ernie's hands were itching. They always itched just before he picked the pocket of some substantial looking citizen. The Whalhoon diamonds!

He ran the tip of his tongue around dry lips. If he could only lift the necklace from the jewelry man. Two hundred thousand dollars! No, probably fifty to seventy-five thousand, for the fence would take at least a fifty per cent cut, perhaps more. But even seventy-five thousand would be a fortune to Ernie Paulo. It would make him a big shot, jerk him out of the ranks of pavement pickpockets, put him into the big time.

The jeweler was turning around, heading toward the cross streets. Ernie followed him swiftly, with the sureness of long years of training. They crossed with the light. He was so close to the jeweler that he could have touched the

man's hand, but he reached the sidewalk ahead of Craig.

Two newsboys stood there arguing. There was a crowd on the corner; the sidewalk was jammed solid from building to curb. Paulo waited until the jeweler was directly behind him, then he reached out and seized the papers from both newsboys.

They swung on him with juvenile fury. He cursed them sharply, stopped as a hand fell on his shoulder.

Craig grabbed him around. "What do you mean by taking those boys' papers?"

Paulo swore at him. He shoved the papers rudely into the jeweler's face. "Okay, then. You take them."

THE JEWELER'S ARMS came up. As they did so it pulled his coat open. For a moment the black leather jewel case was exposed. Then it vanished as one of Ernie Paulo's slim, white hands came up under the fluttering papers, slid it out of the pocket and with a deft motion pushed the jewel case up his sleeve. Then he turned, ducked the screaming newsboys and disappeared through the crowd.

From the shelter of a department store washroom far down the block he examined the necklace. It winked at him, blue fire lancing up in the shafts of sunlight.

Ernie caught his breath. He had never imagined anything like this, never imagined having over a hundred dollars at one time. With fingers that trembled he removed the necklace from its case, hid the case beneath the soiled towels in the container and slid from the washroom.

The diamonds were fastened around his ankle under his sock, well hidden by his long trousers. But his one idea was to get off the street, to get into hiding. The possession of the necklace troubled him far more than any wallet which he'd ever lifted. He made a straight line for his dark hall bedroom, disappeared into it and locked the door.

He did not venture out until well after ten o'clock; then he hailed a cab, spent one of his last remaining dollars to be driven across town.

Syd Greer was old. His face looked like one of Egypt's better-preserved mummies. A myriad of wrinkles laced and interlaced themselves across the dry, unhealthy looking skin. He opened the door himself, started and stared with disfavor at his visitor.

He had bought hundreds of watches from Ernie in years past, but the market for stolen watches was down. It was bad merchandise, hard to move, of no real intrinsic value.

He said in a surly tone: "What you got now?"

Ernie was fighting desperately to keep the excitement out of his voice. "I got something real, see? Something big. . ."

Syd grunted. "I can't give away watches. No one carries them any more."

Ernie was still fighting for control. "This ain't no ticker. This is something big. I ain't sure you're the right guy to handle it. I ain't sure you got enough dough. . ."

Syd snorted. He was used to the bragadocio of minor criminals. He said with a sour grin: "Big, is it? I suppose next you'll be telling me you got the Whalloon necklace."

Ernie's mouth dropped open with surprise. He hadn't seen the evening papers. He didn't know that the robbery had been reported in two-inch headlines. He said: "How'd you know?"

It was Syd's turn to stare. "You mean—" He seized the little pickpocket by his shoulders, dragged him in with strength surprising for a man of his age, shut the door and fastened it securely. Then he twisted around.

"Hey! Keep your meat-hooks off of me, you big stiff. What's the big idea of mussin' all my clothes up?"

Syd's face had lost all color, leaving it a dirty greyish white. "Y-you got the Whalloon necklace? You got it? Where is it? Lemme see it." His voice was trembling far more than the little dip's had.

For answer Ernie stooped, loosened the necklace from about his ankle and held up the string of square-cut stones so that their glistening rays shot out in the lamplight.

"What did you think I was doing—tryin' to kid you?" He didn't manage to keep the quaver entirely out of his voice. "How much is she worth?"

The old man snatched at it with claw-like fingers. "That's it, all right. It's real. It's the real thing . . . the real thing. . . ." He was sucking noisily at toothless gums. He turned and hurried toward the door.

ERNIE yelled after him: "Hey! Wait a minute, you old buzzard. Where you think you're goin' with that strip of rock? Come on. Tell me what you'll kick through with, so I'll see if we can do business."

The old man had jerked the door open at the far side of the room. Ernie started after him, then stopped, his rather weak mouth drooping open as a big man strode through the door.

"Hello, Ernie."

The little dip tried to speak, but his voice was a toneless croak. He knew the big man, knew he was Jack Harris, a private detective whose reputation around town was none too good. The fence had extended the necklace.

Ernie saw Harris' big hand close over it. There was a finality about the gesture which told the dip that the necklace was lost to him forever. But, like a cornered rat, he was ready to fight.

His hand clawed toward his rear pocket where he carried a large-bladed knife. It was the only weapon that he owned, but Harris didn't know that. Harris rather expected a gun.

He took three steps forward, caught Ernie by the front of his coat, jerked the dip's small feet clear of the floor and searched him. The knife he contemptuously tossed across the room; then he carried the dip struggling across to a closet, shoved him into the dark, narrow space, slammed and locked the door.

Ernie could hear their muffled voices through the panel. Harris said: "There's a reward of fifty grand for that necklace and no questions asked. I guess I was playing the right hunch when I came to you. Keep the little rat here till I come back."

The fence said: "And don't forget to come back."

Harris laughed too loudly. "I don't look like a sap, do I? You and I've done too much business, Greer, for me to do a walkout." He went out, slamming the outer door.

Ernie sat down among the shoes. It was hot in the closet, close; the air smelled of old clothes and perspiration. Worried as he was, he found difficulty in keeping his eyes open. When Harris returned two hours later Ernie was more dead than alive.

The big private detective dragged him out. "Jeez! The damned little punk nearly smothered in there. I'd hate to take a trip to the hot seat just because he didn't have any air to breathe."

Ernie opened his eyes and blinked. He'd fully expected the room to be full of cops. It wasn't. There wasn't a cop in sight. Harris walked over to him, jerked him out of the chair.

"Feeling better, huh, stooge?"

Ernie nodded weakly.

Harris said: "Okay. Look, I'm doing you a favor, see? I didn't turn you over to the cops. It wouldn't buy me nothing to. I took the necklace over to the insurance people, got my dough. They was glad enough not to ask too many questions."

Hope leaped up into Ernie's eyes. He'd been sitting there thinking of ten years in prison—ten long years. He knew that he couldn't stay in prison. The very thought of it made him shiver; the very thought of it had made him restrict his activities to petty theft—up to this time.

His words were a mumble. "Jeez, Jack. Thanks. That's swell. You're a good guy. . . ."

Harris grinned sourly. "Sure, I'm a prince. But you don't get off that easy, punk. Here. I got a confession you're going to sign." He extended a paper and pen.

Ernie drew back quickly. "Ixnay. I ain't signin' nothin'."

HARRIS' BIG HAND closed on his shoulder. "Oh, yes you are, or I'm taking you downtown. Captain Allan

would love to get his mitts on you. Come on. Sign."

Ernie's eyes dropped from Harris' set face. With hesitating fingers he picked up the pen, scrawled his name at the bottom of the confession.

The private detective picked it up with satisfaction. "Okay, sport. You can go now, see. But one of these days I'm gonna want a favor of you, and then you're gonna deliver. If you don't deliver I'm sending you up the river for a long, long time. Scram!"

Ernie scrambled. He was glad to get away from the house. His knees felt weak as he covered the blocks of ill-lit sidewalk between the fence's shop and his rooming house.

Once in his room he sat down on the edge of his bed shaking. It was the narrowest escape he'd ever had. He sat there cursing himself for the impulse which had led him to lift the necklace in the first place. He'd known then that he was stepping out of his class, known that he was asking for trouble.

In the morning he read the paper avidly. The jewel robbery rated a lot of space on page one, and Jack Harris rated plenty on his own. Ernie learned a lot of things about the detective which he had never known before.

He learned that Harris was connected with the Retail Jewelers' Association and that Harris was a personal friend of Albert Craig and was engaged to Craig's daughter. The little dip read the paper thoroughly, and as he read it the frown on his forehead deepened.

Why hadn't Harris turned him in? That was the part he couldn't understand. What did the big man want with the confession? What did he plan to do? At thought of the confession Ernie Paulo's mouth was dry.

He feared anything that he couldn't understand and he didn't understand Harris, didn't understand the confession. He thought of leaving town, of going to another city, of changing his name and identity. But there were two things which kept him from it.

In the first place, he lacked money. In the second place, in all of his thirty-

two years, he had never been more than thirty miles from Mammoth City. He thought it over. Suddenly he had an idea.

Maybe Bob South would lend him some money. Anyhow it didn't hurt to ask. He went shuffling out to look for the gambler, found him over at Kelly's having lunch.

Kelly's was a restaurant on the east side which catered to the sporting fraternity. South was in one of the booths toward the end of the long room. Ernie sidled into the booth and met South's look of surprise as the gambler saw him.

"Hello, Ernie!"

Ernie said: "Hello." Now that he was here it was hard to get up his courage to ask for the loan. He sat there red-faced, wondering how to begin.

South said good-humoredly, "Come on, sport. Get it off your chest. I'm having lunch with a lady, if she ever shows up. And I don't want any extra company. Three's a crowd, you know."

Ernie nodded. "Look, Mr. South. I'm in a jam, see?" His voice was husky. "I'm in a real jam. I gotta get out of town. I gotta have five yards right away."

Bob South was laughing suddenly. A hurt expression came over the little dip's face. "Jeez, I know I'm just a punk, but I'm tellin' you there ain't nothin' funny about it. And I'll pay you back. Honest!"

South continued to laugh. Finally when he could speak he reached across and patted the little dip's shoulder. "I wasn't laughing at you, Ernie. I was laughing at myself. Your wanting to borrow five hundred. . . . Well, boy, there's the bank-roll." He drew a handful of crumpled ones from his pocket and spread them out on the table. There were fourteen of them. "You can have half of them, fellow."

Paulo stared at him, hardly comprehending. "You mean—you're broke?"

SOUTH nodded. "That's exactly what I mean, boy. For the last two weeks they've taken me to the cleaners. And how!" His eyes crinkled. "It isn't the first time. I'll get back." He saw the dis-

appointment on the little dip's face and leaned forward.

"I'm sorry, sport. Honest I am. I'll tell you something—something no one else knows. Me and the girl who's meeting me for lunch—were going to slip over the state line and be married this afternoon. It was all set, but I've been losing steadily. Yesterday I got desperate. I put my last grand on a sure shot, and the horse ran fourth. So now. . . . He broke off, said in a low tone: "Here she comes now. Take a powder, will you, kid?"

Ernie rose and started away from the booth. Bob South called him back. He pressed five ones into the dip's hand. "Look, kid. Maybe this'll help a little."

Ernie wanted to protest, but he had no chance. The girl was already hurrying forward. He moved away. There was a lump away back in his throat—a lump he couldn't swallow.

South was so broke that he couldn't go ahead with his elopement, and yet—he'd been willing to split his roll. They didn't make many guys like Bob South. Ernie turned and looked across his shoulder at the girl in the booth.

She was fair-haired, a nice looking kid. The little dip paused at the desk to buy cigarettes.

Long-shot Kelly was behind the cage. He nodded to Ernie. "Don't go touching my customers, sport. As long as you stay on the sidewalk I won't holler."

Ernie grinned at Kelly's joke. "Who's the good looking doll with Bob South?"

The restaurant man lowered his voice. There was a little awe in his tone. "That's Albert Craig's daughter. Her old man owns a jewelry store over on Broadway—you know, Craig and Company. Bob met her out at the races two or three weeks ago. They been in here every day since. If her old man ever finds out she's running around with Bob, there'll be hell to pay."

Ernie flared: "What's the matter with Bob South, you big lug?"

Kelly said: "There ain't nothin' the matter with him to my way of thinkin'. But old Craig would be a different kettle

of fish. He's a stuffed shirt. He couldn't see a gambler a thousand miles away—even a straight one."

The little dip went out on the sidewalk. He was opening the pack of cigarettes when he became suddenly conscious that some one had come up behind him. He turned his head slightly and saw Jack Harris.

The private detective was paying no attention to him, but was standing staring into the restaurant window. Something clicked in Ernie's shriveled brain.

He remembered what he had read in the morning's paper. Harris was supposed to be engaged to Craig's daughter, and yet—Craig's daughter was having lunch with Bob South inside and, unless South had lied, they had been planning to elope that afternoon. He stole another look at Harris.

The man's face was grim, tight-lipped, his whole attention centered on the restaurant. Then he brushed by the dip without seeing him and hurried on down the street. For a moment Ernie hesitated; then he turned and followed.

IT was two-thirty that night when a pounding on Ernie Paulo's door dragged him out of a troubled sleep. He couldn't imagine who could be calling on him at that hour. He couldn't imagine who would be calling on him anyway. In the three years he'd lived in the room, no one save the landlady had approached the door, and she only when the rent was in arrears.

His first instinctive thought was of the cops; but if it was the cops there was no help for it. The room was on the third floor, and it was a sheer drop to the ground. The door was flimsy and would not hold long. He drew the blankets around him and called in a quavering voice.

"Who is it?"

The heavy tones that answered him were unmistakable. "Come on, stooge. Open up. It's Harris. Open it before I kick this damned door down."

Paulo got out of bed trembling. He padded across the floor in his bare feet,

unfastened the door. Harris pushed his way in.

He looked big, rumped, his heavy good-looking face a shade redder than usual. "Where have you been tonight?"

Ernie's voice shook. "Here. Right here. Honest, Jack, I ain't been out of the joint, see? I grabbed myself a bit to eat about seven, then I think I'll work a couple of hours in the theatre crowd. But I ain't feelin' so good and my feet hurt, so I come home."

Harris was relieved. "That's swell. Now listen, you little rat. And get this straight, see, 'cause if you make a mistake you're goin' up-river and you're going up for ten years. You remember that confession you signed last night?"

The little dip whined: "You promised—"

Harris snapped: "Nothing's gonna happen to you if you do what I tell you. But if you cross me, the cops get that confession. Just get that straight in your head. All you've got to do is say that you went out to the Astoria Country Club tonight. You know where it is?"

Ernie nodded uncertainly. "Yeah, I know. That swanky joint about halfway to the racetrack—out where they play golf or somethin'. I worked a tournament out there one time. Them tournament crowds is easy. They carry a lot of loose dough—"

Harris' voice rapped: "Never mind that. Listen. You went out to the Astoria Country Club tonight. You drove Bob South out there in his car."

"I what?" The little dip was too surprised to control himself.

Harris nodded. "That's right. South went out there to see a man named Craig. He told the attendant that he wanted to see him and went into one of the card rooms. When Craig walked in through the door, South let him have it with a thirty-eight. You got that all straight now?"

Paulo's voice was shrill. "I ain't got it straight! Bob South never shot no guy named Craig. Why, he—" Just in time Ernie remembered and choked back the words which were rushing to his lips.

Harris' voice was savage. "Listen, you

little rat. You want to go up-river? Well, that's where you're going unless you do what I tell you. South did shoot Craig tonight. He went out there by appointment. He told the attendant that he'd meet Craig in the card room. Craig walked in and he gunned him.

"South dropped a lucky piece on the floor—a piece he's carried for years. There isn't any doubt about him shooting Craig. But just to make certain, we're going to add an eye witness. South thought that he was alone with Craig. He thought there were only two people around, but he made a mistake. There were three. You were the third one. If you do what I tell you, I'll have Syd Greer tear up that confession. Otherwise—it will be turned over to the police."

ERNIE whined: "But why do you pick on me? Why don't you get some other guy to do it? I don't like talkin' to cops. It always gets you into a jam. . . ."

Harris said: "I picked you for two reasons, rat. In the first place I've got that confession and I can make you do what I want you to. In the second place, everybody knows you're a friend of Bob South. The cops all know it and it won't be hard for them to believe that he had you drive the car. Come on, you're going downstairs. Get your clothes on."

Unwillingly Ernie dressed. Desperately he tried to think of a way out. There seemed to be no way. He was caught—caught as surely as if he were held by the iron jaws of a bear trap. Either he went to prison for ten years, or he sent the only friend he had to the chair for—murder.

They rode downtown in Harris' car. Police headquarters was a dark, dismal building. It always gave Ernie the creeps even to walk by the place. He shuddered as they went up the wide steps, down the long corridor and into the detectives' room.

Captain Allan was seated at the head of the scarred table. He was a big man with a hard face and gimlet eyes which bored into Ernie as the little dip slouched into the room.

Half a dozen plainclothes men stood around the room. They all looked at Ernie contemptuously. Not a man of the squad but knew that Bob South had always been Ernie's friend. The little tout shifted uneasily.

Harris said: "Well, here he is. I told you there was two men in that car when it pulled away from the club."

The captain nodded. "Okay, Harris." There was no liking in his voice. He turned to one of the uniformed men. "Bring in the prisoner."

Ernie Paulo saw them lead Bob South into the room. The big gambler's face was white, strained, but his level eyes met Ernie's directly, then looked away, a shade of contempt in them. Ernie writhed.

Harris said: "Paulo admitted the whole thing when I found him. He admitted that he drove South out to the club in South's car, that South told him to wait down around the circle so the attendant couldn't see him, but he didn't wait. He got out of the car and followed South. He saw Bob walk into the card room, saw him pull the gun. The lucky piece must have dropped out of South's pocket when he pulled the gun out. Then Craig came in through the door—and South shot him."

Captain Allan said: "Wait a minute. How about letting Paulo do his own talking?" He swung around. "All right, rat. Start squealing."

There was a disturbance at the door behind them. A woman's voice demanded entrance. Ernie twisted his head. He recognized the girl he had seen in Kelly's restaurant at noon—Craig's daughter.

She pushed her way in. "Leave me alone! Please. Make them leave me alone, captain. I have a right to be here if anyone does." Her eyes looked large in the very white face.

Bob South said something under his breath. Harris turned and went toward the girl. "Madge! You shouldn't have come here. You. . . ."

SHE brushed past him without speaking. Captain Allan rumbled: "Look, Miss Craig. It'd be a lot better if you'd

wait outside. It may not be so pleasant in here."

She ignored him, pushed her way to South's side. "Bob! What are they doing to you? The fools! Don't they know you wouldn't shoot anyone? Certainly not my father."

Allan said dryly: "Nevertheless he very obviously did, Miss Craig. Your father telephoned South from the club tonight. We traced the call. This man here"—he indicated Ernie—"drove South out to the club. He followed South from the car, saw the killing."

She turned to look directly at the little dip. "I still don't believe it. I told father about Bob tonight. He was very angry. He may even have telephoned Bob, but Bob never shot him."

The captain looked toward Ernie. "Well, rat. Let's hear you talk. You haven't opened your mouth yet."

Ernie was trembling. He felt the girl's eyes on him, twisted his head slightly and saw that Bob South was staring at him. He turned away and met Jack Harris' frown. Then he took a deep breath.

"I did ride out to the club tonight. I left town about eight-thirty, and left the car at the circle." His voice broke a little with excitement. He stopped for an instant, and before his eyes rose the image of prison walls—a picture of himself in a narrow cell. He gulped.

"I saw the killer go into the card room, saw him pull the gun, saw him throw that lucky piece on the floor. I saw the door open, saw Craig step into the room—saw the killer raise the gun and fire. I saw Craig fall and saw the killer turn and run—but the killer wasn't Bob South!"

They all stared at him. For an instant nothing in the room moved: then Captain Allan rumbled: "What the hell is this?"

The little dip seemed to grow in stature, seemed to add at least three inches to his slight height. "There's your killer!" His hand came up and pointed directly at Jack Harris.

"Why, you—" Harris was on his feet, his face mottled. His hand streaked un-

der his coat, came out with a big gun. Ernie tried to duck, but he was too late.

The gun roared twice; the bullet made a funny, stinging sensation as it struck Paulo's chest. He'd expected pain—a lot of pain. There wasn't any—just a curious numbness—which seemed to flood down through his small body.

The room was in turmoil. Bob South was at his side, cradling Ernie's head on his knees, cursing beneath his breath.

A couple of dicks had seized Harris, thrown him to the floor. Allan was bending over Paulo, saying: "Come on. Can you talk?"

Ernie nodded. His voice was weak. He said: "I'm the guy that stole the Whal-hoon necklace." There was a touch of pride in his tone. It was his biggest job. He had stepped into big time. "Harris caught me. He made me sign the confession. He was using that to make me testify against South. But what he didn't figure on was that the confession worried me.

"I couldn't figure what he wanted with

it, so I tailed him. I tailed him ever since noon. When he drove out to the club, I rode his spare tire. I followed him up through the bushes to the card room. He thought he and Craig were alone. . . . They had an argument. He wanted Craig to stop his daughter from running around with Bob South. Craig wouldn't.

"Craig said a lot of things. He told Harris he wasn't satisfied with the way Jack had recovered the necklace. He told Harris he was going to have his office investigated. Then Jack shot him. I think he planned to in the first place—planned to shoot Craig and throw the blame on Bob South. I don't know where he got Bob's lucky piece—he probably stole it. . . ." The voice trailed off, then he spoke again.

"Harris thought he was alone with Craig . . . just the two of them. . . . But I was there . . . outside the window. . . . A crowd always makes a difference. . . . And three people always makes a crowd. . . ." He smiled up at Bob South, died still smiling.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Ten Detective Aces, published bi-monthly at Springfield, Mass.
for October 1, 1938.

State of New York |
County of New York | ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared A. A. Wyn, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of the Ten Detective Aces and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 8, 1933, embodied in section 537. Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y. Editor, A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Magazine Publishers, Inc., 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.; A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y., C. & A. Publishing Co., Mount Morris, Illinois, E. L. Angel, Rockville Center, N. Y., and E. Campbell, Mount Morris, Illinois.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily publications only.)

Magazine Publishers, Inc., Publisher
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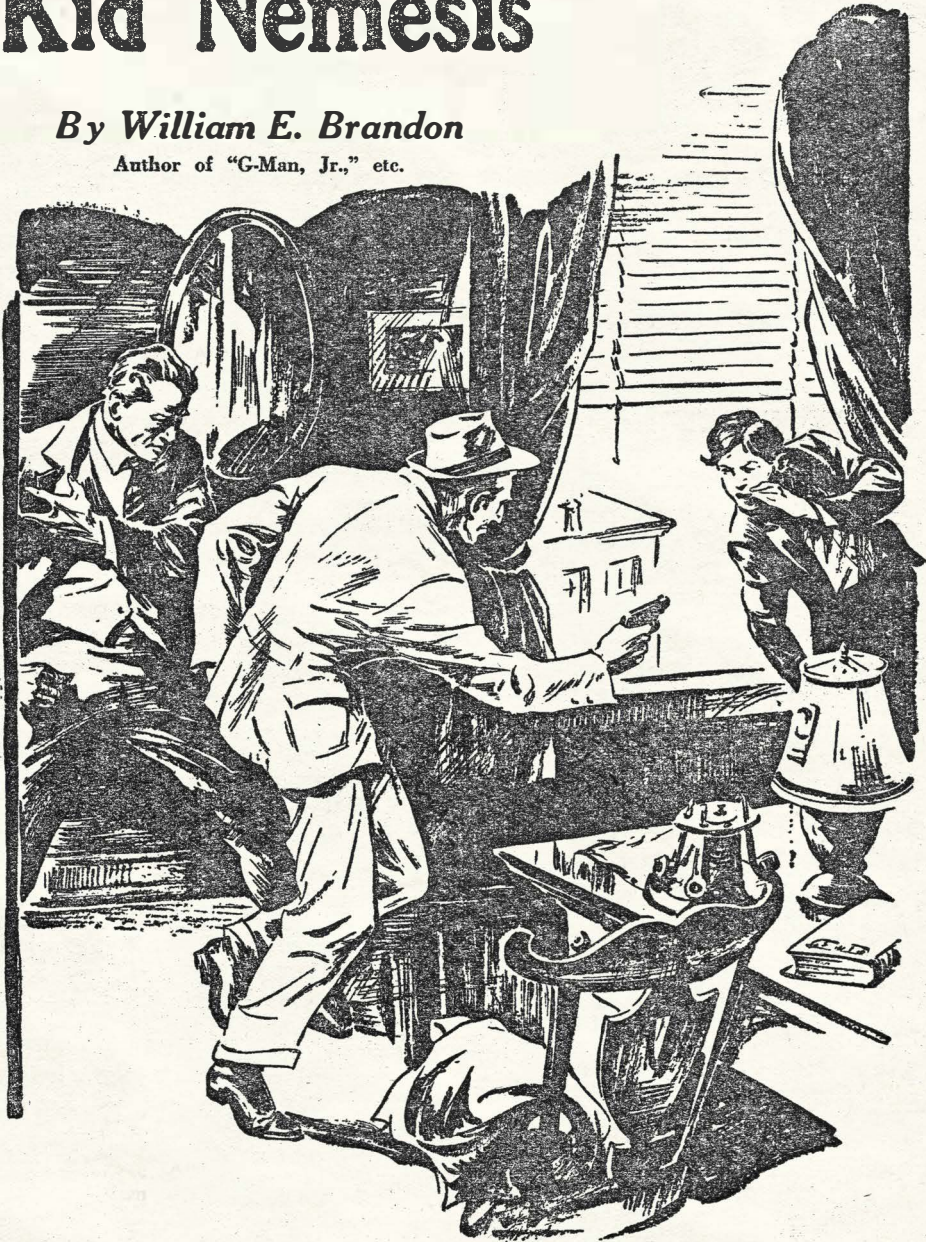
Sworn to and subscribed before me this 23rd day of September, 1938.

J. A. HUGHES, Notary Public
Queens Co. Clerk's No. 3297, Register's No. 7862
Certificates filed in New York's Co. Clerk's No. 1067
Register's No. 9H663.
Commission expires 3/30/39

Kid Nemesis

By William E. Brandon

Author of "G-Man, Jr.," etc.



SERGEANT JOE MCCLANE kept his back straight and his eyes up, but it was tough. The palms of his hands were slick with sweat. He started to rub them on his pants and changed his mind. Be a giveaway to the string-necked secretary sitting across the little railing from him.

The secretary knew why he was here and was probably getting a kick out of it. Sergeant McClane wasn't adding to his pleasure.

The door to the inner office swung open, a harsh voice barked, "Send McClane in here!" and the door swung shut again.

The secretary looked up with a wolfish

The World's Fair meant no picnic for Detective Sergeant Joe McClane. He was given three days to turn in the elusive cop killer—or turn in his badge. And who should turn up in this crisis but that kid nemesis of criminals and detectives alike—G-Man, Jr., the East Side Torpedo.

grin. "All right. The mayor'll see you now."

Sergeant McClane walked through the knee-high gate in the railing, opened the door to the mayor's office and walked in. His legs felt stiff.

The mayor sat behind his desk. He didn't look up. Sergeant McClane shifted his weight from one foot to the other, held his bulldog face in a stolid mask, and waited.

"Sergeant!" The mayor's voice cracked. He was looking up from behind the barricades of papers on his desk. He jabbed out a forefinger. "See that badge?"

McClane looked down at the gold detective shield on his lapel.

"Take it off," yelped the mayor.

McClane swallowed. His fingers shook. He laid the badge on the mayor's desk.

"Now." The mayor leaned back in his chair. He had white hair above a square red face. He said: "Three months ago you were given a special job. On your record you looked like the man for it. Half the bureau wanted that case, the commissioner told me. You got it. You were to go after this cop killer they call the 'Flash,' and you were to run him down."

He glanced at some papers before him. "Four times you called for help. Three times there were two emergency squads on hand besides a full complement of officers. Each time you let this murderer slip through your fingers. In the meantime, the commissioner tells me, he's killed another officer and committed no less than seven various crimes—all to be laid at your door. You understand that?"

DURING the last two years this criminal has shot and killed three officers—besides wounding Lieutenant Mulroon. Mulroon's still in a wheel chair. He'll be in a wheel chair until he dies. I admit it's a tough case. But the

commissioner has given you every chance. You've been granted powers that I can tell you no Sergeant of Detectives ever possessed before in this city.

"Now. Three nights ago Dr. Champion, the great brain specialist, was slugged as he entered his house. His keys were taken from him and his house was rifled. Dr. Champion is in his hospital now with a fractured skull and concussion. No doubt you are aware of that."

Sergeant McClane swallowed and cleared his throat.

"If he dies, it will be the loss of one of the most valuable men in this city. Now. Where were you when this insane criminal did that job? Hellfire, don't tell me! I'll tell you." The mayor stood up. "You were exactly one block away from Dr. Champion's house, standing at a bar in a saloon drinking rye whisky. You were there until—" he glanced again at the papers on his desk—"ten forty-nine, or one hour after the crime. You went home from the saloon. You didn't know the crime had been committed until you read it in your morning paper,"

McClane opened his mouth.

"Shut up! I'll tell you when to talk. You told the commissioner you were picking up leads on this butcher in that saloon. You can't prove that—but no one can prove you weren't. So." The mayor picked up McClane's shield and tossed it back across the desk.

"You're getting one more chance. If the robber and murderer you call the Flash is not under arrest within three days, I'll have that shield back. Three days, understand? That gives you till Friday. That's all."

Sergeant McClane closed the mayor's door behind him. He went out through the knee-high gate and headed down the hall. Behind him he heard the bald-headed, skinny-chested secretary giggling. His

hands knotted into fists; he strode blindly down the hall, his heels pounding on the polished floor.

Something hit him on the shins with a crack like a swung ball bat; McClane jumped and came down stumbling. His legs felt as if they were broken.

A thin, high voice yelled! "Hi, Uncle Joe!" It went into a laugh and the sound of it chilled McClane's soul.

An eleven year old kid stood at the corner of the hallway. A foot-long white silk ribbon was pinned on his sweater. It read:

The Mason *Dispatch*
NEW YORK WORLD'S FAIR
Delegate

Under this had been printed:

Jr. McClane
THE EAST SIDE TORPEDO

Joe McClane closed his eyes. He didn't feel the pain in his shins. He opened his eyes again and saw that Junior still stood there. Now he was waving a cane. That would be the ball bat which had taken Joe across the legs. The cane was striped red and white like one of the sticks of candy which get strung around Christmas trees.

Sergeant McClane's voice was unsteady. "Well, well," he said, "if it ain't Junior. How come you're here in New York? Does Minnie know you're away from home?"

"Sure," said Junior. "Heck, I'm a delegate." He held out the long ribbon on his sweater. "The *Dispatch* at home run a contest, and the kids that sold the most subscriptions all got brought up here to the World's Fair for a week."

"You won it, huh?"

"Naw. I beat up old Tommy Milrose, and made him give me his subscriptions. He didn't want to come anyway, his mama was scared to let him."

Junior drummed his cane on the floor and looked around the Summer City Hall, part of a building located on the World's Fair grounds. Junior was Sergeant Joe McClane's nephew from the town of Mason, Indiana, but as a result of Joe's pre-

vious experience with him, not his favorite nephew, although there weren't any others.

But it seemed to Joe that the kid was more subdued than he remembered him, and he thought with a flash of hope that maybe the big town and the sights had taken the East Side Torpedo down a couple of notches. In that case the move was to get away from him while—

JUNIOR grabbed his arm and jerked him around the corner of the hall. Joe said: "What—"

Footsteps were clicking down the hall. Junior stuck his cane out past the corner, the hook foremost. It worked.

The hook took hold of a passing ankle, and a falling body hit the floor scrambling, fell past the corner, and Joe recognized the once dignified figure of the mayor. He was sprawled face down on the floor, his feet entangled in the cane.

"We blow," yelled Junior in high glee. "Scram!"

Joe hadn't waited for him. He charged out of the building and kept going until he reached his coupé, parked near the New York Central building. Maybe the mayor hadn't seen him, and maybe he had.

Junior jumped into the seat beside him as the coupé shot away. He got his breath and said in disgust: "What was you so scared about? You could of licked that little guy easy."

Junior turned, looked through the back window. "There's a guy there waving at us," he announced. "Wonder what he's sore about."

Joe didn't have to wonder. It was probably the attendant. Sometimes a big official had to get his car out in a hurry, and if there were too many cars around the attendant would move one of the other cars. That was why they all left their keys in their cars here, the way they do in a garage.

Junior said: "I didn't trip that guy. He doesn't have to get sore."

Joe didn't answer. He reached over and jerked open the glove compartment in the dashboard, where he kept his cigars. He felt around in it, came across papers that

he didn't know he had in there, and no cigars. His flat-nosed face creased in a frown; he probed again. No cigars. He remembered putting a half dozen in there.

He lifted his foot from the accelerator and stared at the dash of the car, at the upholstery. His mouth opened and closed. "Lordamighty! This ain't my car!"

"Hot?" muttered Junior, with mild interest.

Joe passed a trembling hand over his face. Some guy with a coupé just like his must have parked next to him, and here everybody left the keys in the ignition. When he'd come out he'd been in too big a hurry to look around. He hesitated, looked back along the road, let out a deep breath and went on. No use taking a chance on making it worse than it was by going back, where likely the mayor would be on hand when he drove up and explained that he'd swiped a car. He could take it into Manhattan and turn it in.

"The first thing," said Joe, "I'm getting you back with whoever you were with. I guess Minnie'd expect me to show you around some but I can't do it this time. Where's your bunch at?"

"What bunch?" asked Junior. They had left the World's Fair grounds at Flushing, come across the Triborough bridge and were driving down Fifth Avenue in midtown Manhattan. Junior craned his head out of the car to gape at Radio City as they passed it.

"Whoever you came to New York with," Joe said.

"Aw, nuts. They're a bunch of sissies. Won't do nothing. I ditched 'em."

Joe's face was paling. "You mean you think you did. Where are they?"

"Well, we was all walking around out there where they're putting up the fair, and I saw you going in that building you was in. I yelled at you but you went ahead on in, so I ditched 'em and went in there and waited for you."

"Where they staying?"

"Huh?"

"I said, where they staying?"

"I don't know."

Joe's voice rose. "Hotel, boarding house, Y.M.C.A. Where'd you stay last night?"

"On the train."

"You mean you just got in town today? Hell—" Uncle Joe bit the phrase off. "So you don't know where they're at?"

Junior drew in his head after looking over the Public Library. "Huh-uh."

Joe said: "Listen. Was there some guy had charge of this gang you came with?"

"Yeah."

"What's his name?"

"Huh?"

"What's his name?"

Junior thought a minute. "Archibald." He added suddenly: "Heck, I don't want to go back with them. I'd rather hang around while you put the arm on some mobsters. You a G-Man yet, Uncle Joe?"

"Listen," said Uncle Joe with heat, "I'm damned lucky to be a cop, right now. And if I—"

"Shakeup, huh? Rugged for snaffling your cut, huh? Protection racket payoff flattie, huh? Go around asking for it, and some straight copper jams on the heat and arms you out and—and—" Junior's derisive voice trailed off as he hung out of the window gazing up at the Empire State building.

"Listen," shouted Joe, lifting a hand from the wheel.

A traffic cop waved his arm and Joe waved back, figuring it was some guy that knew him, although he didn't recognize him.

"Listen," he said again. The thin wail of a siren rose behind them. Joe bent forward to look in the rearview mirror, slowed the coupé and pulled toward the curb.

THE SIREN was racing nearer. He heard the shriek of a police whistle back at Thirty-fourth street as the traffic cop cleared the way; he heard some yells, and saw, in the mirror, a cop running down the street after him.

Something went *zzzzung!* and the metal door-post shook like a violin string.

Joe slammed on the brakes and stuck his head out of the window to look back. The running cop was within fifty feet of him. A white-topped prowl car was sliding up, its brakes screaming, its siren humming into silence.

A white face under a blue cap gaped out at him above a gun barrel.

Joe started to holler and Junior yelled: "Drop that rod, you dumb old flatfoot or I'll blast you!"

The gun in the cop's hand jerked up an inch and Joe found his voice. "McClane!" he bellowed.

The cop's face slowly changed color. "Gravy," he muttered. "I thought—Gravy . . . Tim, it's Joe McClane." He stared down at the gun in his hand. "Gravy," he said hoarsely, "I almost let go." He shook his head. "I thought I'd seen—"

Joe climbed out of the car. He glanced at the door-post, bent from a bullet, and his throat tightened up. "Me," he said. "You—damned idiots." That door-post was about three inches from where his head had been.

The traffic cop crowded up. A mob of citizens was jamming the sidewalk. The two cops in the prowl car got out and came around. Their knees were unsteady.

"It's the car," said the traffic cop. "The car. License 5N-897. We just got the word that the Flash stole it from Dr. Champion's garage three nights ago when he pulled that job. The doc come to today and told 'em he'd had two cars in his garage. His chauffeur's on his vacation and no one knew the Flash had hooked a car, too, until the old doc came around.

"So we got the word and figured the Flash would be driving the crate. Be like him, see? Been a squad of extra men out in every division looking for it. I tried to wave you down when you passed and it looked like you reached for a gun so I took after you"—he gulped and his red face worked—"and damn near shot you. Didn't know you was a cop. Didn't see you good enough to recognize your pan." He mopped his face with a handkerchief.

Joe leaned against the car. The Flash had been driving this coupé—and it had been parked near his own car, out at the World's Fair grounds. Which meant one thing; something Joe had been wondering about.

The Flash, the cop killer who worked against all the rules of crime, was trail-

ing him, Joe McClane, when it was Joe's job to get the killer. Be like him, the traffic cop had said, to drive around as long as he could in his stolen car; be like him, too, to stay close to Sergeant McClane, after he knew Joe had been given the job of getting him.

No one had ever seen the Flash to know him; no one had ever picked up a clue as to his identity. He could be anyone. He could be some one in the crowd on the side walk.

Joe had had the wild thought, when Dr. Champion was slugged only a block from the saloon Joe was in, that the Flash had spotted Joe, watched him, and pulled a job nearby for the hell of it. The guy was cracked. That was what put the chill in the job of getting him.

That the Flash had put his stolen car near Joe's out at the Fair grounds was too much for coincidence. The killer was having himself a circus playing cops and robbers backwards. He probably hadn't figured on Joe or anyone else climbing into his car by accident, but the accident hadn't hurt the Flash any when it happened.

Junior crawled out of the car. He was holding something in both hands. "Hey," he said, "Uncle Joe."

Joe had had enough. "Shut up and get outta my sight. You—"

"Okay, pal," said Junior, and threw the article he'd been holding to the street. It was a pair of sun glasses. Both lenses broke.

One of the cops said: "What the devil was that?"

"Uncle Joe didn't want 'em," Junior said. "They was a pair of sun specs I found in there with fingerprints all over 'em. I thought maybe—"

WITH A CRY of rage Uncle Joe jerked out his handkerchief and bent over to pick up the pieces of broken glass from the street. Fingerprints. If they could get one of the Flash's prints—It was Joe's opinion that the Flash was probably an ex-convict with a special grudge against cops. He'd have a record anyhow, hating the law the way he did.

With a print to check up on and maybe identify him—the rest would be easy.

One of the cops was saying something to Junior in a lifted voice.

"Bellywash," said Junior in answer. "I offered 'em to him, didn't I? I can't help it if old Uncle Joe's dumb. If he was a G-Man he'd have took 'em."

Uncle Joe straightened suddenly and let go with his open left hand for Junior's red head. Junior ducked and scrambled to the edge of the crowd. He began to chant a laugh and dodge back and forth. Uncle Joe went back to his pieces of broken glass. There was a slim chance he could still get a print from them. Mighty slim chance. He used up the words he knew on Junior and silently started over again.

With the glass collected he arranged with the two cops from the prowl car for one of them to drive the coupé into a precinct station or the Police Garage until they were ready to search it more carefully. Then he looked around for Junior. He saw him talking to a tall thin guy in a straw hat. He went over and said; "Come on. I—"

The thin guy said: "How about it, McClane? Got the real stuff?"

McClane recognized him. Reporter on the *Herald*. "Nothing for publication," he said. "Give us a chance for once, will you?" He wondered if Junior had told the story of getting the wrong car. That would look great in print.

"Sure," said the reporter. He chuckled. "Sure. Sure."

"Yeah?" said McClane. "I mean it."

The reporter went on laughing. "Sure."

McClane took Junior in hand and got a cab to head for his apartment. He'd look over the broken glass himself. If there was anything, he wanted to get it. He needed a break of some kind. And he revised that: He had to have a break . . .

Sergeant Joe McClane, in his apartment, turned away from his telephone. He had called every hotel and lodging house in the book, asking if they had anyone registered from Indiana named Archibald. None had. It was after dark; it was likely that Mr. Archibald and his brood of delegates from the *Mason Dispatch*

would by this time have found a place to stay, but apparently they hadn't. Joe considered briefly calling Missing Persons at headquarters to see if Mr. Archibald had reported Junior's loss, but he rubbed off that bet. It was odds on that Mr. Archibald would be so damn glad to get rid of Junior he wouldn't squeak.

Junior was sitting in the window with a rubber band, shooting paper wads at pedestrians eleven floors below him. Occasionally he let go with a soprano Tarzan yell at a singularly good shot. Uncle Joe sat moodily by his telephone and regarded his nephew out of bloodshot eyes. Two ways were left. He could try to put Junior on a train and send him out to Indiana and the waiting arms of Minnie. Or he could let him stay.

Joe's short and heavy frame shook from an involuntary shudder. But if he took the time to wrangle Junior aboard a train and see he stayed on it until it left—if he took that much time out at this period of crisis—while he was letting his last chance for success in his last job as a cop slide by—

Uncle Joe was ordinarily phlegmatic and steady like most cops that are worth their pay. Now he stood up, took a deliberate swing at the telephone and knocked it nine feet across the floor, where it lay quivering at the end of its taut cord.

He turned and strode into the small room off his bedroom which he had fitted up as a laboratory.

Carefully, he laid out the bits of colored glass from the lenses of the goggles which Junior had broken. He looked at them without much hope. In the first place there was a chance that if there were prints on them they would be the prints of Dr. Champion. They might have been his glasses, and have been untouched by the Flash.

Also, Joe had been forced to put the pieces in his handkerchief and transport them in a manner that caused the glass surfaces to come into contact with each other and with the handkerchief, so that if there were any prints to begin with they were by now probably gone, or blurred so badly they would be of no use. But it was a chance.

USING a small pair of forceps, Joe moved the pieces of glass around like the bits of a jigsaw puzzle. As he moved each piece he leaned over and breathed on it and watched the film of vapor for traces of latent prints. On one piece he found a clear half. He felt better. If he'd have the same luck with the other half—

He found another small triangle which fit part of the first piece. On it was a corner of the print. He searched among the rest of the fragments, fitting each piece with the two he had, pushing them aside when they didn't match, trying another. He found several other badly smeared prints, maybe worth coloring and maybe not. Finally he turned up the missing piece to the clear print he had.

He matched the three pieces of glass together. Then, moving the largest piece aside, he dipped a fine camel's hair brush in aluminum powder and passed it lightly over the surface. Then he moved the next piece into its position in the print, dusted it with the developing powder, and repeated with the last.

The print came out fine. It looked to Joe like a big billboard staring up at him and announcing the name of a certain crazy guy with a gun who—Joe had been wanting to meet. It was like walking down Broadway and seeing one of the big signs start flashing a description. It was a break.

He swung his camera over. He was muttering to himself. "Dark yellow background—orthochromatic plates—yellow light filters. Hot dog."

He didn't hear Junior enter the room and take a place at the end of the long table.

"Thumb," muttered Joe. "It's a thumb. Big distance between the core and tip. Thumb sure as hell. Thumb—upper ridge sliding left . . . Left! Twin loop pattern . . . Under loop . . . Under loop opens to the left. Left thumb . . . Hot—"

"Hey," said Junior. Uncle Joe's head jerked up. "What you doing?"

"That," said Joe, sore at no one in his moment of triumph, "is a print of the Flash's left thumb. With a good left

thumb to go through the registration with— Even without a very hot single fingerprint classification it ought to do the stuff. See? It looks like a face, don't it? Going to tell us who this guy—" He was rambling on to himself.

Junior suddenly went, "Ha, ha, ha." He was pressing his left thumb against the side of a glass jar. "You ain't got nothing but my fingerprint. Old Uncle Joe got my fingerprint! I'll bet a G-man wouldn't pull any dumb trick like—"

Something clicked in Joe's mind; his thoughts went hazy. His actions were mechanical as he colored the print Junior had just left on the jar and compared it with the one he was photographing. It was the same. Slowly, Joe straightened up and leaned against the bench, staring at the prints.

The doorbell buzzed.

Junior said, "I'll see who it is," and ran from the room. Joe didn't hear him leave. A moment later he heard Junior yell, "Hey, Uncle Joe—" but his mind registered no more than unintelligible sound. He was whipped. The sudden blow had been too much for him.

"Hello, copper."

Joe came out of his coma and whirled around. The voice had a sound like a snake—flat, smooth, slithering.

And the eyes of the man who stood in the doorway were like a snake's—hard, black. He had a wide, white forehead shining under a grey snap-brim hat; his face narrowed down to a pointed chin. His head was bent forward, the chin sunk on his chest. Two white arc lights in the room were on; the white face looked gaunt and skeletal in the glare. He was as tall as Joe, but thinner. He was dressed in a double-breasted blue suit; his hands were encased in tight gloves.

He didn't have to tell Joe who he was.

He said, "It's like this, copper," and he triggered the automatic in his hand. The slug caught Joe high in his left shoulder, spun him around and knocked him down.

THE FLASH laughed. "I'm giving you special treatment. Right?" He walked over to the bench, reversed the

TDA

gun in his hand and pounded the bits of glass to dust. Then he turned on the camera, smashed it to the floor, kicked it to pieces.

Joe's shoulder hurt like fire; he was glad of it; the pain told him the bullet had hit bone but had not given him a bad wound. He noticed a rolled-up newspaper in the Flash's left hand.

The Flash looked at him. His obsidian eyes glittered strangely. He lifted his left hand, unrolled the newspaper. "Nice, isn't it?"

Joe could read headlines on an article which stated that he had found an important clue to the identity of the Flash; that he was working it out.

"My own little helpers," said the Flash. "I love the newspapers. I'd forgotten those glasses. They're probably the only thing around that car I touched with my bare hand—if I did. I couldn't remember, you see. But I came anyway.

Joe pushed himself up against the wall into an easier position and grunted. "I found a good left thumb."

"Poor left thumb," said the Flash. "Beautiful left thumb. It's fascinating, sergeant. My left thumb. And yet so tragic, too. In your case." He laughed.

Joe kept studying his face. "I've seen you before."

"No doubt. I was arrested in this city nine years ago. For murder. Yes. Isn't it a pity? For wife murder. Do you recall?"

"The name," said Joe, "was—Last."

"Right. Joseph Last. The case received quite a bit of publicity at the time. Right? I was convicted. The police said I had murdered my wife, so I was convicted. Perhaps you also recall that I escaped from prison? Right? You do?"

"Ah, I returned. The return of the native. I, of course, could not look for work; I was an escaped convict. I put to practical use some of the devious—right?—trades I learned in college—pardon me—prison, and became a burglar. As I murdered coppers who got in my way I became famous. Right?"

He reached out with his left hand, caught the front of Joe's shirt and threw him toward the door. Joe stumbled, half fell; the killer held him up, pushed him

on through the bedroom into the sitting room beyond.

The room was lighted. Junior lay in a crumpled heap near the door.

The killer said: "I'd forgotten the kid. Wouldn't want him coming to and barging in on us—ah—unannounced. Awkward. Right?"

Joe was hanging on to a chair with his right hand, holding himself up.

The killer looked at him out of his glinting eyes. "You're not suffering, are you copper?" he asked softly.

Joe got his breath and called him a dirty name.

JUNIOR rolled over, sat up and held his head. He started to talk twice, finally said: "No mug's going to slug me and get away with it, all right. I'll paste in your puss like a—"

He groaned and rubbed his hands over his head.

Joe said, in a tired voice: "Take it easy, Junior. Nothing to get excited about."

"The heck there ain't. Before I answered the door I said into that telephone for them to send some cops up here in a hurry; we'll see how smart this old guy is when—"

The killer's bright eyes glanced to the phone, still lying on the floor at the end of its cord. He smiled thinly. "Sure you did." His smile broadened. He chuckled. "Sure." He said to Joe, "Is your son trying to make me kill you sooner? I will."

"Well, I did, monkey face," yelled Junior. "I been waiting for you to get here. That's why I busted those sun glasses and then told that newspaper guy that old Uncle Joe had a clue. I ain't no flathead, I guess."

The killer's smile was fading. "Of course; then why did you let me in?"

Junior avoided Uncle Joe's eyes. "Well, I hollered at Uncle Joe anyhow. I thought I'd open the door and trip you when you came in and then Uncle Joe could get you. But I called the cops anyhow, see, to make sure—"

The voice was musing. "You did try to trip me when I came in. If you really did call for help I might have trouble getting out. So I'd better hurry, right?"

Steps sounded faintly in the hall outside.

Junior shouted: "There they are—"

The Flash whirled and raised his gun. "Stay away from that door!"

For an instant they listened. The steps went on down the hall and faded away.

The killer's cold eyes swivelled back to Junior. "Quite the little hero," he murmured. "I hate clever kids. Now—"

The steps were returning. The flat voice dried up.

The steps stopped at the door. The buzzer sounded, echoed harshly in the silence. Some one pounded on the door.

The killer's thin mouth was stretching in a tense grin. The knocking on the door was repeated, louder. A voice roared: "McClane!"

Junior jumped and ran. But he didn't go for the locked door. He ran for the window. "Don't let him on the fire escape, Uncle Joe! I'll keep him off the fire escape—"

The automatic slammed and a bullet ripped plaster off the wall. Junior was ducking, dodging, angling toward the window.

The door was shaking under repeated blows. Joe staggered toward it to unlock it.

The Flash lost his nerve. He leaped to the window, paused with one foot on the sill, raised his gun.

Junior was dodging around like a flea. "He's getting out the fire escape! Hey, Uncle Joe—"

The gun was shaking in the killer's hand. He fired once more at Joe; the slug tore splinters from the door.

Junior dove at the window from ten feet away, and the Flash, with a stiff, nerveless expression on his white face, swung around and disappeared outside the window.

The door burst open. A little guy in plainclothes stood there, his eyes like a pair of good-sized plums. "Mr. McClane," he stuttered, "Mr. Mc-Mc—"

It was the superintendent of the apartment building. Uncle Joe hung on the door. He was getting weak. "I thought you was the cops."

The superintendent shook his head like

a mechanical doll's. "N-no. N-no Cops. I just—" He swallowed. "There were three people stopped in and made complaints about some one shooting paper wads down on them. T-tin foil paper wads."

McClane's hands, gripping the door, were white. "Get a doctor. All right. Sure. Get a doctor."

The superintendent's hands went fluttering.

"Doctor," muttered McClane, slipping down.

Junior appeared behind him. The freckles stood out on his face and he didn't look quite so much like the East Side Torpedo. He swallowed and said huskily: "He didn't get away, all right." He swallowed again. "That there was the window where the fire escape wasn't at."

JUNIOR sat by Uncle Joe's bed. "Heck, yes, I did," he said. "Just before I went to the door I picked up that old telephone and said for them to send some cops up to Joe McClane's. I knew that gorilla'd be showing up all right."

Uncle Joe's bulldog face broke into a grin. "I get it," he said. "You wanted to see what the guy looked like before he got nabbed. Only thing—you don't know what a dial phone is. There isn't any Central on there to hear you unless you dial her. You hollered for help into a dead phone."

"I took the receiver off the hook—"

"Sure. But you didn't dial the operator. You forgot you were in the big town."

"Bellywash," said Junior. "This ain't such a big town."

"Well, you haven't got to see it. I'll get hold of that guy Archibald and you'll get to see some of it before you go back. You sure that was his name? Mr. Archibald? You lie about that?"

"Heck, no. That's his name, all right."

Junior looked down at the ribbon on his sweater and didn't mention that Archibald was the guy's first name, not his last. He couldn't help it if Uncle Joe called him Mr. Archibald, and that made it tougher for him to find the *Mason Dispatch* delegates.

The old East Side Torpedo knew when to keep his mouth shut.

Doc Walloper

"Dizzy Doo" Yarn



By Joe Archibald

Author of "Panhandle with Care," etc.

Before Freely Filch, M. D., had been fitted for his mahogany topcoat, Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy had already nominated his candidate for the chair. But Snooty Piper figured that an itch in time would solve a mysterious crime.

EARLY ONE MORNING in the autumn, me an Snooty Piper went to Cambridge along with several uniformed employees of The Hub to call on a Doctor Freely Filch. When we arrived, the taxpayer with the degree of medicine was not able to see us as he was in his office waiting to be measured for a mahogany topcoat.

It seems that Doctor Filch was rubbed out the night before by some unlawful character who had tapped him on the occipital regions with something vastly stronger than a dame's compact. As if that was not enough, there was the *corpus delicti* of a huge canine reposing in

the adjoining room, and right away Snooty Piper wants to know why the guilty criminal overlooked the canary.

"That is it," Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy says without even stopping to think, "the pooch gave its life protectin' its master."

"It did not make much of a success, did it?" Snooty counters. "I bet it was a suicide pact. Doctor Filch and the barker—"

"You keep out of this!" Iron Jaw hollers. "Both you newspaper creeps keep your noses out. I am in charge here—make no bones about that! Ah—ha-a-ah! Get your guns ready, men. I saw that closet door move. Everybody step back!"

Iron Jaw leaps across the room and almost yanks the door off its hinges. "I've got you, you—ye-e-ow!"

A skeleton falls out and fondly embraces the big flatfoot. One of its arms swings around his neck, and its bony dome nestles against his shoulder.

"Ha, ha," Snooty laughs. "If that is the murderer, he starved to death quick. Now let's stop all this clowning, Iron Jaw, and get down to business."

Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy shakily pushes the remains of an old settler away from his torso and wipes at his clammy brow. Iron Jaw has been a detective for ten years, playing tag with unlawful characters, and he has been "it" all that time. Iron Jaw could play blind man's buff with a rhino in a one-car garage and never bump into it once.

"Let's do something," another Beantown bluecoat suggests. "Now here's the thing that rubbed the sawbones out. It's a bronze bust of—wait 'til I read it. Hip—Hippo—Hippo-crates."

"That busted Filch all right," Snooty agrees. "Hippocrates was one of the Greeks who did not open a restaurant. He was the first homo genus to get an M. D., Iron Jaw," he goes on to explain. "And that does not mean mouse destroyer. Are there any clues?"

Muttering and mumbling dire threats against certain members of the fourth estate, Iron Jaw ignores Snooty and starts detecting. He sends some cops to search the house, and three of Boston's finest come in five minutes later towing a very scared taxpayer whom they had found hiding in the attic. O'Shaughnessy bays at the citizen to hurry up and confess.

"Yes, do," Snooty urges him. "We must go out and sell tickets for the police ball. We are behind in our quota now. You got mad at Doc Filch and tapped him. Why? Oh, you won't talk, huh?"

Iron Jaw has four strong law protectors toss me an Snooty into the next room where the defunct dog is and they lock us in.

"Well, this is where we will get all the details of the case, isn't it?" I says

nastily to the crackpot. "We will get fired if we don't find out who killed—"

"Stop beefin', Scoop," Snooty says. "You always give up so easy. Go and listen at the keyhole while I scout the bone crusher."

I wish Snooty Piper would learn to talk English.

WITH MY EAR to the keyhole, I hear the frightened little citizen in the other room telling Iron Jaw that he worked for Filch in his spare time as the Doc was a bachelor. He did the Doc's cooking and cleaning and ran errands and such. He claims he has a bad heart and that when he saw the burglar slipping out of the window, he thought he would drop dead then and there, so ran upstairs and hid so that he wouldn't.

"So?" Iron Jaw bellows quite triumphantly. "Describe the burglar! What is your name?"

"Eg-Egbert S-Skeen. The burglar—I didn't see his face very plain as it was dark. I w-was sleepin' upstairs and I heard Alexander bark once. That woke me up. I got a door that has a tricky lock on it and the key st-stuck. By the time I got downstairs, the burglar was g-goin' out the winder. I snapped on a light an'—an' all I saw plain was a bare arm as his coat sleeve was pulled up. And it—it—well, it looked like he had chicken pox or—or somethin'. There was dark spots on it."

"What did you do then, Skeen?" Iron Jaw yowls.

"I ran upstairs ag'in and h-hid—I get scairt easy. I didn't do it, honest. You ask Doctor Filch. Why, I—"

"When he gets up," Iron Jaw says very testily, "I will ask him. Sit down over there and shut up now."

It is just then that an employee of the city reminds Iron Jaw about Doctor Freely Filch. He tells the dumb dick that Filch was once in the doghouse down at headquarters under suspicion of making more than his share of shekels in handing out pep powders and the like. Snooty scootches down next to me just in time to hear that Filch once had the bee put on him for a thousand smackers for

vending cocaine to a taxpayer who never had had a pain in his life.

"Why, the cad!" Snooty says indignantly. "He got his just desserts; what do you think, Scoop?"

"I think I'll go home," I says wearily. "What've you got?"

Snooty has a very small piece of cloth in his fingers. Before he pockets it, I see that it is blue.

"Maybe it's a piece of the guilty character's shirt," the crackpot says. "What color shirt is Skeen wearing, Scoop? Can you see it?"

"White with black stripes. That cinches it, huh?"

"You are not very funny," Snooty retorts and hammers on the door. "Let us out, Iron Jaw. We will shut up!"

The big whale makes us stay in for twenty minutes and when he lets us out, he laughs right in our faces. "I got this case busted wide open, Piper!" he brags. "How do you like that for apples, huh? Right in the Doc's records is the payoff, ha-a-ah! He was one of them screwballs that kept a dairy, ha-a-ah!"

"Where did he keep his cows? In the waiting room?" I inquire. "Oh, you mean 'diary.' Huh, with all the schools we got in this country—free ones—Iron Jaw, sometimes you—"

"It says right here— Look you smart alecks. 'Must get me a good watchdog. Skeen no good. Dillbird's getting a little difficult. Must be on my guard. Threatened me on Wednesday, September 6th. Must watch out for him. Will get police dog—"

"Well, are you lucky!" Snooty exclaims. "Dillbird, huh? That will be the dishonest citizen who hangs out on Dover Street. 'Dreamy' Dillbird. The last time I met him he asked me would I sell him Philadelphia. Looks like Dreamy bumped off the croaker because he wouldn't trust him for any more lullaby elixir. Congratulations, Iron Jaw!"

"I knew it was only a question of time," the outsize flatfoot beams. "I been havin' bad luck. I kind of like even you today, Piper. Well, we'll go down and pick up Dreamy. He'd better have an

alibi. What's the matter with you, Binney? You got ants in your pants?"

"I guess it's the red flannels I put on this morning," I says "They're killin' me."

Well, we all go down to Dover Street to a joint called Luigi's Beer and Billiard Parlor. Dreamy Dillbird hives up in a room above it, and we bang down his door and walk in on him. Dreamy sits up in bed, and his glimmers are very bright like the bottom of a Dutch housewife's dishpan. Dreamy Dillbird has a long, thin face like a camel and an upper lip that should have belonged to one.

"Hello, Dreamy," Iron Jaw says. "Where was you last night?"

Dreamy grins and wriggles a little. He has been well needled any way you look at him. "I was in Persia," he relates. "Four dolls with veils was with me. They tied lilies in my hair and fed me pink brandy filled up wit' raisins. I'm goin' back there in a li'l while. I'm only waitin' for the flyin' rug to come an' pick me up. I can hear the music of them flutes right now. Pretty, ain't they?"

IRON JAW smacks Dreamy in the chops until his eyes cross. Dreamy does not hear the flutes when Iron Jaw asks him why he knocked off Filch.

"H-huh? The doc? Ya mean he ain't— Listen, they can't do that. Me an' the doc—"

"Where was you last night, Dreamy?" Iron Jaw repeats.

"I toldja. I was in Persia. No—I couldn't have got back so quick, huh? I don't remember where I was at now. Maybe it was India. I brought that elephant back wit' me, though—that purple one over in the corner there. That's where I was, I guess. Did ya say somebody rubbed out Doc Filch? Ya're kiddin'—"

"Come on, Dreamy," the flatfoot says. "I'm takin' you downtown. You bumped the doc and had to knock off his pooch to get at him!" Iron Jaw yanks up Dreamy's shirt sleeve, and we see that Dreamy's arm is as full of punctures as a porous-knit union suit.

"That cinches it, huh?" I says to

Snooty and then ask him to scratch my back just under the right shoulder blade. "I am peelin' off this thistledown ensemble," I vow right then and there, "when I get home. Pneumonia couldn't be as bad as what this does to me."

Iron Jaw and the gendarmes take Dreamy Dillbird down to the icebox and book him for homicide. They start betting fifty to one down there that Dreamy will get a jolt within three months, and it won't be from a needle.

Me and Snooty go back and watch the removal of Doctor Filch's remains and other cleaning-up activities. Egbert Skeen seems quite puzzled as to what to do with the shell of Alexander as he is a very large pooch and could not be put in a shoebox very well. Snooty Piper lifts the canine's noggin off the carpet, and he says for me to look close as the same thing that rubbed out Filch did not extinguish the hound.

"This mutt was not busted with the bust," Snooty yips. "He was massaged with something smaller like a blackjack as the dome is—"

"Listen," I says, "the assassin would not be a dope like you. He could not go in and ask Freely Filch for the bust, then come out and sock the pooch and then go back and hit Filch with it. Citizens like Dreamy Dillbird have been known to carry blackjacks, haven't they?"

Snooty sighs. "I wish you had just a few brains," he says. "I could do my work more easily. Now if Dreamy slugged the pooch with a blackjack, he would still have the noggin knocker when he got in where the Doc was. Why would Dreamy have to use the bust of Hippocrates, huh?"

"Why—er—that is easy. Filch struggled with the rough person and the blackjack slipped out of Dreamy's mitts. Then Dreamy reached for another weapon and it happened to be the bust."

"All right," Snooty says. "All right, just forget it, Scoop."

The crackpot sits down then and I back up against the corner of a high cabinet to scratch my back. "They must be

puttin' iron filings in these red flannels, now," I groan. "Let's go to the Greek's, Snooty, as I am going to peel 'em off."

THE CRACKPOT mooches around the late Filch's tepee for another half hour. Then Egbert Skeen answers a ring at the front door and lets a citizen in. He is a tall gazabo with a very innocent-looking pan, and he wears a long black coat and a derby hat.

"You are too late," Snooty says to him. "Another undertaker got here first. Better luck next—"

"Please do not joke," the citizen says with dignity. "I heard Alexander is dead. I sold him to Doctor Filch and I have come to ask for the remains. I knew I should never have sold him. But I could not feed him and—poor Alexander!"

"You certainly can have him," Egbert said eagerly. "I was trying to figure out what to do with him, Mr.—"

"Tweedmill. You have a blanket or an old sheet or something to wrap him in? I would be very grateful—"

"I'll get you one," Egbert says and goes upstairs.

Me and Snooty linger for another quarter of an hour and watch Alexander's former owner remove the pooch. We are on the way out when Snooty Piper stops and digs under his vest with splayed fingers.

"You got me itchin' now," he complains. "You've been squirming so much, Scoop, that I—"

I interrupt him by snapping my fingers. "I bet it's not this woolen underwear," I says. "That pooch had fleas! They walked away from Alexander when they found out he was no banquet hall for them any more and they—I'm goin' to kill Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy! They got on us, Snooty. That's—"

"Y-yeah," Snooty says jerkily as he scratches. "You are right, Scoop. Let's go to the Greek's and—ow-w-w! One just bit me ag'in."

The two of us go down to the Greek's and dash into the back room and take off our clothes. We shake them out, use a Flitter gun on them and then put them back on. Quite relieved, we go out

and have a beer. Snooty takes the little piece of blue cloth from his pocket and scratches his dome.

"Are they in your hair, too?" I says quite irritably. "I would buy a fine comb at a drug store and—"

"Scoop," Snooty interrupts me, "I have never been more puzzled over anything. I can't stop thinking that Dreamy Dillbird is innocent."

"This time I will not humor you, Snooty Piper," I says sternly. "If Dreamy did not kill Filch, then squirrels hate hickory nuts."

"Scoop," he persists, "if Dreamy Dillbird was loaded with joy juice, he would not go out an' rub out a citizen who dispensed it. It is all very puzzling. If he bumped off the pooch with a blackjack, why didn't—I wish I could think of what I'm trying to think of. Look, Scoop! When pain chasers give out prescriptions, they have to be filled out in a drug store, don't they?"

"I never heard of a patient getting medicine in a garage," I snort. "Go on as I am not even listenin'."

"There would maybe be a drugstore near Filch's office, and the citizen that runs it would most likely get all of the doc's business," the crackpot rambles on. "Alexander was a very smart canine and if he took walks in the neighborhood—"

"Shut up," I moan. "I can't stand any more. In another minute I will be in Persia with Dreamy Dillbird."

"Let's go back to Filch's, Scoop!"

I don't want to, but that is what we do. Sometimes I think I am not very bright. Snooty ferrets Egbert Skeen out and asks if Alexander did tricks or if he was very smart. Egbert says the pooch used to go down to stores and get things for Filch. He even brought him the newspaper from the corner stand.

"It was only a couple of nights ago," Egbert says. "Doctor Filch ran out of aspirin an' he put a note in Alexander's collar and the dog went right down to the drug store and brought some back."

"Come on, Scoop," Snooty says to me. "We will go to the drugstore."

"Good," I says. "If anybody needs as-

pirin right now, it is yours truly, Scoop Binney."

The potion mixer certainly remembered Alexander. He said the big hound grabbed the bottle of headache antidote out of his fingers quite earnestly. He even showed me and Snooty two fingers that were still bandaged up.

"Tell us everything that happened while the pooch was here," Snooty says to the druggist. "Was anybody in the store when it happened?"

"There was a woman drinking a soda," the citizen says, thinking quite hard. "Then there was a man asking the way to some place. Wait a minute now. Yeah, he asked how to get to Mrs. Lyman-Lemman's house. She has got a lot of sugar and is a snooty wren. The guy dropped a little case on the floor and he sure shut it up in a hurry."

Snooty yelps: "Eureka—I am gettin' warm!" and rushes for a telephone booth. "I must call up Betty Beacon Hill, Mr. Guppy's society editor. Wait here."

PRETTY SOON WE hear him saying: "Hello, that you, Betty? This is Piper. Dig through your stints for the last three or four days, Betty, and tell me did a Mrs. Lyman-Lemman put on a jam session for the *retroussee* noses during that time? I'll hang on."

A pause, then: "Oh—she did? You covered it three nights ago? In Cambridge, huh? What was the entertainment besides the usual high C warbling and double redoubling? It was what? . . . Say that again! It was? Well, I'm a— For the luvva—well, stamp my brains out . . . they d-i-id? They actually danced, huh? Let you look through a . . . Abigail Hepplethwaite was there, too? What did that citizen look like? What did he call himself, huh? Ow-w-w! Goo'bye, Sugar."

"All right," I says when Snooty comes out, "I can't wait to hear."

The halfwit takes the little piece of blue cloth from his pocket and asks me do I think it would fit Pavlowa.

"Wait," I choke out, "I've got to get me two more aspirins."

I should have taken quite enough

sleeping powder instead to put me out until the Brooklyns win the pennant. The next thing I know, I am going over to Hanover Street in a cab with Snooty Piper. We get out in front of a honky-tonk where a citizen can shoot at clay pigeons, get his fortune told and play checkers with a mechanized duplicate of Charlie McCarthy.

Downstairs there is a layout where you can see a little twirp from Borneo with two heads for a dime. There is a Hula dancer who never got beyond East Boston, and it is a very lowbrow place to say the least. I follow Snooty through the joint and the crackpot seems to be looking for something.

"That is funny," he says at last. "I hope we are—not too late, Scoop."

"Let's get out of here," I says. "I just heard a dame ask if the guy in the green burlap is part of the sideshow. That means you, Snooty, and it is very embarrassing."

But Snooty Piper cannot be insulted. He goes up to a rough-looking character who looks like an ax murderer and asks if there is a Professor Gasparelli the Great around.

"That big punk? Yeah, he was around. He quit me cold, I paid the greaseball fifty bucks a night an' he double-crosses me," the crude person spiels off. "I guess he went high hat when he got a gander at a Back Bay brawl. Well, if he comes crawlin' back here, I'll say: 'Gnats to you, bozo! I can git them lice a dime a dozen.'"

"He had a pretty good show, huh?" Snooty says. "I heard—"

"Aw, it was okay. The two named Clementine an' Marie Antoinette was the whole works. But stop around in a coupla nights, boys. I'll have a circus better than that one. How 'bout it, huh? Fer a dime you kin see the ape wit' the man's head behind that curtain there. Show starts in five minutes. Step right up!"

"No thanks. I can see one who is on the police force for nothing," Snooty chirps. "We must hurry, Scoop!"

I push the numbskull against the front of the place when we get outside. "All

right," I says. "I'll give you 'til I count ten to wise me up. What were you callin' up Guppy's society snooper for? What did that citizen in there mean?"

By the time I get up to seven, Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy comes sauntering by and I have to stop. He shows us a newspaper, and it has his picture on the front page. The print underneath says that Dreamy Dillbird has confessed to murdering Doctor Freeley Filch. I start to read some of it out loud:

"I musta done it," the prisoner said to Detective O'Shaughnessy who apprehended him. "I guess it was the night I thought I was in Persia as I remember I cracked open a big Persian melon when I was there. That was Filch's dome, huh? Git me a lawyer. He'll prove I was nuts!"

"I do not agree with Dreamy," Snooty says loftily. "It is you who are nuts, Iron Jaw. Now, don't stand in front of this place as you will ruin business. Citizens will not spend a dime in that museum when they can see bigger freaks outside for nothin'. Beat it before the owner of the joint puts in a complaint."

"Go ahead an' kid, Piper," Iron Jaw brays. "You're just sore because I busted the case open so quick. Ha, ha!"

"I forgot somethin', Scoop," Snooty says to me. "I will be out in a minute."

"That will give me time enough to get to Chelsea," I says. "S'long, you fat-head."

I AM about to duck around a corner, but I see a taxpayer who is after me for some dough I owe him for the suit I am wearing, so I duck back into the honky-tonk instead and join Snooty. The dimwit is asking the rough boy where Professor Gasparelli lives.

"Over on Friend Street—in the Palace Hotel."

"Scoop," Snooty says as we leave the joint, "the pooch sure was hard luck to Filch, huh? I bet Professor Gasparelli the Great wished he had never seen Alexander either. It is quite a case, huh?"

"Pull up your coat sleeve," I snap at him. "I am sure your arm is full of holes, too, you garter snake. I bet it's a needle you use and not one to sew buttons on with."

Snooty saunters along just as if he was sane and in about twenty minutes we are walking up the stairs of the Palace Hotel. It is full of very obnoxious smells and I am sure the last time it was swept was the night of the Chicago fire. There is one smell coming out of a door marked 13 that is quite familiar. Snooty sniffs and nods his skull very emphatically.

"I am right as usual," he gloats. "If the rough character gets unpleasant, stick close to me, Scoop!"

"Huh?"

Snooty knocks on the door. The funny noise we hear on the other side of it stops. It was like somebody was blowing up a bicycle tire or like a taxpayer with asthma trying to catch up on his breathing. There is a grunt from the hotel guest and then we hear him scuffling around before he hollers: "Who ees thees?"

"Uh—er—we come to drain the radiators," Snooty says. "We ain't got all day."

When the door opens, I almost swallow my bridgework, as who peeks out at us but the citizen who came to Filch's to get the body of the defunct canine. I hang onto Snooty's coat-tail so I will not fall down. "T-Tweedmill," I stutter.

"That is what you think, Scoop!" Snooty says. "Hello, Professor. Do I smell Flittem?"

"Why—er—ha, ha," the long-faced character says. "I was getting reed of flies. Did I see no you fallers some other place yet?"

"We been there," Snooty replies. "What is that sticking out of the closet, Professor? Don't tell me you wear a tippet! Tsk, tsk!"

It is then that I see the character's eyes change, and if they were looking out from a black leopard's map, I would not have been more scared. "So wha-a-t?" he snarls. "What you want, no?"

"Yes—no—yes," I says. "Come on, Snooty, will you? It's the wrong room, isn't it? Ha, ha, ha!"

"That is Alexander in the closet," Snooty deducts, and I fight off a swoon. "You forgot to tuck his painter in. You were sprayin' his corpus delicti with Flittem, Professor, to see if Marie Antoinette and Clementine were still playin' possum in his hair. The jig's up, Professor! You rubbed out Doc Filch. I demand that you come to headquarters and—"

Professor Gasparelli the Great seemed determined not to go anywhere with Snooty Piper unless it was to a morgue. He got his meat-hooks around Snooty's throat, and Snooty managed to grab the Professor's necktie and pull it up very smartly. It was an even bet which of them would be choked to death first unless some one stopped them.

I remember then that I came with Snooty, so I pick up the Flittem gun and whang the long-faced character over the scalp until the implement is all twisted like a cruller. But Snooty is still strangling, so I look for a more doughty weapon. It is a very heavy umbrella that I select, and I wrap it right around Professor Gasparelli's noggin like a turban. He lets go of Snooty and does a Leon Errol walk around the room before he falls down. I sit down on the character until Snooty gets his bellows inflated, and it takes quite some time.

"H-hello, Scoop," the crackpot finally gasps. "I held my breath longer than he did, huh?"

"If I had not interfered," I says with a sniff, "he would've torn your dome right off and hit me with it. Get up and call the police as this unlawful criminal is beginning to quiver under me."

ME AND SNOOTY PIPER compliment the police on their speedy response to a call for help from beleaguered citizens. "I will bring it to the attention of Mr. Guppy," Snooty says. "I know you would've been here much sooner if you had not had to bring Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy. Iron Jaw, go into that closet there and see what you find.

Tell me if you have seen the corpus delicti before. Don't be afraid. It is not a bone rack this time."

"It—it's that dead dog!" Iron Jaw howls when he takes a look. "The same one that—look here, you smart alecks, if this is playin' jokes—"

"The citizen on the floor rubbed out Doctor Freeley Filch," Snooty Piper tells him. "Please surround the murderous gent. Dreamy Dillbird has got a case against the city for false arrest. Yeah, that is what I said! The flea maestro is the Doc walloper!"

"It's a lie!" Iron Jaw booms. "It can't be. Dreamy confessed."

"It was the lullaby elixir that confessed, not Dreamy," Snooty corrects the flatfoot. "Shackle this snake in the grass with the state jewelry, Iron Jaw, and get him downtown as I will feel much safer then."

Professor Gasparelli the Great owns up down at LaGrange Street but says he would sure like to know how Piper pinned it on him. "Already yat I theenk I am out of town weeth nobody knowing anny'teeng. I mus' geet them back, Marie Antoinette an'—"

"Let us begin at the start, huh?" Snooty chirps. "When Iron Jaw got very touchy and locked me and Scoop Binney in the room where the pooch was laid out, I found a little piece of blue cloth on Alexander. That was quite puzzling to say the least. Then my pal. Scoop Binney, got to scratching at his torso and he had not been doing that before we got there."

"Well, when we tumbled that we had fleas, we knew we had caught them off Alexander, and down at the Greek's I started to think about the piece of cloth. So then I went to a drugstore and find out that Alexander was quite well known there. In fact he was in the place the night the Professor here asked the owner of the pharmacy how to get to Mrs. Lyman-Lemman's."

Iron Jaw groaned. "It don't make no sense. It's worse than Dreamy Dillbird's story about Persia. Maybe I'm nuts—"

"Be patient, Iron Jaw," Snooty says

soothingly. "I called up the society editor who works for Mr. Guppy and she said Mrs. Lyman-Lemman put on a very quaint bit of entertainment for her snooty guests and what was it but a flea circus? Then I knew that Dreamy Dillbird was innocent. The piece of blue cloth was a ballet skirt belonging to a dancing flea, and either Marie Antoinette or Clementine had lost it when they left Alexander flat."

"They both jumped on me and Scoop. Then that night in the drug store, the Professor dropped his fleas, and two of them got out before he could stop them. Fleas are very talented jumpers, I am told, and can hop twenty feet without getting up a sweat. They hopped on Alexander and when the pooch trotted home, he took Marie Antoinette and Clementine with him."

"Now these two fleas were the Prof's best performers, and his show was a washout without them. He discovered they were missing when he got to Mrs. Lyman-Lemman's and he was very put out about it. When he thought the whole thing over, he remembered that Alexander had been in the store, and he knew then that his fleas had gone on a spree on the hound's carcass."

"Professor Gasparelli, quite desperate, inquired about the pooch, and as Alexander was well known in the neighborhood, he soon found out who it belonged to. The Professor did not bother to consult Filch, so the next night he broke into the croaker's home and slaps the pooch down. Doc Filch heard him and went to take a gander at things. The Professor, quite sure that he would be accused of burglary, got to Doctor Filch and during a lively scuffle the flea coach here bopped Filch with the bronze bust."

IRON JAW has his big dome in his hands and is stamping his derby flat under his feet. I am not quite sure I am not headed for a violent ward at Danvers myself.

"The Professor got out of the window just as Egbert Skeen turned on the light, and Egbert saw that arm he said was covered with spots," Snooty goes on.

"Well, look at the Professor's wing, Iron Jaw. He fed his fleas off it and it is not lily white any way you look at it.

"That wing of his almost put Dreamy Dillbird, the jolly juice addict, right into the sizzle sofa. It was the flea's blue ballet skirt that started me on the trail of the real culprit. And that is another thing. Like I said to Scoop—why didn't the assassin hit Filch with the same pate punisher?

"It was Gasparelli who went and got the dead pooch after you moved Filch to the corpse grooming parlor. He figured maybe the fleas would still be hiding on it. He was coaxing them out with Flitterem when we called on him at his hotel."

"Ba-ah! I grab heem ze lacteric chair an' who ees careeng, no? Bah-h-h! The dog he ees brak up ze cirgus. Weethout Ma-arie Antoinette an' Clem—who cares? Ha-ha-a-a-a."

"Ow-w-w!" Iron Jaw bays suddenly and digs at his ribs. He gets another twinge on a different part of his big chassis and goes into a kind of fit.

"Ah," Snooty breathes, "the rest of

the fleas got out! They hopped on Iron Jaw over at the hotel as they know a St. Bernard when they see one, huh? Quick, Watson, the needle! I mean the Flitterem gun. Ha, ha!"

Dreamy Dillbird comes out of the lockup and takes a squint at Iron Jaw. He is having the jitters, too, and he taps the flatfoot on the shoulder. "Yeah, pal, I got 'em, too. Let's go an' git us a shot of paradise, huh? I know a guy—"

"They would have to use a grease gun filled with that lullaby lotion to make that ox feel happy," Snooty gurgles and bursts into quite a fit of laughter. "Scoop, he kills us, doesn't he?"

Iron Jaw thinks it is a very good idea and he tears the back off a chair and jumps at us.

"Ha, ha," Snooty yips, "come on, Scoop! We must flee!"

"Gnats to you!" I snort and step quite nimbly aside and shove out my foot. Iron Jaw does a pretty one-and-a-half without a springboard and goes right on out through the door.

"Show us out the back way, will you?" I whispers to a gendarme.



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*The arm rose, the sap
was noised.*

JOE DUNCAN finished his beer and ordered another. He finished that one and ordered a double brandy. The brandy scorched a path down his throat. It wasn't very good brandy.

"Another order, Mr. Duncan?" asked the waiter.

Duncan shook his head. He wondered suddenly what Arthur Holbrook's face would look like if his nose was flattened out across his pale cheeks.

"I have brought the telephone," said the waiter, plugging it into a hole in the floor. "You remember Mr. Underhill wanted to talk to you."

Duncan frowned at the waiter. "Why should I talk to Underhill?"

The waiter didn't seem to know; at least, he didn't make any answer.

Duncan stood up. He was a tall man. His face was thin, sharp-featured. It ordinarily wasn't unattractive, but it

When a news columnist is fired, he usually is in for a long rest. And a rest was what columnist Joe Duncan figured was coming to him. But Death takes no rest, and that was what worried Joe Duncan. For Death threatened Joe's scoop with the scoop of—Joe's obituary.

didn't look very nice right now. There was a hint of anger showing in the eyes, and the lips were a straight narrow line above a jutting chin.

The waiter discreetly backed away, taking the telephone with him. Dropping a bill on the table, Duncan moved toward the door. He nodded casually to a group standing at the bar but scarcely noticed them. Beyond the door he paused at a hat-check stand just off the lobby.

The girl at the stand smiled at him mechanically, and with his hat, passed him a sealed envelope. "Some woman left this for you, Mr. Duncan," she told him.

Duncan put on his hat and scowled at the handwriting on the envelope. It was small, slightly backhand. He didn't recognize it. Tearing it open he read the message inside. It was brief and unsigned and stated:

If you want to find out why Holbrook fired you, ask Porky Meyers.

Duncan's scowl deepened. He read the message several times and then looked over at the hat-check girl. "Who did you say left this?"

"A woman."

"Who was she?"

"I didn't know her, Mr. Duncan."

"What was she like? Young or old?"

"She was young, blond. She just came up and handed me the note and then hurried away. I hardly got a chance to look at her."

Duncan grunted, tipped the girl and crossed the lobby to the street. Just outside, a newsboy was hawking papers. "Buy a *News*, mister," he said to Duncan. "Read all about the mine disaster. Just three cents. This is the last paper I've got."

STARING down at the paper, Duncan's eyes noticed the column on the right-hand side. It was headed *Round the Town*

and below it was his name. He said half humorously:

"Your last paper and my last column, sonny. Maybe the sheet will sell better after today."

A taxi pulled up at the curb, and a young, attractive, dark-haired girl stepped to the sidewalk. She handed the driver a bill and, without waiting for her change, turned and started for the door of the hotel. There was a worried expression on her face.

Duncan called out: "Hi, Marcia."

The girl stopped abruptly, and when she saw Duncan a relieved look came into her eyes. She moved over to where he was standing and, before he could speak again, said very swiftly: "Joe, I've been looking for you. You've got to see Dave Underhill right away. He's at the Athletic Club. I—"

"Easy, girl. Easy," Duncan interrupted. "You'll run out of breath. Suppose you start all over. Why is it so important that I see Dave Underhill?"

The girl's face tightened. She seemed to draw away from him. "Please, Joe. I—I can't tell you. But Dave—"

"Dave Under-hand," Duncan interrupted, deliberately mispronouncing the name.

Marcia frowned. "Joe, please don't be stubborn. It'll only take you a minute to walk down to the Athletic Club."

Duncan shook his head. "Even my best friends wouldn't guess it, but I'm a little particular about the people with whom I associate. The rock Underhill crawled out from under is a little too slimy for my taste."

"Joe—"

"See you tonight," Duncan grinned.

He crossed the sidewalk and stepped into a taxi. Looking back, he saw that Marcia was staring after him, a worried expression again tightening her face. He

waved at her and leaned back in the cab.

"Where to?" asked the driver.

Duncan gave the man Porky Meyers' address. . . .

Meyers' apartment was on the third floor of an old barnlike structure which had one day been a very fine dwelling. There was no elevator and no telephone from the ground floor.

Joe Duncan climbed two flights of stairs and turned down a wide corridor to Meyers' door. He pressed the bell and then added a knock, but there was no answer. He tried ringing again, and then knocked once more and finally tried the door. It opened easily into a wide light room, and in the middle of that room, sprawled out on his back, lay the body of a man.

THE SIGHT was so unexpected that for a moment Joe Duncan didn't move. Wide-eyed, he stared at the figure on the floor. The man's eyes were open and he seemed to be looking up at the ceiling. But he didn't see anything, for he was dead. Just above those open eyes there was a small hole in his forehead, and a red path of drying blood marked its way from that hole back over the man's bald head.

Duncan was unaware that he had entered the room until he suddenly found himself standing over the man's body. Then all at once, it seemed, his mind started functioning again. His first thought was that Porky Meyers had killed himself, but both of Meyers' hands were empty, and looking around, Duncan couldn't see a gun.

He did notice something else, however. The room gave every evidence of having been searched. The overstuffed furniture had been slit open with a knife, pictures had been pulled from the wall and ripped apart, books lay helter skelter on the floor.

The realization that Porky Meyers had been murdered came to Joe Duncan as a shock. Then something else shocked him. From the doorway a heavy voice rapped out: "All right, you. Get your hands up and back over to the wall."

Duncan jerked around. In the doorway

stood two men. One of them he recognized as Val Reudy, a special investigator working out of the district attorney's office. The other man he didn't know. Both of them had their guns out, and on Reudy's tight-skinned face there was a sardonic smile.

"So we've caught up with you, huh?" he said mockingly.

Duncan frowned. He had always known that Reudy had no particular love for him, and the feeling was mutual. But there was no reason that he could understand for the look of satisfaction in the man's eyes.

"What do you mean?" he asked bluntly.

Reudy blinked. Holding his gun on Duncan he said: "Look around for the rod he used, Pete."

The second man, an undersized fellow with rounded shoulders, slid into the room. He found the gun quickly. Too quickly. It was stuffed inside one of the slashed cushions of the davenport. He pulled it out, holding it carefully by the barrel. He didn't touch the handle.

"Your gun, isn't it?" said Reudy.

Duncan looked at the gun. It was very much like one he owned.

When he didn't answer, Reudy said coldly: "You'll burn for this, Duncan. Too bad, too. You used to be a right guy."

Joe Duncan took a deep breath. He said slowly: "You think I did this? You think I killed Porky Meyers?"

"The jury'll think so when they hear all the evidence I'll have," Reudy answered.

There was a tinge of mockery in his voice which stirred a deep anger in Joe Duncan. "What evidence?" he heard himself asking.

Reudy grinned. "Well, first off, there's the row you had with Meyers last night. Then there's the gun. Then there's the fact that I've caught you here, red-handed. An' that's only a part of it. Come along. Let's go see the D.A."

Joe Duncan stood perfectly still. He had had no fight with Meyers the previous evening, though it was true he had been with him. That didn't make any difference, however. This whole thing, from the note he had received at the hotel on

down to Reudy's attitude, looked like a frameup. And if it was a frameup, Reudy would make it a good one. Given half an hour in here before the police arrived, he would have things so well fixed that there would never be any question as to his evidence.

The special investigator from the district attorney's office stepped forward. Still grinning, he said: "Oh, I almost forgot. That note you got at the hotel. I'll take it."

Duncan reached into his pocket and took out the note. Over Reudy's shoulder he could see that Pete was gingerly wrapping the gun he had discovered in his handkerchief. Duncan held out the note. As Reudy reached for it he dropped it, and instinctively, Reudy bent forward to grab the note.

That was a mistake. Duncan's hand, balled suddenly into a fist, swung up and caught the man on the point of the jaw. It was a good solid blow and it straightened Reudy up. His gun went off but the bullet missed Duncan by at least a foot. Duncan hit the man again, staggered him against the wall, then whirled to face Pete.

Pete had dropped the gun he had found and was tugging at his pocket. His own gun was probably there, but if it was he didn't get a chance to use it. Joe Duncan's fist spread Pete's nose over half of his face and Pete fell back on the davenport.

SCOOPING up the gun from the floor, Joe Duncan headed for the door. Reudy was leaning against the wall, near it, trying to keep on his feet. There was a glazed expression in his eyes. Lifting the gun in his hand, Duncan tapped him back of the ear. Quietly, Reudy slid to the floor.

Outside the door were a very fat woman in a flowered kimona, a couple of men in their shirt sleeves, and a rather attractive blond with a frightened look in her eyes. They all backed away as Duncan came out. The fat woman screamed.

"Call the police," Duncan barked at one of the men. "There's a man in there who's been murdered."

The blond girl bit her lips, started to tremble. She turned suddenly and ran for the stairs.

Duncan hurried after her. When he reached the second floor he heard a door slam. He had a notion that it would be interesting to talk to the girl, but right now, he knew, wasn't the time.

Continuing on outside the house, he walked swiftly to the street and turned to the left. There was a bus at the corner. He sprinted and caught it. At the next stop he sighted a vacant taxi and he left the bus and entering the taxi, gave the driver his own address.

Unlocking the door of his apartment, Joe Duncan stopped short. Seated in a big chair near the window was a round-faced, heavy-set man. The man was smoking a cigar and reading the evening paper. He had taken off his shoes, and his feet were placed comfortably on another chair. When Duncan came in, the man said easily:

"Hello, Joe. I hope you don't mind the fact that I'm making myself at home. The janitor's a friend of mine. He let me in."

Duncan shrugged. "You have curious friends, Underhill."

"I haven't found that it bothered me."

Joe Duncan made no answer. He walked into the next room and looked in the drawer where he usually kept his gun. It wasn't there. He looked in several other places but finally made up his mind that the gun he had in his pocket, which he had picked up in Porky Meyers' room, was his. When he moved back to the other room, Underhill was again glancing at the paper.

"What do you want?" Duncan asked sharply.

Underhill folded the paper. He said slowly: "I heard that Holbrook let you go. Thought maybe you'd be interested in a proposition."

"You learn things quickly, don't you?" said Duncan.

"Sometimes."

"Maybe you know where I've just been."

"No, I don't think I do."

Duncan frowned. "What's the proposition?"

Underhill made a tent of his stubby fingers. He asked: "Why did Holbrook let you go?"

Recalling his interview with Arthur Holbrook, Duncan's lips tightened. Holbrook hadn't said why he had let him go. He had just fired him. He had refused to give any reason.

As though guessing that, Underhill said: "Maybe he didn't tell you, Joe, but has it ever occurred to you that you've been riding the administration of our fine city pretty hard in that column of yours? That is, you've been hinting at how open things were, you've been talking of various gambling rackets and of vice conditions. That mean anything to you?"

Duncan's eyes narrowed. "Should it?"



UNDERHILL leaned forward. "Joe, you're in a position to do this town a big service. Maybe that sounds funny, coming from me, but whether you think it is or not, I mean it.

All that you have hinted at in that column of yours is true. Things are even more wide open than you hinted. And behind all the vice and the rackets, there's an organization which is milking this town to death. I want that organization smashed, and you can do it."

For a moment Joe Duncan made no answer. He had a feeling that Underhill's analysis of the situation was true, but he couldn't understand Underhill's attitude or why the man had come to him. After a short pause, he said: "All right, what do I do?"

"Find out who's back of the organization and get the proof needed to smash him."

"How?"

Underhill frowned. "That's up to you, but I think you can do it. Just from reading your column I can tell that you have sources of information that would lead

you to the man back of this thing. That is—if you had the guts to tackle it."

Joe Duncan drew a deep breath. His chief source of information, so far as things like this were concerned, had been Porky Meyers. And Meyers was dead.

"If I get the name of the man, what then?" he asked.

"If you get proof to back it," said Underhill, "you can name your own price, up to a hundred grand."

"Who will pay it?"

"I will."

Duncan walked over to the window and stared down into the street. He didn't know what to make of Underhill's offer. It sounded phony. While he stood there trying to make up his mind what to say, a car pulled up at the curb outside and four men got out of it. Three were uniformed officers. The fourth was wearing plain clothes, and Duncan recognized him as a detective named Mike O'Toole. The four men stared at the apartment house and then started toward the door.

Duncan swung around. He said to Underhill: "Wait here a minute. I want to see about something."

Moving into the next room, Duncan stepped through a back door to the hall. He hurried to the other end of the corridor, past the elevator, waited there until two of the policemen and O'Toole got out of the elevator and moved toward his door. Then he took the same cage to the basement.

He got out into the alley without any trouble and turned down it to a side street. Two blocks farther on, he caught a bus and rode it downtown. At a corner not far from the *News* office he bought a paper. His name was in the headlines and after it were the words, SOUGHT IN CONNECTION WITH FRIEND'S DEATH. He scanned the story but it told him little. It didn't say how the district attorney's men had happened to come to Meyers' apartment.

A man waiting on the corner noticed what he was reading and said: "I hope they get him. A fellow who would do a thing like that ought to be strung up by a mob."

TDA

Duncan nodded. He folded the paper, stuck it into his pocket and turned away. The story in print had brought him a strangely excited feeling. There was a policeman on the next corner, and when he saw him, Duncan wanted to run. The policeman hardly noticed him, however, as he passed.

Walking on up the street, Duncan tried to figure out what to do. Why he should have been framed he couldn't guess. That was the crux of the matter, he decided, but what was the meaning of it? Certainly the hints he had made in his column hadn't been outspoken enough to bring on a thing like this.

Suddenly then to his mind came the memory of the blond he had seen in the old house where Meyers had his apartment, and he recalled Meyers having mentioned an interest in some girl who lived at the same place where he did. It wouldn't be a bad plan, he decided, to see that girl.

It had grown dark by the time Duncan reached the apartment house. Out in front there were no cars. That reassured him. He turned into the house. There was a dim light in the front hall, but no one was about. Climbing the stairs to the second floor he hesitated. Which apartment on that floor was the girl's, he wasn't sure. There were four apartments, two on each side. Duncan moved forward to the closest door. There was no name over the bell. After a moment's hesitation, he rang it.

A TALL, thin, middle-aged woman answered the door. She had a flushed face and stringy hair. Her dress hung from her shoulders with about as much shape as a flour sack, and there was a whining note in her voice when she said:

"Well, what do you want? If you're a detective it won't do you no good to talk to me. I don't know nothin'."

Duncan frowned. He said sternly: "You know about the girl who lives on this floor and who is a friend of the man who was killed. Which apartment is hers?"

The woman sniffed. "She lives across the hall, but it won't do you no good to go there. A couple men called for her about half an hour ago."

"Who were they?"

"How should I know. Police, I guess."

"Was the girl—" Duncan broke off the question. The eyes of the woman facing him had suddenly gone across his shoulder and had widened with surprise.

He whirled, jerking up his arms in an instinctive effort to protect his head. But the movement was of no avail. Something exploded against his skull with terrific force, knocking him into the black void of unconsciousness. . . .

When Joe Duncan opened his eyes, the first thing that he saw was the picture of Mona Lisa. The woman in the portrait stared down at him with her mysterious, fixed smile. He frowned at her, turned his eyes to the side and saw thick, red drapes covering a window.

Turning his head a little more, he saw the figure of a man seated in a very comfortable chair. The man was thin, rather distinguished in appearance. His hair was gray, and he had a close-clipped gray mustache. The man was Howard Chandler, the district attorney.

Duncan blinked and sat up. He had been lying on a davenport, he noticed, and he realized suddenly that this must be Chandler's home. His gun, strangely enough, was still in his pocket.

Chandler got up. "Feeling better, Mr. Duncan?" he asked.

Duncan's head felt twice its normal size. Something seemed to be churning up and down inside of it. He looked over at Chandler. "Does it make much difference how I feel?"

Chandler's face didn't change. There was a very grave expression about his eyes and lips. He said: "I'm sorry my man hit you so hard. That wasn't necessary, but I guess he just wasn't taking any chances. I wanted to talk to you."

Duncan frowned. He glanced around the room. There were no others present.

"You're not under arrest, if that's what's bothering you," Chandler stated. "I know as well as you do that you didn't

kill Meyers. I think that thing can be cleared up. I brought you here because you are in real danger until it is."

Joe Duncan felt the bump on his head. He said slowly: "Suppose you tell me what this is all about."

"How well did you know Meyers?" Chandler asked.

"Pretty well. Why?"

"Did he tell you of his connection with me?"

Duncan shook his head.

A brief smile touched Chandler's lips. "I'm not surprised," he nodded. "Meyers' safety lay in making everyone think that he was only a reporter. But he was actually more than that. He was my own personal agent. Mr. Duncan, for a year now my office has been trying to get to the bottom of the best organized system of corruption and vice you can possibly imagine, and we haven't reached first base.

"Arresting a few women and closing down a few houses won't stop the vice racket. Raiding games in back rooms and smashing slot machines won't stop gambling. You've got to get the men at the top who are back of it. Well, Porky Meyers was working on that when he was murdered. In fact," and Chandler's voice lowered, "I have every reason to believe that he succeeded in reaching the man we are after, that he got the proof we want.

"But I don't know what has happened to that proof. Tell me this, Duncan. Did Meyers give you anything to keep for him last night when you were together?"

Duncan shook his head. Recalling the evening spent with Meyers, it seemed to him now that Meyers had been a little excited, but he hadn't given him anything or indicated the reason for his excitement.

Chandler frowned. "You're sure of that, Duncan?"

"I'm sure of it," Duncan answered.

"That would be worth a lot to me," Chandler hinted. "I have a fund which is practically limitless on which I can draw

to pay for the information needed to break up organized crime in this city. It's a fund provided by business men. If it's a question of money—"

Duncan scowled. "It's not a question of money."

"Well, someone seems to think you have that information, anyhow, or that frame-up wouldn't have been fixed."

"Your own man was in on that," Duncan said abruptly.

"You mean Reudy?"

"Yes, Reudy."

CHANDLER shook his head. He said: "Listen here, Duncan. According to the doctor's report, Meyers was killed last night, and whoever killed him had plenty of time to search his place. If he had found what he was looking for, he would have walked off and left us with a plain murder on our hands.

"Instead, you are sucked in and the thing is set up to make you the goat. Some one, apparently, must think that you have Meyers' stuff. And so far as Reudy is concerned, he isn't on the county payroll and hasn't been for the past ten days."

Duncan blinked. He was silent for a long time, thinking over what Chandler had said. On a chair near him there was a later newspaper than the one he had seen. Reaching for it, he scanned the article concerning Meyers' death and the police search for him. Midway in the story, one particular item caught his attention.

It read.

Arthur Holbrook, publisher of the *News*, tonight broadcast an appeal by radio asking Duncan to get in touch with him. "Duncan is innocent," Holbrook stoutly maintained, "and the entire resources of the *News* stand squarely behind him. I know that he would never have committed such a crime." Holbrook further pledged his personal aid to the man for whom the police are searching.

Laying the newspaper aside, Duncan got to his feet. He said slowly: "I'm beginning to get an idea about things, Chandler. You said I wasn't under arrest. Does that mean I can leave?"

"I wish you wouldn't. Here you would be safe. But—"

Duncan interrupted him. "Look here. I knew Porky Meyers about as well as anyone in the city. Give me a chance and maybe I can figure things out."

"The police—"

"They haven't got me yet. Maybe I can cover a lot of territory before they do."

Chandler hesitated. His face looked older. He said, almost desperately: "Duncan, if you could only figure out where Meyers might have left the things he had, you'd be doing your city a real service. I had hoped—"

Duncan moved toward the door. Chandler made no motion to stop him. . . .

From a filling station near Chandler's house, Joe Duncan telephoned Arthur Holbrook, the publisher. He said: "This is Duncan checking in. What do you want? The exclusive story of a fugitive? How it feels to be a hunted man?"

Holbrook's gasp sounded clearly over the wire. "Where are you, Joe?" he demanded. "Have the police—"

"The police haven't," Duncan answered.

Holbrook's voice sounded lower. He said swiftly: "Listen, Joe. I've got to see you. I was a little hasty this afternoon but I can explain that. I'm going to the Hoff-Parkhill hotel. I'll register under the name of Burgoyne. Can you come down there right away? I—I'm afraid, after what I said, that the police are watching my home."



JOE DUNCAN frowned at the telephone. He said after a moment's hesitation: "All right. I'll meet you." Then he broke the connection and dialed Marcia Smith's home. There was no answer. He tried Dave Underhill's number and heard Marcia's voice.

"It's me," he announced.

"Joe?" Marcia cried.

"Right. Sorry about tonight, or did we have a date?"

Marcia's voice betrayed her worry. "Are—are you all right, Joe?" she asked.

"Never better," Duncan replied. "Tell me, just what did Mr. Under-hand tell you that he wanted of me?"

"Didn't you see him, Joe?"

"Sure I saw him, but what did he tell you?"

"He said— Joe, he seemed to know that you were in trouble. He said that if he could get to you in time he could save you from doing something which—which would have serious results."

Duncan scowled. After a moment's pause he said: "You're working late, Marcia."

"Dave asked me to stay here. He said he thought you might want to get in touch with him. He's been calling in every few minutes."

"Any police around?"

"No."

"I'll drop by later," Duncan promised. "Tonight's my night to pay calls."

Duncan hung up. He noticed the filling station attendant looking at him closely. Near him there was a newspaper with Duncan's picture in it. Duncan glanced at the picture. "Looks a lot like me, doesn't it," he suggested.

The attendant moistened his lips. "I—I wouldn't say so."

Joe Duncan laughed. He walked out of the station and from the corner locked back. The attendant had secured a gun and was bending over the telephone, probably calling the police. Duncan started to run. . . .

The Hoff-Parkhill was a large hotel. It stretched up into the sky for fifty stories and was spread over a lot of ground. It boasted a roof garden and three restaurants, three cocktail lounges and a grill. It had a staff of five house detectives.

It was of those detectives that Duncan was thinking as he turned into the hotel. He knew them all. Aside from that, the Hoff-Parkhill was a splendid place for a man to go if he didn't want to be recognized. Home folks didn't patronize it much. It was too expensive and it was

always booked up by conventions and conferences.

Duncan crossed the lobby without seeing anyone he knew. From the information desk he got the number of "Mr. Burgoyne's" room. An elevator jerked him to the twentieth floor.

Holbrook answered the door the minute he knocked. There was a drawn look on the publisher's face. His eyes were webbed with red lines. He had been perspiring and his collar was wilted. Of average size, usually immaculate and always very self-possessed, right now he looked like a man at the end of his rope.

"Thank heavens you've come, Joe," he cried, pulling Duncan into the room. "I was afraid—" His voice broke off. He didn't say what he was afraid of.

Duncan leaned against the wall and stared at his former employer. He was sure that Holbrook's condition wasn't due to the fact that the man had been worrying about him. After a moment he said: "Well, I'm here."

Holbrook relit a half-smoked cigar. His hand was trembling. He said: "About what I told you this afternoon, Joe. I can't explain everything, but I can tell you this. I didn't want to let you go but I had to. I was practically ordered to let you go. You know I own the paper, and maybe that doesn't sound real to you but the man who made me fire you has made my life hell in lots of other ways, too.

"Once, a long time ago, I did something that—that wasn't just right. This man knows about it. If he tells what he knows, I'll be ruined. When he ordered me to fire you there wasn't anything else for me to do."

Duncan scowled. "Who is this man?"

"I can't tell you that, but—Joe, you were with Meyers the night he was killed. There were certain papers Meyers had. If I can get my hands on those papers I can checkmate this man I've been talking about. I thought maybe—"

"You thought maybe Meyers gave me those papers."

Holbrook nodded, his eyes searching Duncan's face.

"The man you want," said Duncan, "is

also the man back of the vice and gambling rackets, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"How did you know Meyers had these papers you mentioned?"

"I—he called me last night, but I wasn't in. He left a message. The maid at my home didn't give it to me until tonight. It looked, to her, like a very innocent message, very unimportant. But it wasn't. If I had received it in time—"

THERE WAS a sound at the door. Holbrook's voice suddenly stopped. His body stiffened. Joe Duncan swung around. Val Reudy was standing in the doorway, a gun in his hand. There was a swollen bump on Reudy's chin and a bruise on his cheek. He wasn't smiling, and his eyes were as cold as ice.

Reudy said sharply: "I'd rather pull this trigger than talk, Duncan, but you've got a line on something I want. Where is it?"

Duncan glanced at Holbrook. The publisher had raised his hands. He was biting at his lips, and his face was gray.

"Well?" Reudy snapped.

Duncan moistened his lips. He said hesitantly: "If—if I give you the papers, will you let me walk out of here. Will you let me go?"

"Sure I'll let you go," Reudy answered. "All I want is the papers." But his words sounded hollow, and by his eyes Duncan knew that he didn't mean them.

Duncan's gun was in the pocket of his coat. It hadn't been taken by Chandler or Chandler's men. He could sense the weight of it now.

Lifting his left hand to the lapel of his coat, he started to take the coat off. Reudy watched him closely, watched that left hand. He should have watched the right, for Duncan's right hand slipped into his pocket. It was a little awkward, getting the coat off that way, but he managed to get his left arm out of the sleeve and then he started pulling his right arm out and pulling the gun out, with it.

It would be close, he knew. Perspira-

tion broke out on his face. He heard himself mumbling: "The stuff's sewed up in my coat. It—" But that must have been the wrong thing for him to say, for even as he spoke, Reudy's arm went rigid and his hand tightened around his gun.

Duncan jerked sideways. He heard the roar of Reudy's gun. A stinging pain burned across his chest. He fired through the sleeve of his coat, jerking the trigger spasmodically. The corner of Reudy's head seemed to break away, and blood splashed down the side of his face. He fell forward, struck heavily on the floor. One of his legs jerked a couple times, but after that he didn't move.

"The coat, Joe. The coat," Holbrook gasped.

Duncan laughed. His laugh sounded unnatural. He said, "Hell, there ain't no papers in the coat. That was all talk."

"But—"

Duncan put his coat back on. He opened the door and looked outside. A man was hurrying toward their door, a man Joe Duncan recognized as one of the house detectives. The man was jerking at his pocket.

Duncan stepped into the hall just as the man reached the door. Just as the man got the gun out of his pocket, Duncan lifted his own gun and hit the man smartly across the head. "Sorry, Tom," he murmured, "but you wouldn't understand."

The house detective sagged against the wall, his eyes blank. He slid to the floor.

Racing down the corridor, Duncan almost bumped into a party of four women. He was still holding his gun. One of the women started to scream. Duncan put the gun in his pocket. He said, "Louder, sister. Louder. That's no good at all," and hurried on without stopping.

A down elevator was just stopping at the floor when Duncan reached it. He stepped inside. The woman's screams could still be heard. There were two people in the elevator, and Duncan said: "It must have been a mouse."

The man and the elevator boy grinned. The woman looked a little pained.



HE left the hotel with no trouble, though he knew that within a few minutes the search for him would be on in earnest. In a taxi he drove past Underhill's office. Underhill ran a trucking company and his office was in the corner of his storage building. There was a light in the office and several cars were parked not far away. None of the cars, however, seemed occupied.

Paying off the driver, Duncan got out and walked back to the entrance. He opened the door and stepped inside, climbed a stairway to the office, pushed open that door.

Just inside the door, facing it, his gun covering it, sat Detective Mike O'Toole.

"Come on in," said O'Toole. "Figgered you might show up here, an' for once I figgered right."

Duncan entered the room. He felt suddenly very weary. His eyes traveled from side to side, but he saw no sign of Marcia or of Dave Underhill. He had half expected Underhill to be here.

"I'll take your gun," said O'Toole.

Duncan handed it over. He made no attempt to debate the issue with O'Toole. Even if he had had the chance, he knew that he wouldn't try it. He rather liked O'Toole. There was something homely, straightforward and honest about the detective which appealed to him.

O'Toole got up and leaned back against the edge of Marcia's desk. He was a big man. He had two or three chins, sagging cheeks, a neck which went straight down to his shoulders from his ears. He was growing out in front, too.

Duncan said: "Mike, I didn't kill Porky Meyers, but I suppose that's what they all say, isn't it."

O'Toole shrugged. "What did you make a break for?"

"I didn't want to be framed. From what Reudy said I knew I was up against it."

O'Toole scowled. "I never did like that guy."

"Who did he work for?" Duncan asked. "The D.A."

"Chandler denies it. He says he let Reudy go ten days back."

The detective's scowl deepened. "I wouldn't know, then."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Take you in, Joe. I've got to. In fact, you're lucky it was me who came up here. Some other guy might have shot when you came through the door."

Duncan knew that was true. With a half smile, he said, "Thanks, Mike." Then he added: "Where's the girl, Marcia?"

"Locked up in that closet over there. The key's in the door. You can let her out, now."

Duncan nodded. He moved over toward the door, turned the key and opened it. Marcia literally fell into his arms. Her hands and feet were tied and there was a gag in her mouth. Duncan started to work on her bonds. He heard a gasp behind him, heard a thudding sound, whirled around.

Dave Underhill was standing near his desk, and O'Toole lay on the floor near the politician's stockinged feet. A sapper dangled from Underhill's wrist.

"Neat, huh?" Underhill grinned at Duncan. "But if he hadn't been watchin' you so close, I think he might have heard me when I sneaked up on him from that back door."

Duncan finished untying the girl. He said: "Are you all right, Marcia?"

The girl rubbed her wrists, stared down at O'Toole's body and then up at Underhill. She said huskily: "You—you didn't—"

"He'll wake up with a sore head. That's all. He isn't hurt," Underhill replied. Then he looked over at Duncan. "Where's the stuff Meyers had? I'll pay off for it—on the line—any price you name."

Duncan crossed over to a chair, sat down. He said slowly: "That must be mighty important stuff. You want it, Holbrook wants it. The D.A. wants it. What is it, anyhow?"

Underhill blinked. "Haven't you got it?"

Duncan shook his head. "No, but I'm beginning to get some mighty interesting

ideas about it. That's what you wanted when you came to my apartment, isn't it. You might even have come around to mentioning it if I hadn't walked out."

Underhill nodded.

"You knew then that Meyers was dead."

Again Underhill nodded. He said: "I knew even more than that. I knew that his apartment had been searched and that the stuff hadn't been found."

O'TOOLE groaned, and Underhill leaned over and hit him again with the sap. Duncan glanced at Marcia. The girl was staring at Underhill, a curious expression in her eyes. Moving around to Underhill's side, Duncan suddenly lashed out with his fist, catching Underhill just below the ear. He hit him again, heard Marcia scream.

Underhill fell to the floor. He rocked groggily back and forth on his hands and knees. Duncan reached for the sapper the politician had used on O'Toole and put the man to sleep. He glanced up at Marcia.

"Don't worry," he said. "Underhill isn't hurt, either. Come on. We're going places."

The girl swallowed. She said: "Joe, I don't understand. I thought—"

"I don't understand either," Duncan answered. "Suppose we put our heads together."

They went outside and got into Marcia's car. Duncan slid under the wheel. He drove over to a boulevard and started north. Glancing at Marcia he said: "Girl, how important is Dave Underhill to you?"

Marcia frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Just that," Duncan answered. "Back of all the arguments we've had about him, just how important is he?"

For a moment Marcia didn't reply. Then she said slowly: "Joe, I've worked for him for five years. I've seen a side of him very few people have ever seen, a good side. I know he's a politician in what a lot of people would call the worst sense of the word. That is, I know he's swung city contracts the way he wanted and that he's been paid for it. I know

he's swung elections the way he wanted, for money, too.

"In other words, he hasn't been above digging his fingers into the public's pockets. On the other hand I could tell you a lot of good things he's done. I could name people he's helped. Pretty soon I'll find myself back to my old argument. He's a political boss, but most towns have them and I think Dave Underhill is above the average."

"Suppose you found out he wasn't. Suppose you found out his graft extended to vice and gambling."

"It doesn't."

"But suppose it did."

Again the girl was silent for a moment. When she spoke her voice was very weak. "Then, Joe, I think I'd lose all faith in humanity. You see, I haven't any people and Dave has been like a father to me. He lost his own daughter years ago in a rather tragic manner and his wife died shortly after that. Sometimes, Joe, I think he feels that I've taken his daughter's place."

Joe Duncan parked the car. He told Marcia everything that had happened to him from the time when Holbrook fired him on down to the present. When he had finished, he said: "I can see this far, Marcia. Somehow or other, Porky Meyers got his hands on some papers so valuable that they cost him his life. Those papers must name, in no uncertain terms, the man back of organized crime in this city.

"Underhill wants them, and the only reason he gives is that he wants to bust up the racket. That sounds phony to me. Holbrook wants the papers. He seems to think that with them he can checkmate the man who had been making his life a hell on earth. Well, maybe that's motive enough.

"Chandler wants those papers, too. Cleaning up the town is his job, and besides, Chandler would like to be governor, and a thing like that would help. But most of all, the man named in those papers wants them. Now, the question is, of those reasons given, which two are honest?"

Marcia shook her head. "The question is, where are the papers?"

"Yes. Where?"

"What about that girl, the blond friend of Meyers? Who took her from the apartment?"

Duncan frowned. He started the car. "I don't know, but I think I'll look over that place of hers. I might find something."

DRIVING back to the old house in which Meyers had been killed, Duncan parked the car. "You stay out here," he said. "I'll not be long."

Again he entered the house without trouble, walked up to the second floor. The door to the girl's apartment was unlocked. He entered it, switched on the lights, caught his breath. He had thought that the apartment was empty but it wasn't.

The blond was lying fully clothed on the bed. Her head was turned toward him. There was a horrible grimace on it. A bottle had fallen to the floor below her head.

Duncan crossed to the bed, stared down at the bottle. He didn't touch it and couldn't make out the name on the bottle, but the red skull and cross bones and the red word, POISON, were clearly visible. Glancing again at the girl, Duncan frowned. Her dress was torn and on her bosom were several red, swollen, open sores. They looked like burns, burns such as might have been made by a lighted cigar.

A cold shudder ran over him. He opened and closed his hands spasmodically. He couldn't know that he was right, of course, but it seemed possible that those men who had taken this girl away might have tortured her in order to gain what information they wanted. Then, successful, they might have brought her back here and forced her to take the poison.

He glanced around the room. This room, too, he could see, had been searched, though the searchers hadn't made the mess of it that they had made in Meyers' room.

The waste basket caught his eye. In it were several papers. He picked up one,

blinked at his own name. What he held was apparently the beginning of a letter. It read:

Dear Mr. Duncan:

"I don't know whether this is the right thing to do or not, but—"

There the writing stopped. It seemed as though the girl had either changed her mind about writing him or had crumpled up this sheet and started again.

"Oh, so it's you again," said a voice from the doorway.

Duncan turned. Out in the hall stood the woman from the opposite apartment. Her hair was down and below the coat she was wearing, a long nightgown was visible.

"Yes, it's me," Duncan admitted. "Tell me, what time did this girl get in?"

"The men who took her brought her back about an hour ago. I guess she was drunk. They almost carried her up the stairs. She—"

The woman had moved forward to where she could see the figure on the bed. Her voice broke off, then came in a sudden scream.

Duncan would have liked to question her further, but he knew that he didn't dare stay around. He slid past the woman who seemed paralyzed everywhere but in the lungs and throat, ran for the stairs and hurried down them. When he reached the car, Marcia had the motor running. He jumped in beside her and the girl wheeled the car out into the street.

"Where to?" she demanded.

"What about your apartment?"

Marcia nodded. . . .



JOE DUNCAN leaned back in his chair and smiled across the breakfast table at Marcia. Through a haze of cigarette smoke he said comfortably: "You know, I like this. I'd like it every morning the year round."

Marcia frowned. "I wish you'd be serious."

"I am. Of course I don't like sleeping

on the davenport. Something would have to be done about that."

"I could buy a cot."

Duncan shook his head. "I don't like cots."

Leaning forward, Marcia said: "I heard you telephoning when I woke up. Who were you calling?"

"Detective Mike O'Toole, but let's talk about this sleeping problem."

"O'Toole! But Joe, he could trace the call. He—"

"He didn't have to trace it. I told him I was here."

"You what!"

"I told him I was here. In fact, I invited him around. I invited some others, too. I think they'll get here first."

"Who did you invite?"

"Your boss, my ex-boss and the district attorney."

Marcia studied his face gravely.

"Now about this sleeping problem," Duncan started. "I—"

"Joe, please be serious. What are you going to do?"

"Throw a party, Marcia, maybe with Death as one of the guests and with skeletons from the closet as favors."

Marcia got up and began to clear off the table. She seemed a little nervous and Duncan could understand it. For a long time during the early hours of the morning, they had discussed all that had happened, and such conclusions as they had been able to reach hadn't been reassuring. A police broadcast had reported the death of Reudy and had charged Duncan as the man who had killed him. Duncan felt that he had a good defense for that charge, but it depended almost wholly on Holbrook's testimony. What Holbrook would say he wasn't sure.

The sounding of the apartment buzzer interrupted Duncan's thoughts. He glanced at his watch. It was just eight-thirty. Marcia came in from the kitchen. Her face looked a little strained.

"I guess they're beginning to arrive," Duncan stated. "Be a good girl, Marcia, and stay out in the kitchen."

Marcia shook her head. She pressed a button, releasing the electric lock down

stairs, and said to Duncan: "I'm not the kind of a woman to be kept in the kitchen. You might as well know that right now."

"But—"

Marcia crossed and opened the door. She looked down the hall and then drew back. Footsteps approached and she said: "Come on in, Mr. Holbrook."

Arthur Holbrook entered the room. The publisher looked as though he had spent a sleepless night. His eyes went at once to Duncan. "Where is it?" he demanded swiftly. "You told me—"

"I told you that I expected to have it at about eight-thirty," Duncan answered. "I think it'll be here in a few minutes."

Again the buzzer sounded.

"Who's that?" Holbrook demanded.

Duncan nodded at Marcia, and Marcia again pressed the button releasing the lock downstairs. "Maybe that's the man with the stuff," Duncan said to Holbrook.

Marcia again opened the door, and once more footsteps sounded down the hall. This time, however, two men appeared. One was Howard Chandler, the district attorney. The other was Underhill.

As they came into the room, Duncan could sense a stiffening in Holbrook's body. Holbrook was staring at the two men. There was hatred in his eyes.

"Suppose we all sit down," Duncan suggested.

Chandler shook his head. There was a tension about him, too. It showed in the lines of his face. It sounded in his voice as he said sharply: "What is this, Duncan? A joke?"

"No, not a joke. I think that I'll have the papers you want in a few minutes."

CHANDLER looked at Holbrook and then at Underhill. The tension didn't leave him. Holbrook was breathing heavily. Only Underhill seemed self-possessed. But in spite of that the atmosphere in the room was charged with emotion.

Marcia had closed the door and was leaning against it. Duncan looked at her and then at the three men. He said slowly: "While we're waiting for something which I expect to be brought to me, suppose I tell you a story. It starts out with Porky Meyers, a *News* reporter. He was

a good reporter. He had a faculty for doping things out which was remarkable.

"He was clever, too. So clever that in the end his cleverness cost him his life, for in some way or other, he got his hands on some papers which disclosed the identity of the man back of organized vice and crime in this city. He was killed for those papers, but the papers weren't found, and I guess that each one of you men thought that he had given them to me or that I might know where they were.

"Meyers hadn't given them to me, however. Instead, he had given them to a girl in whom he was interested, a girl who lived in the same apartment house. I suppose maybe he knew that he was in danger. At any rate, that's what he did with the papers."

The three men in the room were watching Duncan and watching each other, very closely. The tension had increased appreciably. Duncan had the feeling that he was sitting on the lid of a volcano which might erupt at any moment.

"That girl," he said suddenly, "is dead. Some one guessed that she might have had the papers, kidnapped her, tortured her and then killed her, trying to make her death look like suicide. But before they got her, the girl had disposed of the papers in a place where they couldn't easily be reached. I only figured out last night or rather early this morning, where they were.

"But before I go any further along that line, let me tell you why I asked all of you to come to this meeting. The reason is simple. All of you tried to buy those papers from me. Underhill, you offered money. Chandler, you tried fear, with a threat to frame me. And you, Holbrook, tried to work on my sympathy with a very effective story.

"Well, I don't need money, I'm not sympathetic and I'm not afraid of being framed. Those papers were mailed to me by the girl. This morning I called Mike O'Toole, told him the story. He went to see the postmaster. It took a hell of a lot of pull, but in some way or other Mike worked it. He's collected my mail and he's on his way here now. When he comes,

the four of us will examine the papers together."

Holbrook's shoulders slumped. Underhill and Chandler were scowling. Duncan lit a cigarette, studied each of the men. The thought came to him that if all the hate in this room could be collected it would be enough to start a European war. The air was alive with it. He recalled, now, his joke with Marcia, a joke about having Death as a guest. That might not turn out to be a joke.

A knock sounded on the door and all the men in the room swung to face it. Marcia opened the door. Outside stood Mike O'Toole. He held a flat, white envelope in his hand.

"Here it is, Joe," he said, entering the room.

Holbrook's hand jerked to his pocket, came out with a gun. The gun swung from side to side. Holbrook's face was gray. "I'll take that letter," he said through his teeth. "This may cost me my liberty, but no prison could be more of a hell than my life has been for the past two years. *Give me that letter!*"

Mike O'Toole handed the letter to Holbrook and Holbrook stuck it into his pocket. He started backing to the door. Duncan shot a glance at Underhill and Chandler. Underhill was moistening his lips. Chandler's skin was tight across his face. His eyes were half closed. One hand was poised above his pocket, was lowering. He was standing so that Holbrook couldn't see that hand. It dropped into his pocket, came out with a gun.

DUNCAN threw himself forward at Chandler's legs. He hit the man just as a gun roared above his head. Another shot sounded and then another. Chandler staggered back against the wall. His gun fell from his hand.

Looking up, Duncan saw Underhill throwing himself on Holbrook, fighting for Holbrook's gun. He saw Chandler sag to the floor. He got up. O'Toole was parting Underhill and Holbrook, and Underhill was saying: "He's finished, man. Snap out of it. You're safe now."

Chandler lay on the floor. His throat was bloody. O'Toole moved over to where

he lay, bent over him. Chandler's jaw moved but no words came past that wound in the throat. His eyes glazed, and standing up, O'Toole said: "Well, he's finished. But it'll save you trouble, Mr. Holbrook, if I take the blame for it. By this time, the commissioner's got a warrant out for his arrest."

Holbrook blinked. In a rather dazed fashion he said: "Then you knew that Chandler was the man back of the vice and racketeering?"

O'Toole nodded. "When we got that letter from the post office I opened it, took it to the police commissioner. I didn't want to risk bringing it here. There was plenty of information in it, names, addresses, records of safety deposit boxes and phony bank accounts, all the dope we needed, and all of it pointed to Chandler. By night we'll have the jails jammed and by tomorrow a grand jury will be in session."

"Then the envelope you brought here—"

"Was just an envelope. I decided I'd let you make your play."

Several policemen barged in the door, and O'Toole turned that way.

Holbrook came up to Duncan. He said slowly: "You're entitled to know this about me, Joe. What I said to you in the hotel was true. A long time ago I was arrested back in Missouri for a crime of which I was innocent. With three other men I broke jail. I got away, but the old charge still hangs over my head. Chandler found out about it from an old bulletin. He bled me white so far as money was concerned, then began dictating the policy of my paper. He told me to fire you because he didn't like the direction your column was taking."

Duncan nodded. He said: "I didn't even hear you."

"I'll expect you on the job as usual," said Holbrook.

Underhill was standing near him, and Underhill said: "My turn now. I once had a daughter. If she had lived she would be about Marcia's age. But my wife, one night, in a fit of anger, struck her—killed her." Underhill's voice low-

ered. He said huskily: "She wasn't even sorry for what had happened. She—she laughed about it. I couldn't stand it. I 'arranged' an accident and my wife was killed. Chandler knew. He held the threat to open the case over my head."

Duncan stared away from the haunted expression in Underhill's face. "I didn't hear you, either," he muttered.

O'Toole rejoined them. "I'm pretty sure," he told Duncan, "that Reudy killed Meyers and that blond, too. I worked on the case all last night after you and the girl walked out on me and Underhill. Some stuff we found in Reudy's pocket bears that out. He had some of the girl's jewelry. Besides, I've found a man who saw him hanging around your apartment. I suppose he stole your gun."

Duncan nodded. He could figure out all the rest. It had been Chandler's notion to frame him and to hold that over his head as a threat in order to make him hand over Meyers' papers. Chandler had had some one leave that note for him at the hotel. But very cleverly, Chandler hadn't shown his hand when he had had him brought to the house for he still wasn't sure who had Meyers' papers.

And Chandler had lied about Reudy. Reudy was still working for him. He should have guessed that when he had told Reudy that the papers were in his coat. Reudy knew they weren't. He must have known it because without doubt, he had been thoroughly searched at Chandler's house.

Duncan turned toward Marcia. The police were leaving, taking Chandler's body with them. Holbrook was already gone, and so was Dave Underhill. O'Toole called something but Duncan didn't hear him. Marcia, he saw, was still a little pale.

"Now about that sleeping matter," Duncan suggested, "so far as cots go—"

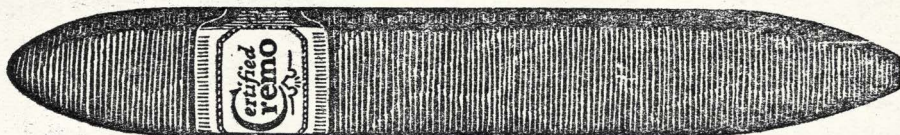
Color came back into the girl's face. She said a little shakily: "Joe, will you ever be serious. After all that's happened—"

"I am serious," Duncan answered. "Of course it will look better if we get married. Don't you think so?"

Marcia looked toward the kitchen. "How are you at washing dishes?"

"Fine," Duncan admitted.

"Come on then," said Marcia. "I'll give you a trial."



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Death's-Head Rendezvous

By Maurice Phillips

"When you're in stir," Cole Nesbit said, "you're as good as dead." Now Cole was out of stir. He was free, riding the broad highway to a new life, a new future. But the shackles of his past bound that future to an encounter with doom.

THEY gave him a drab, gray suit and a five-dollar bill and they shut the grilled gate behind him.

"You've been a good prisoner," the warden's words rang in his ears with the clang of the gate. "Don't ever let me see your face in here again."

"You won't," Cole Nesbit said.

He turned around and took one last look at the walled fortress that had held him prisoner for three long, painful years. Most men don't turn back for that last look. It's not a pleasant memory, and they'd rather face the unfettered expanse of freedom. But Cole Nesbit wanted to sear in his mind all that those walls and the sentries on watch atop them meant, so that if fate ever tempted him in the future, he'd remember.

Out in front a ways a black sedan waited, its motor idling. As Cole Nesbit came up, the front door swung open and he climbed in. For a fleeting second, as he sat down, his eyes dwelt on the figure of the slim, nattily dressed man at the wheel.

"Good of you to come, Hermie," he said.

"S nothing." Hermie waved his hand in a generous gesture. He engaged the clutch, started the car rolling. "As long as I'm on the outside looking in," he said in a flat voice, "I don't mind the pen at all." He laughed, as if he were surprised



The gun was thrust in his hand.

at his wit. He winked confidently at Cole. "I'm smart. I'll never know what it looks like on the inside."

Cole remained silent. After a while Hermie said:

"The boys'll be glad to see you."

Cole kept his eyes on the road. "Gotta cigarette?"

Hermie nodded his head in the direction of the door near Cole. "In the side pocket—a fresh pack."

Cole stuck his hand in the pocket. His fingers found a pack of cigarettes and a paper of matches. Before they withdrew, his fingers felt cold hard metal.

He tore the cellophane off slowly. The first drags of the cigarette he pulled deep down inside him, as if he hadn't smoked one in years.

Again Hermie nodded at the side pocket. "Something else in there for you."

Cole stuck his hand in. He knew what it was before he took it out.

Hermie laughed. "Pretty, eh?"

COLE looked at the gun in his hand for several moments. His jaw grew grim. "Did you think I was kidding," he said, "when I wrote you that I was finished? Didn't you read my letters?"

"Sure. Sure, Cole, I read 'em."

Cole put the gun back in the pocket. "Three years is a long time," he said. "A guy's got a lot of time to think in there, Hermie. I did my thinking already. I'm finished, Hermie . . . I mean it."

"Sure. Sure, Cole. You're smart your way, I'm smart my way. If you say you're finished, it's good enough for me."

A lot of the road was through country. Then they passed through a couple of small towns. It was summer and the windows of the sedan were down. Every time they hit a country road Cole breathed deep and he couldn't take his eyes off the farms and woods.

"You know, Cole," Hermie said, "for a smart guy like you, there's still plenty you can learn."

"Hermie—" Cole's voice was restrained but it had an edge to it—"I ain't ever gonna be shut up again. I drew a five-year rap, but I was on good behavior. I got to report to the parole board. If they stick me again, they're gonna stick me good. I'm finished."

"That ain't what I—"

"I don't want to talk about it . . . How's Marge?" He'd been wanting to ask about her the moment he saw Hermie, and now he couldn't hold back any longer.

Hermie hesitated. Cole lit another cigarette.

"She's written you how she is, hasn't she, Cole?"

"Sure. Sure she has. But if things went bad, she wouldn't want me to worry about her . . . Has she got money? Is she working? How does she look?"

Hermie hesitated, then said slowly: "She looks—she looks fine, Cole." He shot a glance at Cole, then turned his head away quickly, but not too quickly for Cole not to see.

Cole's head jerked up. "She's all right, isn't she, Hermie?"

Hermie nodded. "Sure." It came out slowly, in a long breath.

"Say it, Hermie. Say it." Cole's eyes hung on the road. "Is she—is she going around with another guy? Is she married?"

"Like you told me, Cole, I been keeping my eye on her."

"Answer me. *Answer* me, Hermie! Is she—married?"

Hermie didn't answer at once. Then: "No, she ain't married. Not exactly married, Cole."

Cole Nesbit felt the pale skin of his face draw taut. He didn't take his eyes off the road and yet he didn't see anything. The cigarette ripped apart in his fingers, and when he bent down to stamp out the lighted end he felt as if his forehead were in a vise. And then he heard Hermie's voice again.

". . . It ain't as if she was the only dame in the book, Cole. There's plenty of other— But that ain't what I was gonna tell you, Cole. It's this guy Ritter I wanted to tell you about. I been hearing things. You never would of got caught if somebody hadn't snitched. This guy Ritter, now—"

Cole waved him down. "I knew somebody had framed me," he said. "But I ain't so much interested in that now. Marge, now. Is she engaged—or what? Are you stalling, Hermie?" He caught

his voice or he knew he'd be shouting, and it put a knife edge on his words.

"This guy Ritter," Hermie said, "like I told you, is smart. He figured with you outta the way— Some people call it engaged if they want to. You and me, we been around, we don't care what they call it, we know it's—"

"Save it!" Cole snapped. "You don't have to talk any more."

They hit another town and then they were out on a country road again.

"When you're in stir," Cole said, "you're as good as dead." His voice was subdued, as if he was talking not to Hermie, or himself, but to the farms and the woods. "The only thing that keeps a man alive is if he's got something to live for. Somebody to get even with—or a woman to go back to . . . I knew somebody had framed me, but I didn't know why. But I was gonna forget I was framed. If they got me again, they'd stick me good. I didn't want any part of it. I was willing to forget it, planning to go straight. All I wanted was—"

HE caught himself, choked his words before they had a chance to get out of his heart and into his mind. His hands were clenched and his white knuckles showed still whiter. When he got his voice again it was under control.

"Do you know what a guy thinks about for three years, Hermie? For three years all I could see was Marge. Every place I turned, every dream I had, she was in it. When I sat down to the hash they served, I could see her serving me chops. In our own flat—when I'd come home from honest work. And now . . ."

His voice trailed off.

He stuck his hand in the pocket of the car. The gun lay heavy, destructive in his hand. He examined the cylinder, saw that it was loaded. His fingers curled around the butt, poised the weapon.

"How much more to go, Hermie?"

"'Bout thirty miles. We can do it in fifty minutes easy."

Cole put the gun back in the car pocket. "You know where Ritter would be when we get in?"

Hermie nodded. . . .

It was dusk when they hit town. Hermie drove to a fancy restaurant.

"After the hash they been slingin' at you, Cole, I figured you'd like to sink your teeth into a juicy steak. With all the trimmings."

"I don't want to eat. Where can I find Ritter?"

"Maybe you're jumping off the handle too fast, Cole. You don't want to do anything that'll send you back. Maybe a good meal will do you good. Think it over, huh? You know how to think real good now, huh?"

"Nuts!" Cole said, but he followed Hermie into the restaurant.

When they found a table, Hermie remained standing. "I want to make a coupla calls," he explained. "See where Ritter is."

He came back a few minutes later. Cole Nesbit hadn't ordered yet. Hermie ordered for both of them, but first he had a couple of ryes brought over.

When they'd finished their steaks, and washed them down with coffee, Hermie said: "Good. huh?" He looked at his watch. "How about another rye, Cole?"

"No. But if you want one, go ahead and have it."

"You were eatin' pretty fast, Cole. Maybe you better have one too."

Cole shook his head. Hermie ordered one, sipped at it. He looked up, saw Cole eyeing him, and then he put the rest of it down at a gulp.

"Let's go," he said.

When he paid the check he looked at the wad of bills in his hand. "That reminds me," he said. "You can't go very far on that fin, Cole. Here's fifty."

Cole looked at the bills a moment. Then he accepted them. "I'll pay you back as soon as I land a job," he said.

"Sure, sure. Take your time."

In the car Cole took the gun out of the side pocket, stuck it in his own pocket. "You think you know where Ritter is now?" he asked.

"I'm goin' there now," Hermie said. He looked at his watch. "You sure you wanna go through with it, Cole?"

Cole nodded.

Hermie nosed the car downtown. He crossed west and ran into some heavy traffic. After a while he got straightened out, and in a few minutes they drew up in front of a plain two-story house. It was entirely dark now.

"You sure you still want to go through with it?" Hermie asked.

"I'm sure, all right."

"Street floor. He's there now. You can see the lights."

Cole looked up the street, down the street, then across at the house. He took the revolver out of his pocket, watched the glint of it as it lay heavy in his hand.

"Three years," he muttered, his eyes hot on Hermie. "Three years—for nothing. I got nothing any more, Hermie."

Hermie looked at his watch. "I get the setup, Cole."

COLE shrugged his shoulders doubtfully. His eyes still hung on Hermie. "I never killed a man, Hermie. They'll get me good for this. Maybe I better not—"

"Marge is probably in there now," Hermie reminded him. "Three years, Cole. You ain't forgettin' . . .?"

Cole nodded. "I owe you fifty," he said. "That's all I want to owe you. You better beat it, Hermie."

Hermie looked at his watch. "And leave you without a getaway? I'll stick around . . . Better yet, I'll follow you in—in case I'm needed." He drew an automatic from a shoulder holster, examined the clip. He pulled back the slide, released it. Then he shoved the gun in his side pocket, kept his hand on it.

They got out of the car. Hermie closed the door softly; he'd left the key in the ignition, the motor humming softly.

Cole padded silently up the steps. Hermie followed him. In the vestibule, before he rang the bell, Cole whispered: "I been a wild kid, Hermie, but I never killed a man. I never even shot at a man before . . . I got hands. I'll beat him up, that's what."

He took the revolver from his pocket, forced it into Hermie's hands. He pressed the button. The latch clicked. Cole shoved the door open, stepped through. Across

the threshold he waited a second, and then Hermie followed him.

The inside was lighted, but Cole couldn't see anybody. A radio was sounding softly and then it was shut off altogether. Cole could feel a pounding in his chest, thought he even felt the thumping of his pulse in the wrist that hung knotted at his side.

He moved forward slowly, through a small dining room and into a small parlor. His eyes hung on Ritter, standing there in front of him, behind a small center table, hands exposed; and then they moved and he saw Marge, white-faced, white-lipped. He thought he could make out her lips forming a soundless, "Cole."

He felt like unclenching his fists and throwing his arms around her and drawing her close. But he stood there quietly, his eyes bitter, his body tense. What Hermie had said was true. She was here—with Ritter. All he had eyes for at that moment was Marge, yet he retained sight of Ritter, and the table, and the radio, and off in one corner a curtain hiding an alcove.

Everything was so quiet. Only the thumping and pounding of his heart that sounded louder now than the radio had sounded. It was too quiet. Somebody had to say something. No one stirred. Cole said:

"What have you got to say, Ritter?"

"What the devil are you talking about, Nesbit? What the hell do you mean breaking in here like this?"

Cole turned his eyes to Marge. "What have you got to say, Marge?" he asked.

"Cole," she said, and the way she said it, low, husky, made him almost forget the three years, Ritter, Hermie behind him, with the two guns now in his pockets. "Cole, what are you doing? Why do you come back like this, with murder in your eyes? After what you promised—after what you said we were going to do together?"

Cole should have shoved the table away now, smashed his fists into Ritter. Marge had seen in his eyes what he was going to do, and she was stalling so Ritter could get out of it. She didn't know that he didn't have a gun now. He should

let Ritter have it now, but the way she said it

"Cole!" It was Hermie. "Cole, you gonna let them talk you out of it? Those three years—for what? Here's Marge—here's your proof. Take him, Cole!"

Cole heard a movement behind him. His eyes were on Marge when he felt the revolver being thrust into his hand. Marge's eyes were staring; her mouth was wide open but no sound came from it.

BEHIND him he heard Hermie curse, felt hot breath on his neck. He whirled quickly, instinctively, thrust his gun into Hermie's belly.

"Drop it, Hermie," he said.

He watched Hermie's eyes, but he saw Hermie's hand lower, saw the automatic drop.

"Now," Cole said, "we're gonna get the whole story. You tell your story, Marge. . . . You bat an eye, Hermie, and I'll let you have it."

"All I know," Marge said, "is that Hermie called me up and told me to come here at exactly eight-thirty I didn't know you were—coming out today, Cole."

"I wanted to surprise you," Cole said. "Hermie was the only one I wrote it to But what about you and Ritter?"

Marge gasped. "Me and Ritter?" She laughed, a little hysterically. "Is that the reason you came here with murder in your eyes, Cole?"

Cole nodded. Marge laughed again, but the note of hysteria was gone.

"Nothing, Cole," she said. "There's absolutely nothing between me and Ritter. Except" She looked at Hermie.

"Except what?" Cole prompted.

"Cole," she said, "keep cool while I tell you. Hermie was always pestering me, and one day I told him how things stood between you and me, and he said if anything happened to you, would he have a chance. To get rid of him, I said yes. And then, after you had—gone away—I learned from Ritter that Hermie had

something to do with your being sent up I was willing to forget about it because you promised you were going straight. And I didn't want you to get mixed up in anything."

Cole said: "Is that right, Ritter?"

"Sure."

Cole nodded. "Your word was always good with me, Marge." His eyes swerved back to Hermie. "Two birds with one stone, eh, Hermie? I'm out of the way for good—and Ritter can't ever tell how you framed me. I smelled something the way you kept stalling, Hermie, and I was pretty sure I was right when you didn't take the shortest cut here from the restaurant. Outside, I stalled *you*. You weren't sure that I'd go through with it, so you came in here. And when you stuck the gun in my hand— You were altogether too anxious, Hermie And I suppose you arranged to have a dick here, too?"

"That's right," a voice said, and a man stepped out from behind the alcove curtain. Headquarters was spelled all over him, and in his hand a Police Positive was centered on Hermie.

"I'm Rafferty," he said as he clicked the bracelets on Hermie. "You don't have to worry about the parole board," he told Cole. "I heard and saw the whole thing. I saw him shove the gun in your hand."

He smiled. "I guess we both were too smart for him. He phoned headquarters and said you were going to gun this Ritter guy at exactly a quarter to nine. I was supposed to wait outside and stop you as you came to the house. But Hermie had it timed that you'd be in the house already, and when I'd hear the shot and run in, it would be all over, and I'd have you red-handed."

He took off his hat, scratched his head. "I'm pretty smart," he repeated. "I came here earlier than I was supposed to But I'll be damned if I knew who I was gonna shoot at when Hermie stuck that gun in your hand and took out his own gun. Lucky you took the play in your own hands."

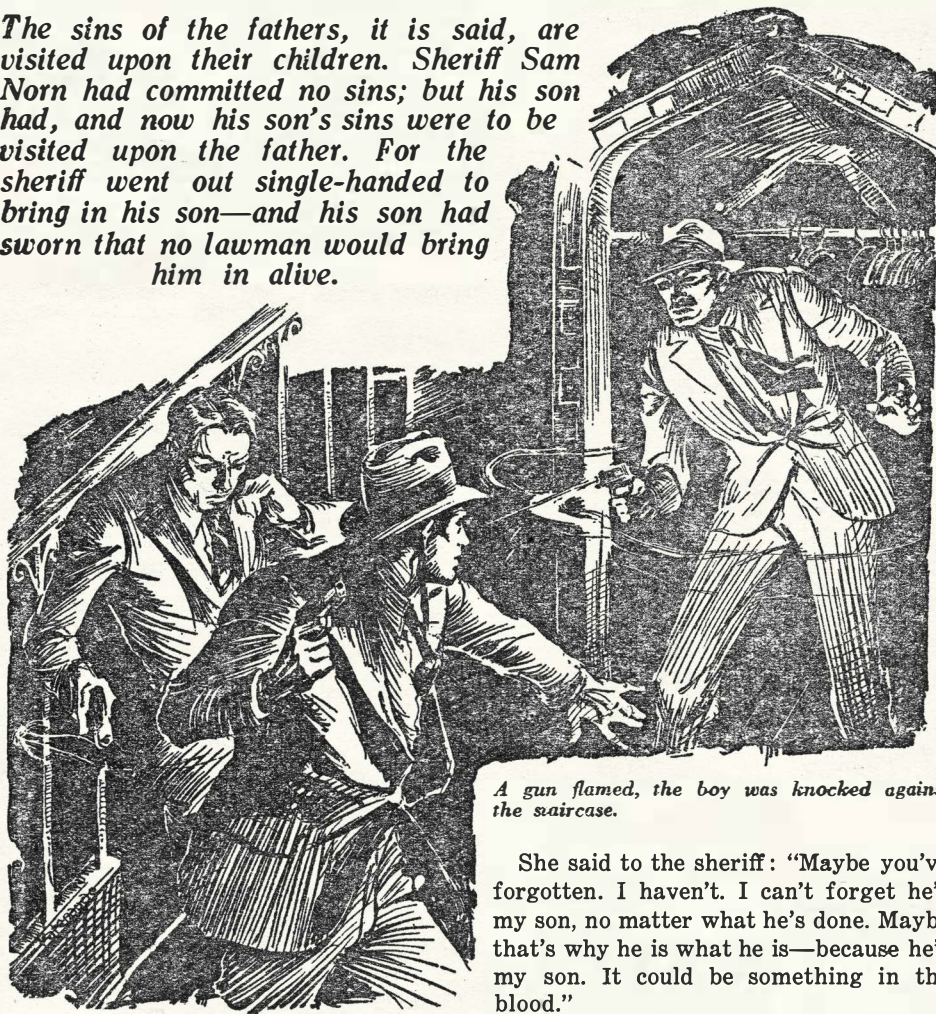


His Son to Hang

By G. T. Fleming-Roberts

Author of "The Devil's Okay," etc.

The sins of the fathers, it is said, are visited upon their children. Sheriff Sam Norn had committed no sins; but his son had, and now his son's sins were to be visited upon the father. For the sheriff went out single-handed to bring in his son—and his son had sworn that no lawman would bring him in alive.



A gun flamed, the boy was knocked against the staircase.

She said to the sheriff: "Maybe you've forgotten. I haven't. I can't forget he's my son, no matter what he's done. Maybe that's why he is what he is—because he's my son. It could be something in the blood."

The sheriff said nothing endlessly. He hadn't said anything since she had entered the office except to whisper her name as though the name itself was something that hurt him to hear. He kept pressing his hands flat against the desk top. His palms were sweaty and stuck to the desk. He kept looking at his hands. It was as though to avoid looking at something else.

THE WOMAN in the sheriff's office was nearly forty. Gray of ash was scarcely noticeable in her permanented, blonde hair. Her eyes had too small green irises, but were pretty because the lashes were long and curled. She kept pulling at porous, white gloved fingers nervously, neither taking her gloves off nor putting them on.

"If it hadn't been that I couldn't forget that he's my son, I wouldn't have come here," she said. "You've got to believe that, because when we parted fifteen years ago and I said I'd never see you again, I meant what I said. You don't owe me anything, understand. Nothing good, anyway. I was rotten to you."

It was very quiet in that room in the courthouse basement. And quite gloomy. The sky outside wanted to rain badly. Air that came through the high-placed windows carried the stench of a sweating city.

"What do you want me to do?" the sheriff asked.

"Do?" she cried. On the other side of the desk, she got half out of her chair and then dropped back to throw her bare arms full length across the desk, her gloved fingers clasped into white knots that resembled a tangle in somebody's clothes line.

"Do?" she sobbed. "You know Jerry. You must know him, even though—"

"Though I have had little opportunity," he concluded hoarsely. He was thinking. "Together we might have saved him all this." He raised his eyes to find her head lowered so that he met only the crown of her small brown hat and its corona of silvery blonde hair.

"You must have looked on," she said. "You must have seen him growing up. You must have seen more than I saw, because I wasn't a good mother. It's all my fault. And I taught him to hate you, too. That's my way. Selfish."

She raised her head a little. Her fingers unknotted. One hand fluttered for a moment like a white butterfly, then dipped to his wide-spread hand only to be quickly withdrawn.

"Forgive me, Sam," she breathed. It was a very hard thing for her to say even in a whisper.

He said nothing.

"I've got to tell you about him," she said. "He's not really bad. You—you must know his criminal record. I know how uncompromising a criminal record is. You must know how reckless and desperate he is. You must, because he's like you that

way. But he's a bluffer. You're a bluffer, too, Sam. I never knew it until right now."

She laughed and the laugh caught somewhere in her throat, choking. Her tears glimmered. "You're a bluffer, Sam. You're really not hard. You're going to help him." She repeated this last, adding a doubtful rising inflection.

The sheriff stared at his hands.

"You are going to help him, aren't you, Sam? You'll help my son. You'll help our son?"

HIS EYES winced. They were small eyes with wrinkled lids. He had a large head with thick, white hair. His face looked like that of a man who had been beaten down. Not beaten up. Down.

"A thief," he muttered, "several times over. A murderer now. You ask me to help him. For the first time you ask me to help him."

"For his sake," she said. "Not mine."

"For your sake, too," he contradicted. "You just don't want it to look as though you were begging. You're too proud to beg. When we were divorced, you took him away from me. You could bring him up so much better than I. Well?"

He lifted his hands slightly from the desk, like lids from a box as though he were showing her the result of her upbringing of their son.

"I admit all that," she said. "I'll admit anything. Only not all that he knows was my teaching. He must have learned much elsewhere." Her lips became bitter. "In the reformatory, for instance. I can't believe he's a killer. Do you remember him crying when you killed a mouse in our kitchen once?"

"Time makes many a man callous," he said. "If he didn't kill Joel McCarthy in that tavern brawl, why did he run?"

"He was drunk," she said. "He may have thought he killed McCarthy. And that girl helped him escape—remember that. Don't you see? His senses were mixed by the drinks he had. After the shooting, he was dazed. The girl held the back door open, told him to run for it. He ran. He didn't have time to think."

"The city police have been watching the

girl," the sheriff said. "They thought she'd lead them to Jerry's hideout."

He stopped. His eyes returned again to his hands on the desk top. Jerry—the name sounded strange because Jerry went by another name now. He was known as "Spike." Probably the only persons who knew that Spike Brisko was Sheriff Sam Norn's son were in this room.

"Do you know," he asked, "what Jerry said to the girl before she shoved him from the tavern door? You don't, of course. It didn't get into the papers. He told the girl that no one would ever take him alive. He said he'd shoot it out with any lawman who ever cornered him."

"He's a bluffer, Sam," she said. "Like you. Answer just one question. Are you going to help him?"

His shaggy, white head nodded slowly. "Do you know where he is?"

The woman drew a long, quivering breath. "Yes. He phoned me this afternoon. Here—"

She fumbled with the clasp of her purse, got it open, removed a torn corner from an envelope. He could see that the side of the paper toward him carried part of a grocery list. She had always written her grocery lists on envelopes that had come to the house bearing advertising matter.

She started to hand the scrap of paper to him, jerked back her hand to her breast where her gloved fingers knotted tightly over the paper.

"Sam, you wouldn't double-cross me? You wouldn't send your men after him?"

He laughed then, mirthlessly. "Send my boys to be murdered by my own son? Maybe it's old-fashioned, but I still think that parents are responsible largely for what their children do. No, I won't send my men."

She extended the paper to him. He snatched it, read *Closter's Place* in his wife's handwriting. No sooner had she relinquished the paper than she was knifed by an afterthought. She gasped. Her gloved right hand closed upon his fist. Her fingers looked very small, closed on his fist.

"Sam, how are you going to help him?"

FOR A LONG MOMENT he stared steadily into her eyes. Then he said slowly, huskily: "The hard way. It's the way he's never been helped before. It'll be hard for him. Harder for me. I'm going to turn him in."

Her jaw dropped. Then her teeth closed with an audible snap. She stood up. She was taller and straighter than he had ever seen her. Defiance swelled her bosom. Scorn smouldered in her green eyes.

"You'd do that?" she whispered. "After what you've said? You'd turn your law hounds loose on him?"

He spoke very quietly and without inflection. "No. I intend to go for him myself. Alone. I cannot risk another man's life on a job that is entirely my own. I don't shift responsibilities. Neither do I bluff."

"I see," she said. "I thought you were that kind. I knew it all along." She forced a laugh to cover a sob that swelled in her throat. "Save yourself the trouble. I was testing you. That isn't where Jerry is. Closter's Place has been deserted for nearly a year. You ought to have known that. He isn't there. I was testing you, understand?"

"Yes," he said. "I understand."

She turned slowly, walked to the door of the office. She opened the door. The door closed behind her. He could hear her steps on the stone stair leading from the courthouse basement—steps that started to hurry noisily and then dragged, but more noisily, making him hear how slowly she walked.

Sheriff Sam Norn whipped a telephone from its cradle on his desk. It communicated with his deputies' office.

"Gilbert?" he questioned. "There's a woman leaving the courthouse. Blond hair graying, small brown hat. A—pretty woman. About five feet four. About a hundred and twenty. Green eyes. You can't miss her. Follow. Of course you can't arrest her. There's no charges. Just do what I say." He hung up.

He unclenched his right fist. The crumpled bit of paper that bore his ex-wife's shopping list and the words *Closter's Place* flurried to the floor. Closter's wouldn't be deserted. It had been

half burned some time ago. Some of its windows were boarded up, others were broken.

But it wasn't deserted. Jerry was there alone, hiding. His mother would try to warn him. That was her way. Years ago it had been the same, whenever Jerry needed punishing. "Jerry, Dad's coming with a switch. Run, Jerry . . ."

He wasn't Jerry now. He was Spike. He had broad shoulders and almost no hips. Short, greasy ropes of black hair parted in the middle of his head and hung down. He had a large nose, like his dad. He had small eyes like his dad's, except that they peered at you like vicious little animals from cavernous eye sockets set close together. His mouth—well, it wasn't *his* mouth. It was the universal mouth that the reformatory and the prison graduated, lopsided from talking "away from the screws." That was Spike Brisko, the sheriff's son.

Sheriff Sam Norn had disowned his son, or so he had thought up to now. Now he knew you can't disown a son. Whether it was Spike or Jerry, he knew he couldn't disown him. It was his responsibility. If Spike Brisko had been anybody else, any other rat in a hole, Sam Norn would have sent deputies to smoke him out. But not his son. Spike had said he'd never be taken alive.

That didn't mean suicide. It meant Spike would shoot it out with whoever cornered him. If the sheriff sent Gilbert or Henderson or any of his other men and one of them got killed, that made Sam Norn the killer. If your car knocks down a man, you are responsible. If your dog bites somebody—well, it was like that with the sheriff and his son. He couldn't dodge that responsibility.

OUT of that leaden sky the dusk came swiftly, and in the thicket of willow and ghostly sycamore that edged the creek half a mile from the hard road, the dusk was night. Summer night, noisy with the ceaseless saw of insects and the occasional splashing of a fish in the turbid water of the creek.

The sheriff moved with silent swiftness toward the clearing where Closter's

Place was approached by snakes of ruddy road overgrown with weeds. What was left of the clubhouse had been the north wing, its plaster walls tinged brown in spots by fire, like a carelessly colored meerschauum. The door he approached had been a door between the two wings before the fire. It hadn't been made to take much weather. Its finish was scaly and the veneered panels blistered.

Where the branch of a willow stooped to the ground, the sheriff came to a sudden halt. Clods of baked earth on the road to his left rolled under his heel. The sheriff clutched the willow branch to him and peered at shadows through the foliage.

A man was approaching the clubhouse along the road. He was a tall, stooped silhouette, standing apart from the shadows because of his light suit. It looked as if he had his right hand in his hip pocket. Forty feet from the front of the house he stopped. His left hand went up to his face, massaged his jaw thoughtfully. The man in gray was Bronson, a detective on the city squad. He was looking the house over carefully.

Evidently he decided, as the sheriff had, that the easiest entrance was that door that connected north and south wings, for he was moving cautiously toward where the sheriff was concealed. The sheriff took out his revolver and gripped it by its awkward length of barrel.

He knew Bronson. An impulsive young daredevil and a good cop. Bronson was way out of the city limits. He had no authority here. He was probably playing a private hunch, risking everything to bring back a killer. A killer—the sheriff swallowed hard.

He let go of the willow branch and it swung aside, its trailing twigs whispering through the grass. Another instant and he'd lay his gun butt on Bronson's head, hammer the young fool down to safety. Then he'd go it alone for that son of his. Nobody else was going to take the slugs from Spike Brisko's gun.

But the detective did the unexpected. His mind made up, no longer wary, he turned and made straight for the door. He had taken no more than half a dozen

steps when the door of the old clubhouse opened a crack and the blackness within was slashed by the orange-red knives of gun flame.

Two shots hammered into Bronson's body. He spun half a turn to the right, hands going up above his head, then plunged downward into the tall grass. It was as though he had vanished into thin air. The door of the clubhouse closed.

For fully a minute, the sheriff stood there in the shadows, his brain a sluggish thing that hurt him. Somewhere, hidden in the grass in front of him, was the undeniable proof that his son was a murderer. And he, Sheriff Sam Norn, was the father of a murderer.

The sheriff's knees sagged under him. He dropped into the grass and crawled slowly toward the spot where Bronson lay. He smelled blood before he found Bronson. The dick was gulping air that seemed to leak out of his lungs faster than he could take it in. When the sheriff touched him, his body jerked defensively. He groaned an oath.

"It's Sam Norn," the sheriff whispered. "He get you bad?"

Maybe the sound that came from Bronson's throat was a laugh. He said: "Hell no! I'm just dying." And then he was too busy breathing to say anything else for a moment. "Got a tip from his girl," he forced out, "that he was coming out here to get—to get—"

Pain-tortured muscles in the dick's body squirmed and then only fluttered. He seemed suddenly to rest a lot easier. The sheriff raised himself to his knees. He was shaky. He had trouble finding the thumb catch on his revolver. When he found it, he pressed it down, broke the gun and closed it again quickly. He was afraid of himself.

He got to his feet and moved back within the shadows of the willows, stayed in the shadows until he found a window where a pane was broken jaggedly from the frame. Then he moved in quickly toward the window. Inside himself he quivered.

He reached through the break in the glass. His fingers found a rusty latch. His fingers weren't strong any more;

they fumbled at the latch as though they were frozen. But they kept fumbling until he had pushed the catch over. He raised the sash, rested his hands on the sill, vaulted up.

He jammed his left knee against the edge of the window frame, pulled up his right leg, rested his right hip on the sill. Then he screwed himself around and thrust his feet down to the floor. He stood up, panting—panting because his heart was beating like a trip-hammer made of lead.

FOR A MOMENT he stood there, his eyes shut against darkness that was total. When he opened his eyes again, he found he could see quite well by the ghostly gray light that passed through the window.

He was in a fairly large room with a stairway leading upward. There was a small alcove to the right with a counter stretched across it, almost entirely separating it from the room itself. When Closter's Place had been a local bright spot the alcove had served as a check room. There was impenetrable darkness in the alcove, and there was motion, too. The sheriff drew his gun.

A man moved from the alcove, at first only a moving shadow among motionless shadows. Then, as the figure crossed a slanting pillar of gray light from the window, it became a tall, square-shouldered silhouette like a cubist painting that exaggerated the long curved line of nose and the angular jut of an automatic. The sheriff's numb fingers managed to get out a flashlight. Its white beam jabbed ruthlessly, pinned the figure to the wall like a butterfly to a cork board.

"Put up your hands, Jerry," the sheriff heard his own voice say. "I've got you covered."

The little eyes that were like beasts in caves, snarled silently at the light. The automatic in Brisko's hand trained along the line of light from the sheriff's flash. One corner of the boy's mouth said: "Maybe you didn't hear what I said I'd do to any damned snooping lawman who got me in a spot. Maybe you thought I was kiddin' yuh, huh?"

The flashlight quivered a little. "No," the sheriff said. "I didn't think you were kidding. That's why I came alone. Only you don't shoot it out. You kill without warning, like you did Bronson a minute ago. It won't be like that now, Jerry. I'm ready for you."

The boy who called himself Spike Brisko sprang sideways out of the ray of light. The light followed relentlessly, picked out the hunted man as he was edging along the counter, working toward the stair. His automatic was dead level on the sheriff's heart.

"Jerry," the sheriff said hoarsely. "It's Dad."

Spike Brisko shook his head. Ropes of black hair tumbled across his face. He snarled: "I got no dad. All right. You say I killed that snoopin' dick. I'll finish you the same way."

Fingers of his left hand found the stair rail. He felt with his feet for the lower step.

The sheriff took a step toward his son. "Maybe you can do that, Jerry," he said. "Maybe you can disown your father. But a father can't disown a son. It won't work both ways. That's why I'm here alone. Bronson didn't come with me, understand. I came alone."

Spike sneered. "Big stuff! Like hell you came alone. You haven't the guts."

"I hadn't the guts to bring any one with me, Jerry. If I'd have brought anybody with me and you had killed him, I'd have felt responsible, see? Bronson came here acting on a tip from your girl."

An expression that was something like a shadow flitted across Brisko's face. "The dick's a liar. I got no girl."

"The girl that helped you get out of the tavern the night you gunned McCarthy?"

Spike Brisko leaned forward, his eyes narrowed to slits. "She said I gunned McCarthy? *Gunned* him?"

"I don't know what she said. Bronson died before he could get it all out. Didn't you kill McCarthy?" The sheriff's eyes wavered; his eyelids flickered. A new thought had come to him.

Suppose Jerry hadn't killed McCarthy. Suppose he had thought he had killed

McCarthy. Suppose the law had hounded him into a hole for a crime he hadn't committed, forced him into shooting Bronson. Aside from the murder rap, the boy could have paid for his crimes with a six- or eight-year stretch with time off for good behavior. But murder—the death of a cop like Bronson—

The sheriff's thick-set body wavered. He gripped his revolver as though it were something that would hold him erect. He blinked and saw the face of the hunted man clearly again.

"I finished McCarthy because he was a rat," the boy was saying. "He was a gyp card player. I slugged him with a booze bottle. If the girl said I gunned him—"

He stopped. His loose lower lip hung open from set teeth. His small eyes glimmered. "By hell, I see now! Of all the dirty—"

He stopped, gulped. His eyes filmed, then squinted.

THE SHERIFF took an eager step forward. His son's automatic jutted inches forward to meet him, to form that impassable barrier between them.

"Jerry, you got to come back with me. You got to tell it all. You got to face the music. You got to learn this lesson the hard way. Jerry!" His voice pleaded.

The kid shook his head. "None of your rotten traps. The bait you use smells of fish. I had all the justice I want once before. I said nobody would take me alive. You think I'm kiddin'? What I'm doin' now is givin' you a break. You get the hell out of here before I turn on this roscoe."

The sheriff didn't say anything. His own revolver tilted upward and centered on the kid's middle. His gun didn't tremble because he wasn't afraid of his gun. The kid was giving him a break.

And why? He'd shot Bronson without waiting to see who he was shooting at. Why hadn't he knocked off the sheriff the same way? He would have had plenty of time before he had found out who was in the room with him.

There was a lump in the sheriff's throat, formed with words he dared not utter. He could pull strings; he could

twist the law. If Jerry didn't kill McCarthy, maybe the sheriff could find a fall guy for the Bronson job. He could square the filling station robberies Jerry had pulled off. Insurance companies would be glad to dicker on a deal to cover their losses for the couple of cars Jerry had swiped—all this was locked in the lump in the sheriff's throat.

He denied the words utterance, with a shake of his head that Jerry never would interpret. The sheriff wasn't thinking of ethics. He was thinking of his son—the kid who had to learn his lesson the hard way, even if the gallows was his teacher.

He spoke around the lump in his throat. "I'm taking you back, Jerry." And at the same time he dropped his flashlight, sprang, left hand outstretched in an effort to clutch the automatic in the kid's hand.

The kid was like his dad, fast moving, but lighter built. He had his gun just beyond the sheriff's reach as the sheriff tried to jump it. The automatic cracked twice, the angry blast from its muzzle searing the sheriff's cheek. And then the kid backstepped, gripped the bannister with one hand and kicked with his right foot to the sheriff's chin.

The sheriff got his chin out of the way, grabbed for the kid's outflung foot. His fingernails ripped across the cloth of the kid's trouser leg. The kid jumped up a couple of steps, vaulted over the bannister.

The sheriff wheeled. In the well of dark on the other side of the staircase, gun flame flared. A slug slivered the stair rail. Another shot. He saw his son knocked back against the stair, his tall silhouette crumpling over like a doll cut from flimsy paper. And across the room was another man who crouched, a smoke-breathing gun in his hand.

He couldn't see the face of the man with the smoking gun. He knew that it didn't matter. He simply knew that he had seen his son shot down; that a man fights for his son no matter what his son has done. He scarcely realized his own helplessness, thought little of the worthless weapon in his hand. Because he had been afraid of what he might do, he had

ejected the cartridges in its cylinder before entering the house.

The sheriff simply raised his empty revolver, flung it at the head of the man with the smoking gun, flung himself in the same direction. He met gun blast and a slug that hammered into his side. The impact rocked him back on his heels. The pain blinded him.

He lurched forward. A hot gun barrel grazed the tip of his nose. He caught the man's gun wrist in both hands, thrust upward. At the same time he kicked at the man's knees with his right foot.

They went down together. The sheriff felt the hot breath of his opponent explode against his cheek as they hit the floor. He partially released his hold on the man's gun arm, let go with his right fist time after time at the man's head until his fist was like an unfeeling club that kept punching, breaking itself against a man's face. He seemed to keep punching even when there was no more strength in his arms, even when an abysmal darkness eclipsed his senses. . . .

WHEN Sheriff Sam Norn came to in the hospital, Bob Henderson, one of his deputies, was leaning over his bed, grinning.

"How's it feel?" Henderson asked.

The sheriff blinked. Lying flat on his back, bandages tight across his middle, he couldn't say that he felt much of anything. Weak, perhaps.

"You lost quite a little blood," Henderson said, "but the doc says you'll be all right in a couple of weeks. Well, I guess this clinches the next election. You're a public hero. But that was a hell of a risk to run, tackling a guy like Spike Brisko with an empty gun. They found the cartridges from your gun alongside of the city dick, Bronson."

Henderson winked. "I gave the story to the papers and made it good. I guess you knew this Brisko kid wasn't such a tough egg, huh? The story about the McCarthy and Bronson killings won't break into print until your heroism angle soaks into Johnny Public. How'd you figure it?"

"Figure what?" the sheriff asked dazedly.

Henderson chuckled. "I meant about the Brisko kid not killing McCarthy and Bronson. We got the slugs out of McCarthy and Bronson and they matched. They also matched the markings in the barrel of Vin Rayburn's gun."

The sheriff closed his eyes. His eyeballs burned beneath his lids. He was thinking: "Jerry didn't do it. And now it's too late . . ."

"You act like this was all news to you," Henderson said. "This is the way it stacks up. This Spike Brisko and the card shark, McCarthy, got into a bottle-tossing scrap. While they were scrapping, this Vin Rayburn gunned McCarthy. McCarthy had been fooling around with Rayburn's girl and Rayburn had been laying for him.

"The noise of the bottle brawl pretty well masked the shot, and when the smoke cleared away there was nobody in the room but the dead McCarthy, Rayburn's girl and young Brisko. Brisko looked like the likely candidate for the murder rap, and he was too drunk to know but what he really had done it. What he really thought was that he had bonged McCarthy on the head with a bottle.

"Rayburn's girl shoved Brisko out of the door and told him to lam, to complete the frame. Then tonight Rayburn got worried for fear the city cops or maybe us fellows from the county office would get hold of Brisko and Brisko would have had time to think over what had happened, and put the blame where it belonged.

"So that's why Rayburn went out to Closter's where Brisko was hiding—to shut Brisko up. Bronson, the city dick, tailed Rayburn, and Rayburn plugged

him. Rayburn plugged you and Brisko—but say, were you there or was it somebody else?"

The sheriff opened his eyes. The whiteness of the room hurt. But he had to look Henderson squarely in the eyes now. "And Je—and Brisko?" he asked. "Where is he now?"

"In the room next to yours," Henderson said. "He's nicked in the shoulder. Not bad, though. After you'd knocked Rayburn out, Brisko lugged you to a filling station half a mile up the road and phoned from there.

"I told Brisko that after saving you—the sheriff—from bleeding to death, the judge will probably go mighty easy on him for his filling station holdups. Brisko's a little cracked, though, because he said he didn't want a light sentence. Said he wanted to learn the hard way. He may be just bluffing, though. There's a lot of bluff in that guy.

"And we got Rayburn, too. He confessed when we showed him that young Brisko just couldn't be the killer."

"Why not?" the sheriff insisted hoarsely.

"Why, because of the ballistics proof," Henderson said. "That automatic Brisko has been using for holdups cost four bucks and is chambered for blank cartridges only. It's a scare gun, that's all."

"I guess his mother knew him better than I did," the sheriff said. "She said he was all bluff."

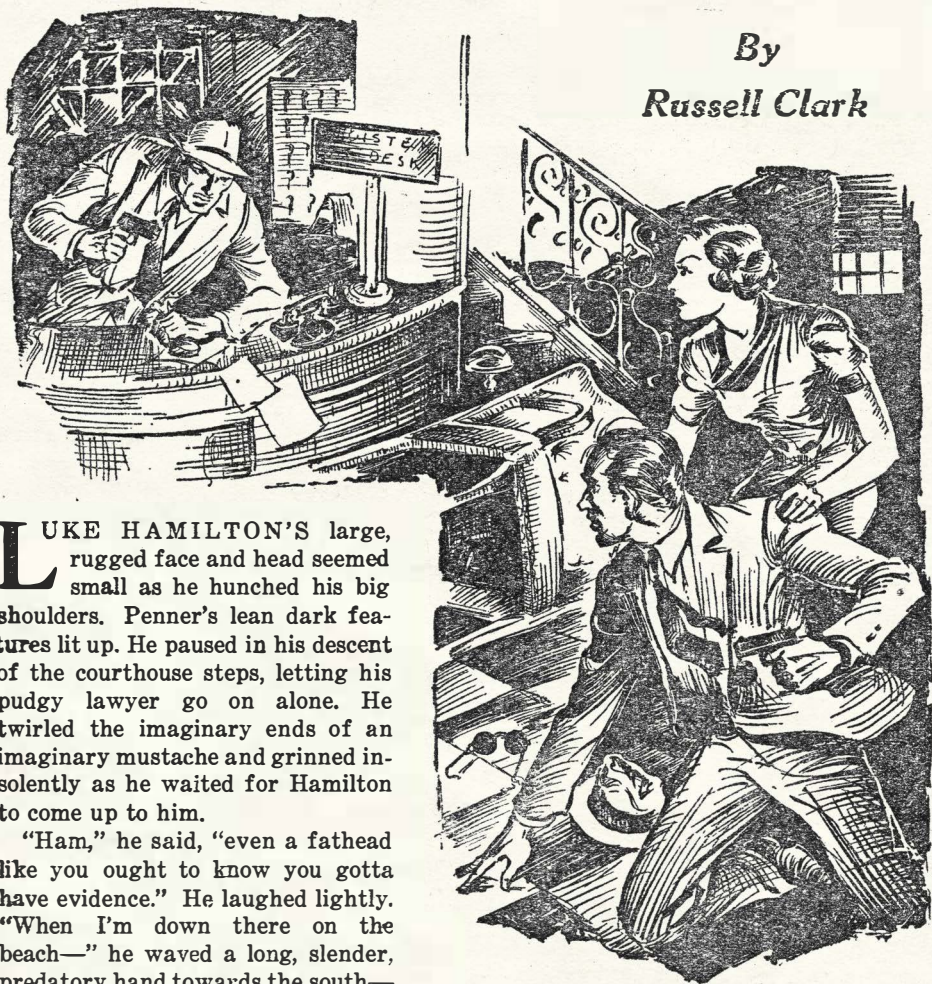
Henderson raised his eyebrows. "You knew his mother?"

"Yeah," said the sheriff. "She was my wife."



Jail-Bait Joker

When Carse Penner removed the witness who could testify against him, Private dick Luke Hamilton decided to try a daring plan. He was going to open on a bluff—and use a strange kind of joker. But he couldn't foresee that Luck would deal the last hand—with a joker running wild.



By

Russell Clark

LUKE HAMILTON'S large, rugged face and head seemed small as he hunched his big shoulders. Penner's lean dark features lit up. He paused in his descent of the courthouse steps, letting his pudgy lawyer go on alone. He twirled the imaginary ends of an imaginary mustache and grinned insolently as he waited for Hamilton to come up to him.

"Ham," he said, "even a fathead like you ought to know you gotta have evidence." He laughed lightly. "When I'm down there on the beach—" he waved a long, slender, predatory hand towards the south—"playing with the cute little beacherinos, I'll think of you, Ham." His black eyes glittered. "And hope you freeze, you bum."

Luke Hamilton's eyes were two blue icicles that matched the cold blue sky

over which gray clouds were massing. "So very kind of you, Carse," he said. "Get out of town," he roared. "You've bumped off the last witness for me you're ever—"

"Yeah?" Penner prompted.

Luke Hamilton rubbed a big, straight nose with a stubby thumb and glanced reflectively at the other man. "Take your hand out of your pocket, Carse. You're too smart to pull that on the courthouse steps."

Hamilton grinned. "Think how the beacherinos would miss you. And it don't bluff me a bit. I know how you feel, Carse. As long as I'm alive—yeah?" he turned abruptly and plunged down the steps to a small sedan by the curb.

He drove swiftly to the tall building in which he had his office, The Hamilton Detective Agency.

"One thing," he muttered to himself as he locked his filing cabinet, covered his typewriter, fastened the windows, and let himself out the door, locking it. "I got no employees to spill the dirt." He trudged to the elevator and pressed the button. "And my client says get Penner dead or alive. But get him legal."

He got into the car. "If you was stepping out," he asked the elevator girl, "would you rather go yipee in a strange burg, or in the old home town?"

THE GIRL stopped the car between two floors and turned burning brown eyes on him. "My name," she said, "is Annabelle Lee, believe it or not. I'm an orphan. I'm single. I work at this job because eating has become a habit. The show I was legging in flopped in Kalamazoo. I—"

"Listen, sister, I was just kid—"

"I understand there are about two billion people," she went on in a nice voice, ignoring his interruption, "in this world. Strain them through a sieve. You'd be surprised at the freaks you'd shake out. I look nice. I talk nice. I can wear nice clothes. But—"

"You got a queer line, kid. Still—"

"Nevertheless, I'm one of the freaks."

She tapped a small head of shining bobbed black hair. "The quirk is in here. In the three days that I've been piloting this vertical ark I've learned more about you than your mother'd ever guess. Show—"

Luke's fair skin reddened as he gaped at her. "Listen—"

"Show me the hamburgers," she went on, "and I'll go yipee with you anywhere you say."

"With or without onions?" Luke couldn't resist asking.

"Since I don't neck," she retorted, "make it onions."

He glanced at her shapely figure in the cute, knee-length uniform, and sighed. "It looks like a waste of—er—talent. Not to neck, I mean. But you've given me an idea, Annabelle Lee." He rubbed his big nose thoughtfully. "And as you say, the world has a generous sprinkling of freaks. It's not for me to ask the reason why." He nodded his big head in decision. "I'll play the cards I'm dealt."

"That means," she said, grasping the control handle as the buzzer snarled, "you're going to open on a bluff and use me as the joker running wild."

Luke Hamilton's heart warmed. His blue eyes sparkled in admiration. "Sister, you've got *umph*."

"I hate crooks," she said bitterly. "Crooks made me an orphan. When I was a kid." Her eyes flamed. "Try being an orphan and a girl once. I mean, try it down by the railroad tracks."

"I get you, Annabelle," he said gently. "You develop sharp little claws, and eyes in the back of your head—if you stay straight."

"I'm twenty-three and still straight," she said, and dropped the car with a speed that made his stomach quiver.

Two floors down, a fat man with a sagging, whining mouth got in. He leered at her with piggish eyes. "Times must be hard," he sneered, "when you gotta date 'em in a public elevator."

"This may be foolish," Luke growled, suddenly white hot, "but it's a genuine pleasure." He slapped the fat man with a big open hand. The fellow slumped as if struck with a club.

The girl stopped at the ground floor and took a jacket and a dinky hat from a hook in the car. She looked at the unconscious mass of blubber on the floor.

"You've made it necessary to start buying my hamburgers from this minute on," she said calmly. "When Carse Penner hears that his mouthpiece took the

count for making a simple iittle wisecrack at an elevator girl—but why go into all of that now?" She put on her impossible hat and followed Luke to his sedan.

"Where's your flophouse?" he asked, pulling away from the curb. She told him. He drove swiftly. "Got any glad rags?"

"I've had no other income than my regular wages," she replied. "So all my foundation garments are in a very small handbag."

"We'll pick 'em up and drive straight on through to Memphis. I'll outfit you there. You say you can wear nice things?"

"I've strutted gowns in style shows at the big department stores." She watched a few lost snowflakes flatten against the windshield. "Mind telling me?"

He swung the sedan around a bewildered puppy and cornered into a side street. He cornered again into an avenue not so densely crowded, and speeded up.

"Has Carse Penner ever seen you?"

"I try to avoid crooks," Annabelle Lee said. "I don't think he has. He makes his lawyer come to him, I suppose. He's never been in my car." She glanced at Luke sharply. "I read the papers. Did you lose your case against him?"

"No trial," he growled. "Witnesses irrevocably dead." He pulled up before her modest apartment house. "Make it snappy."

WHILE SHE was inside, he drove rapidly to his own apartment and gathered a spare collar and a change of socks and his shaving outfit and a spare automatic. He'd outfit in Memphis, too. She was waiting at the curb as he pulled up again and stopped.

He dropped her handbag beside his suitcase in the rear of the sedan.

"I left my monkey suit in my room," she said, pulling a worn but comfortable heavy coat around her modest blue clothes.

"If we come out of this alive—" he engaged the clutch—"which means successfully, you'll have a steady job with me. You won't need your monkey suit."

She snuggled down, making herself comfortable for a long drive. She smiled. "If we don't, I won't need it anyway."

He switched on the windshield wiper to clear the increasing snowflakes. "It's my thought," he explained as the motor droned monotonously, "that a person who makes yipee in a strange locality is more likely to cut his capers with a little more—more—"

"Abandon?"

"Good word. A little more abandon. Carse Penner watches his step pretty close in the home town. On his guard. Hard to lure."

She pulled a tiny automatic from her big coat and eyed it fondly. "I'm to lure?" She thrust the gun out of sight.

"It won't be a badger game," he assured her.

As the miles slithered beneath their whining rubber, he dwelt at length upon his need to gather Penner into the fold in a nice legal manner. He outlined the part she was to play.

"Ducky!" she exclaimed at last. "I hope you won't have to stay so well hidden you can't see me in a swim suit." She smiled demurely.

Luke's fair skin reddened. He pulled up by a wayside food station. "Hamburgers and coffee," he growled, "as per contract . . ."

From the very nature of the business it is evident that a certain amount of risk must be run in the matter of crime detection. Luke Hamilton tried to minimize this risk as much as possible by the adroit use of dark glasses; a wobbly, hunched-over attitude supported by a heavy, gnarled walking stick; the distortion of his nose and chin by wax needled beneath his skin; and baggy clothes.

Nor did he fail to make careful use of Annabelle Lee's knowledge of actor's makeup. Altogether, he became a remarkably good example of the senile creatures who, possessed of a little money, basked in the warm sun of the little gulf port of Boggs, cackling of their rheumatism, dangling shrimp-baited lines from long bamboo poles off the ends of rickety, smelly wharves.

Carse Penner, Luke was gratified to discover, was immediately wrapped up in

attempting to make the young heiress who arrived two days after he—Penner—came, and ensconced herself in room 212 of the barnlike wooden hotel overhanging the lapping waters of the beach.

She was a knockout as she strolled the beach in a swim suit that was as brief as the duration of a New Year's resolution. Penner tagged her like a motor cop in Sunday traffic. For days she tantalized him with just the right degree of well-bred indifference.

And then the day came when her gradual yielding brought her to that point where she must lean upon Penner's virile masculinity in helping her to decide a very, very important matter. She and the now pie-eyed crook paused for a moment, heedless of the old wreck in dark glasses sprawling on the sand, reading a newspaper.

"Carse," her voice caressed him, while her dark eyes melted into his in sweet indecision, "what shall I do with my jewels? I was so foolish to bring them. But I did, poor, witless little me. And fifty thousand dollars in diamonds—oh, I know it's a mere bagatelle to you. But they are dear to me because of the memories, if you know what I mean. What shall I do? I can't take them on our little boat trip. Do you reckon the hotel safe would be quite all right?"

Luke could see Carse Penner's start of surprise and the hot flame of greed in his dark eyes, quickly curtailed.

"Are they mounted in some unique way, dear?" Penner's voice was not too eager.

"That's the trouble, Carse. Father told me to be very careful because a thief could so easily dispose of them. Oh, I'm naughty. But they're so pretty. They're loose, you know. I just love to trickle them through my fingers. They scintillate. They're divine."

PENNER scuffed at the hot sand with a bare toe. "You are naughty," he said with mock severity. "But," he added reassuringly, "they'll be all right in the hotel safe. That old safe has held many a treasure, I imagine."

The girl looked about her in alarm.

"Oh, maybe I shouldn't have spoken so loudly. Do you suppose—"

The flash of cunning was gone from Penner's face so quickly Luke could scarcely believe he had seen it flicker there. "Why, darling," the crook said, "in such a place as this, small, you know, and with a select crowd, you might say, the more publicity the better."

He smiled brightly. "Just the thing to do. Wrap them in their case and hand them to the clerk and let everyone know what they're worth. Everyone in town will be watching out for them for you."

So far, so good, Luke congratulated himself as the two strolled towards the hotel. It was a new wrinkle for him—something entirely different from anything else he had done as a detective. But he had his orders—and anything legal was acceptable.

He got up and dusted the sand from his baggy pants and wobbled away to watch the train come in, a string of antediluvian wooden coaches jerked along by a boiling teapot.

As the comic opera train clattered to a pompous, wheezing stop, a fat man with a sagging, whining mouth stepped down to the splintery platform and glanced about with furtive, piggish eyes.

"Hotel del Mah, suh?" A Negro reached for his suitcase.

Luke's heart turned a double flip. A chill settled in his stomach. Why did Seth Doyle, Penner's lawyer, have to turn up now? If he saw Annabelle Lee and recognized the ex-elevator girl, all bets were off. All this expensive build-up was shot to hell and gone.

Another thought harrowed his brain. In case of a mix-up, he might have to expose his mysterious client's name. Or else let fifty thousand dollars of unmounted ice— It made him shudder. It was his mysterious client's ice.

The urge to gallop ahead and put Annabelle Lee on her guard worked on him powerfully. He almost sweat from the effort to keep himself humped over his gnarled stick, to stay in character, a derelict wrecked on the ocean of time and stranded on the beach of senility. The

powder, the keg, the fuse, the lighted match were all nicely assembled for an explosion of distressing proportions.

He wobbled along in the wake of the blubbery mouthpiece and the Negro hotel runner. The distance was short. By fudging a bit at the corners and cutting down an alley, he managed to enter the lobby of the hotel on the heels of the Negro.

The girl was just handing the clerk a small package and saying: "So you've seen for yourself they're in there. Please take good care of my pretties. Lock them in the big safe."

Her back was to them. But she was slowly turning. Penner smiled down at her. He glanced at the clerk. "I expect," he said, "fifty thousand in jewelry is nothing unusual to that old strong-box."

She was still in her swim suit. Luke Hamilton hoped fervently that the fat Seth Doyle's scrutiny would begin at the customary starting point, her slender ankles, and not climb too fast.

The long-faced clerk babbled something about the enormous wealth the hotel had safely harbored, and an inquisitive old dame sailed majestically to the desk, momentarily blotting the girl from the sight of those at the door.

Seth had paused with characteristic caution to size up the layout. Luke prodded him in the back with the end of his stick.

But Doyle didn't turn, as might have been expected. A tremor shook his fat body, and then he froze. Luke almost swore aloud. The big hunk of cheese must be on the lam. He was plenty terrified. He must have thought the end of the stick was a gun.

The old dame moved aside, and Penner's dark eyes caught sight of Doyle. His startled recognition evidently was noted by the girl, for she began to turn.

But just as her profile was coming into view, she almost jerked away again. "Carse, dear," she said, "I just thought of another little trifle. I must get it." She brushed past Penner and made for the grand stairway, showing those in the lobby only the back of her shining bobbed black head and a ravishing set of curves.

HER sudden movement diverted Penner's attention, and Luke scuttled hastily sideways, crablike, to a deep chair and sank into it.

Just in time; for the crook came forward, dark eyes dangerous. "What the hell you butting into this place for?" he demanded harshly, grabbing a fat arm.

"Somebody stuck a gat into my back," sobbed the fat man, in a loud whisper. "Who's there behind me?"

"There's nobody behind you," Penner said savagely. "I asked you what the—"

"Sh! Not so loud. Where's your room?"

"You hop-headed, yellow-bellied shyster!" Penner snarled—Luke had to strain his ears to catch it—"I've told you to stay away from here. You ain't worth a damn to me outside of—"

"Pipe down, Carse," Seth pleaded. "The clerk is giving us the eye."

"Who wouldn't?" Penner snorted. He spoke to the clerk: "This man won't be registering. Wants to sell me gadgets for one of my factories. Can't imagine how he wangled my address from my secretary. Strictly against my orders."

Penner started for the stairway. "I'll give you just a half hour in my room," he snapped at Doyle. . . .

As Luke Hamilton adjusted the ear-phones of a dictagraph, in his own room, he congratulated himself on having listened to Annabelle's advice. Penner was playing the fine gentleman so thoroughly, Luke had had little hope of overhearing anything important. Nevertheless, the girl had foreseen just such a possibility as this—that one of his henchmen might get in a jam and come running for help—and she had insisted that Luke scatter a few mike buttons here and there in Penner's quarters.

Luke heard the sobbing whine of Doyle's voice.

". . . . But I had to scram. I always said it was a mistake for you to take these winter vacations. 'Stinko Red' Kelly musta had his mob all primed to go the minute you left town."

"What did he do?"

"Ask it the other way."

"What do you mean?"

"Ask me what he did not do. It'll make easier answering."

"Dammit!" Penner's voice was rasping, raw; and there was the sound of pacing steps. "Do you mean I'm cleaned?"

"To the sub-basement." There was the whine of bed springs. Doyle would pick the softest seat in the room for his flabby body. "And I beat a Tommy-gun out town by a split-second."

"Why," Penner asked, "did you?"

"Why?" It was a stricken whimper. "You ain't ditching me, Carse. I know too much about—"

"Are you telling me? What you know is too hot for your own good. I think I'll take you for a ride—in a boat. Drowning won't hurt you as much as slugs in your belly."

"Say—"

The frantic bleat was cut short by Penner's cold, merciless tones. "Unless you help me pull a job. It'll put us on our feet again. And it'll hang the bars and stripes over you if you ever get caught. What's your choice?"

"I ain't got any," came the sobbing whine. Luke could almost see Doyle's pig-gish eyes darting about in trapped terror. "I always kept clear of the law. But I ain't ready to croak."

"People that ought to never are. There's fifty grand in unmounted ice in that old cheese box downstairs. Besides odds and ends of chicken feed."

"But I can't heist a crib, Carse."

"I'm not dumb enough to expect it. Not even you ever knew it, Seth, but I got trained fingers. That's how I got my start. That's how I got enough to buy the Thalia Dance Hall. Fifty grand'll give us another good start. South America, maybe."

"Whose ice is it?"

"That young cutie's. She's an heiress and—"

"Oh, yeah!" Doyle's skeptical tones sent a chill through Luke's body. "Being a phony gent yourself, Carse, you wouldn't recognize a phony dame."

SUDDEN SILENCE throbbed against Hamilton's ears. He quivered in dread anticipation. Doyle had spotted the

girl, and now the private detective's whole plan was headed for the creek.

"Yeah?" Penner's prompting voice was like a thin, prodding knife.

"Yeah," the whine went on. "I only saw her profile for a second. But you know my memory, Carse. The set of that black, bobbed head, the shape of her neck, the shape of her legs from the knees to her slim ankles and little feet—combinations like that ain't common."

"So what?"

"Rear views and profiles are what you see the most of when you ride in the elevator in the building I got my office in back home."

"Oh!"

"You got an expressive voice, Carse. That 'oh' was a mouthful. Yeah. Your heiress is that brat I made a crack about and got my ears slapped down for by Luke Hamilton."

"Maybe she's phony," Penner finally said in a hard voice. "But the ice isn't. I know ice."

"You still need a lawyer's trained mind." Doyle's voice was becoming more certain, oily, and insinuating. "Can't you get the setup, Carse? This kid and Hamilton both left the home town about the same day as near as we could figure. It's plain, now, they weren't running from you. There's only one man back there who could—and would—finance this frame to get you."

It was becoming clear to Luke that like so many winning combinations, the real brains of the team did not repose in the same body that had the handsome looks, courage, and audacity. Penner was not dumb, to be sure. But as many another courageous man has done, he overrated his own ability because he was gifted with chilled-steel guts. Conversely, he underrated Doyle because the latter was lacking in physical fortitude.

"If they left together," Penner asked, "where's Hamilton?"

"He ain't broadcasting it, Carse, but he's somewhere close, if my guess is correct. Did you ever search your room for dictagraph buttons and wires?"

Luke couldn't wait to hear more. He

tore the earphones from his head, leaped to the window, shoved the wire screen open. He sneaked along the upper gallery that practically encircled the hotel, ripped fine wires loose as far as the next room window, and slid swiftly back inside his own room again, closing the screen. He pressed a razor blade into the soft wood in the back of his dresser, and hung the headset on that.

If he remained in his room, and they came poking their noses through his screen, that would look suspicious. If he left his room and went down the stairs, they might be peeping through the crack of their door, and that would be suspicious. If he sought Annabelle, that would give him dead away. Hell!

He opened his door and thumped along the hall with his cane and rapped sharply on Penner's door. It opened, and Penner's lowering gaze struggled against Luke's dark glasses.

"Mr. Penner," Luke cackled in a high, thin voice, "did you see anything of my purse? Dang it! I dropped it somewhere on the stairs or in the hall. Two-three hundred in it." He cackled in a shrill, anxious laugh. "Put me on the town if I don't find it."

"If I see it, I'll let you know, grandpa," Penner replied shortly and slammed the door.

"In a pig's eye," Luke said to himself and thumped noisily down the steps. He cursed the wily fat lawyer for so shrewdly cutting off his source of information. A little more and he would have known their plans.

At the foot of the stairs he brushed close to Annabelle Lee, now dressed in a fascinating affair of gold.

"They're wise," he mumbled and thumped to a deep chair and sank wearily into it. She followed him and sat down close.

"What's next?" she asked in a low voice.

"Doyle just brought word that Penner is washed up, in the North. I'm gambling Penner's natural greed and audacity will override the lawyer's caution. He'll want action. I'll know pretty quick."

WITH a puzzling sleight-of-hand movement the girl was cuddling the tiny automatic so that only he could see it. She hid it again and said: "How will you know?"

"He'll order a car from the garage. I hope that horse-faced clerk don't get shot. As a detective, I was pretty good in my day."

Penner came down the broad stairs, followed by his fat mouthpiece. In one hand was a heavy automatic. The other hand swung Luke's headset in small circles.

The horse-faced clerk's eyes bugged out. "Why the gun, Mr. Penner?" he managed in an uncertain tone.

"Tell the garage to send over that Packard," Carse Penner replied easily. "I'll drive it myself. Annabelle, darling, will you have the man get your diamonds from the safe? I'm going to drive you over to Corpus Christi. I've just discovered there is an international thief in the hotel. This gun," he explained, "might come in handy to protect the little lady and her precious gems."

Penner's dark eyes roved about the lobby, now vacated by all except the five of them. He tossed the headset at Luke's feet. "Put your earmuffs on, grandpa, and go for the ride with us."

"Hee-hee, you young fellows like your jokes," Luke cackled in a high falsetto and bent over to pick up the headset.

His dark glasses fell off. He reached for the phones, then suddenly straightened, his eyes shooting blue sparks.

"Clerk," he shrilled. "Who's this man Penner? Who is he? Maybe he's the crook." Luke twisted toward the girl, shielded by his big body. "Young lady, you tell that clerk to leave that safe shut."

The startled clerk hung up the telephone receiver, having already given the order to the garage. Through the huge windows they could see, a block away, a mechanic cross the walk to the long, sleek car parked in the crushed-shell street.

"Tell him to open the safe," Penner's voice cracked viciously.

The green-faced Doyle, standing on the stairs, raised a shaking automatic and pointed it at the clerk. "I'll cover this

punk, Carse," he whimpered, "while you handle those two phonies."

Down the street the mechanic was checking the gas and oil.

"You see, clerk?" Luke shrilled. "Now who's the crook?"

"To save your own life," Annabelle Lee said, "you can give him the diamonds. But I call you to witness he's taking them by force of arms."

The sweat poured from the clerk's long face. He rolled his eyes in wild fear of the gun held in Doyle's twitching hands. His fingers became all thumbs. He couldn't hit the combination.

Through the window they could see the mechanic get into the seat of the car. The tide of time was at its crest, Luke knew, and would now be running out

"Hold your gun on Ham and his girl," Penner commanded harshly. "I'll have to open this can myself." He leaped at the clerk and smashed him down with a side-swipe of his automatic. He twirled the knob of the safe with long, slender, predatory fingers.

Luke looked into Doyle's piggish, inflamed eyes and saw raging insanity. The strain had been too much for the man's cowardly, drink-weakened nerves. His habitual caution was drowned in an engulfing sea of panic. Luke saw it coming in the momentary glare of the little eyes. He snatched his pistol from beneath his baggy coat and whipped the muzzle up with a short snap of his wrist.

There was a double roar; and searing shock smashed through his shoulder. His own pistol dropped to the floor as Doyle pitched headlong down the steps.

Luke sprawled in a pain-crazed clutch for his gun.

Penner swung the safe door open, snatched the wrapped package of gems, and whirled. Annabelle Lee braced Luke in a sitting posture and pressed a tiny automatic into his left hand.

Penner shot fast. He didn't have time to aim. His gun roared and missed. It roared again and missed. He swore and steadied his elbow on the desk. Luke pressed the trigger of the tiny gun.

Penner fell on his face across the desk, the package of diamonds pinned under his left hand. . . .

Back North, in his office, Luke Hamilton listened to the voice trickling over the phone. "Good work," the voice said. "We'll tick them off, one by one. Er—don't mention my name to your new secretary. My wealth and position makes secrecy imperative. You understand."

"I understand," Luke replied. "Who's next?"

"Stinko Red Kelly. I'll tell you when."

"Okay."

Luke hung up and turned a rugged, blue-eyed grin on Annabelle Lee. "How's to step out with me and absorb a couple of hamburgers?"

"Sure." A beautiful pink glowed in her soft cheeks. "Er—no onion."

The MAYOR of HELL

Unique Mystery Novelet

By G. T. Fleming-Roberts

And Nine Other Complete Detective Aces

January
Issue



Out
December 1

Slickers Are Suckers

By William McAllen

For twenty years Sergeant Brady and Slicker Gorman hated each other—hated with a violence that only death would end. But Slicker was too smart to fall into the hands of the law. And, for more reasons than one, Brady had to prove that Slicker was a sucker.

SURE, I hate Slicker Gorman! I've been hating him for twenty years. Fact is, I'd have killed him that time back in '29, when my kid sister fell for him, and—well, we won't go into that, though I will say she didn't know who he really was. But being a cop you just naturally look at things differently; you can't go around killing guys, even when you know you got a kind of right to.

Gorman and I grew up together and were in the same class at Cathedral High. That's where he got the nickname, "Slicker." He was always springing some kind of a phony raffle, or a trade, or whatever, on the kids.

Never seemed to study, but he used to pass his exams without any trouble. Why not? Didn't he have a pass key to Father Corbett's office, where they kept the questions and all? Used to brag about it, too. 'Course, that didn't go over so big with us kids. But tattling—that would have been worse; especially since we were practically all Irish. They've just got it in their blood against an informer, I guess.

I didn't tell on him, either, when I caught him swiping money in the locker room, one day during a football game with St. Vincent's. But I took him up to the gym and punched both his eyes shut. He never came back to school after that.

It was about my second week on the force that I first met Slicker officially, as you might say. I knew his record, of course: he'd been picked up a dozen times on penny-ante charges; beat the rap every time. Later we knew he'd been in on

some loft jobs, too. But just knowing a certain crook pulled a certain job isn't any good as evidence in court.

Anyway, when I turned the corner by the Trader's Bank that morning, I guess I was thinking mostly about what a great world it is. Then something happened. There was Slicker Gorman coming out the front door, carrying a forty-five automatic in each hand. His partner was right behind him, carrying a canvas sack. They were both masked. but I made Slicker, all right.

HE AND I spotted each other at the same time. I got my gun about half-way out of the holster when a slug caught it and sent it spinning down the sidewalk. There I stood, naked, as you might say. Slicker leveled his gun on me again.

"You've had this coming for a long time, Waffles," he snarled.

That was a mistake. That just cinched the identification, later. Nobody had called me Waffles since the old days at Cathedral High. And I knew his voice, too. The D. A. will tell you that all those things help with a jury.

His next shot caught me on the left breast pocket and knocked me down. He fired two more quick ones while I was lying there. One of them nicked me over toward the southeast. The boys at the station still kid me about that one.

Slicker hated me, or he wouldn't have wasted all that time, right in the middle of his getaway. But his luck held out, and he got away clean. My luck was good, too.

I had a thick notebook in my breast pocket that slowed up the shot in the front, so I wasn't hurt much.

Later, I took a prayer book down to the gallery and fired a shot into it, and told my mother it was the book that saved my life. She was an invalid and was always worrying about me not going to church. She died about a month afterward, and I was glad I'd sort of lied to her. Anyway, when I told Father Corbett about it, he just squeezed my arm.

"I'll see you at mass next Sunday, Waffles," was all he said.

They collared Slicker Gorman about a month after that bank job. The fact that he kept phoning the station every day to blast me, sort of helped round him up. He certainly hated me!

When his trial came up, they had him cold, of course—but his slimy lawyer tried hard. I know him. They tried to claim a motive for framing Gorman, dragging my kid sister's name into it. I'll never be able to understand why the judges let them do things like that!

But two witnesses had heard his crack to me, and that, with my testimony, sewed him up. He drew a grand total of forty-five years, on three counts. For the things he said in court about me, he could have got another ten years just for contempt of court.

I suppose Gorman cooled off by the time he was up in the Big House a while, and began to figure ways and means. In his twisted, vicious way, he was pretty slick. He was what you'd call a smart crook, if there is such a thing—which there isn't, if you know what I mean.

One story is that he got some theatrical makeup and practiced till he was a mirror twin to one of the guards. But whatever the real lowdown is, it's one of the warden's worries, not mine. Gorman had played his cards right.

For five years he was a model prisoner—on the surface, anyway. Then he staged it, the crushout he'd been rehearsing in his mind for heaven knows how long. He went out of there in a guard's uniform, with two forty-fives. He left behind him an empty clip, and two dead guards.

We knew he'd come back here, of

course, and we tried every angle. I said "we." Well, I was sergeant on the Loft Squad at that time, so I didn't have a hand in the search, personally. In a month the big hurrah in the papers had eased off, but Slicker Gorman was still Public Rat No. 1 to us on the force. We hadn't eased off. We knew he'd be raiding a bank any day. And he did—for sixty grand.

No mask this time. He was already wanted, plenty. And—my kid sister was there; secretary to one of the officers! The poor kid just stood there with her hands up, saying nothing. But before he left he spoke to her.

"Here's something for that dumb brother of yours to remember me by!"

Then—cripes—he blasted her down. Killed her, just because he hated me. Any wonder I hated him? I'll hate him in hell!

I had my speech all figured out before I walked into the commissioner's office.

"I want a transfer to the Homicide Squad, sir. I want to be assigned to just one job: I want to get Slicker Gorman. I know that skunk, inside and out. I know what his habits are, and how he thinks. I can get him. And I'm going to spend all my time doing it. If I can't have the assignment, there's my shield. On the force, or off, I'm going to get Slicker Gorman!"

MAYBE I was sort of melodramatic, walking in there on the commissioner with my shield in my hand. But he jumped up from his desk before I had a chance to say a word.

"Steady, lad. Steady. I understand."

Before I left his office, it was all fixed up. He agreed I could work better alone. He did make me promise that I'd make an honest try to bring Gorman in alive; that I wouldn't kill him on sight, like I'd meant to.

"You want vengeance," he said, "but if you just kill Gorman, you won't get the full taste of it. What Gorman will hate, above everything, will be for you to outsmart him, for you to bring him in and show him you're a better man."

Gorman tipped his hand inside of a week. He wrote me a letter. You can imagine what was in it! I've met up with some sadists in my time, but he was the

worst. I got a letter from him two or three times a month. It was punishment, but I had to read them, hoping I might get a lead. There weren't enough of them to give me a pattern to locate him by, but they told a lot.

I knew he was holed up some place in the city. He kept boasting about how smart he was, and how dumb all the cops were, me in particular. And what he was going to do to me, some day.

He saw the story in the *News-Telegram* all right, about me going on a week's fishing trip to the Spring Mountains. I got a letter from him:

*You dumb, yellow * * * *. You thought you could sucker me into chasing you off into the woods. That's a laugh! You haven't got brains enough to find me in a telephone booth. Why, you * * * **

And there was a lot more.

He'd guessed what I had in mind, all right. But I was only playing a long shot, and Slicker didn't fall for it. He kept posted on everything that was going on and, in his way, he was shrewd.

Stool pigeons were no use. He'd cut himself off entirely from all his old connections. I figured he was holed up in some apartment, on the first or second floor. He'd been badly scared, once, in a hotel fire, and he always kept near the ground.

I figured he'd be wearing a disguise and was probably going out only at night, mostly to mail me those letters. He could have his food and other things delivered.

Of course, I'd been reporting regularly, but I hadn't seen the commissioner in four months when I walked in that morning.

"I've got a plan, sir," I started. "I'll need some help—"

"There are eighteen thousand of us, Terry, counting me," he volunteered.

Counting me! That wasn't just talk, either. I've seen him, myself, at three of a winter morning, gun in his hand, leading the way into a rat's nest of criminals! Then I told him what I had in mind.

"So that's the picture, commissioner," I finished. "I know it's a long shot."

TWO WEEKS later the Hollyhill Bookstore began running half-page ads in the *News-Telegram*. We picked the Hollyhill because Mrs. Wilson, who owned the place, was the daughter of a patrolman who had been shot by a thug twenty years before. We could count on her. We picked the *News-Telegram*, too, because I knew Slicker Gorman read it regularly. His letters, and some tests I'd run, gave us that.

We ran our key ad on the eighth day. At two the next afternoon, we moved in on the apartment house.

The white wing working along the gutter was Captain Platz of the Robbery Detail, with a machine gun under the papers in his can. He swung his broom over his left shoulder. The foreman in charge of the laborers who were picking at the pavement across the street — that was Lieutenant Voler and some of his crew — took off his hat and mopped his brow. A man in an open car at the next corner unfolded a newspaper. We had the alley and the back street covered, too.

Smoke began to roll slowly out of a first floor apartment, just as the sirens of the fire apparatus sounded. The inside halls were filled with smoke, and when a ladder went up against the window of Apartment 24, a gray-haired man stuck his head out.

"Hurry and get down this ladder!" yelled one of the firemen. "Don't wait to save anything or you'll be trapped!"

The old man disappeared for a moment, then crawled out onto the ladder. He was carrying a suitcase in his left hand, but he backed down that ladder pretty fast, at that. I was standing to one side and between the foot of the ladder and the building, where I could get a good look at his face.

I was dressed in a fireman's outfit, same as six of the other boys, so it would look okay. Two real firemen were holding a nozzle between them, pouring a high-pressure stream of water clear over the roof. As the old man reached the ground, I jumped on him.

"Stick 'em up, Gorman! You're covered!"

Then he recognized me. And I guess he hated me more than he wanted to live, because his trick suitcase flew open and he had a Tommy-gun in his hand, all in no time at all.

"This for you, Waffles," he was saying, when the deluge hit him.

Those firemen had plenty of savvy. They just turned that nozzle on Slicker with a stream of water that yanked his gun right out of his hands.

I made a flying dive, and landed on his back. My fingers fastened around his throat, and I forgot all about my promise to the commissioner.

I'D never believed any of the stories that killers sometimes tell, like: "Then everything just went black. I don't remember picking up the knife, or stabbing him." Stuff like that. But now I know it can happen.

The next thing I remember, the Commissioner was talking.

"Steady, Terry. Steady. The boys are taking care of Gorman. I thought they'd never get you pried loose from his neck! I anticipated something like this, so we were watching you, too. But I'm not criticizing you. Ride down to the station with me and we'll talk to this Slicker Gorman."

When we came into the room where they were holding him, still soaking wet, he screamed at me:

"I'll get out of this yet, you—I'll blast your dumb brains out. It had to be a lousy break, that building catching on fire, or you'd never got me!"

"So you're a slicker, eh, Gorman?" The commissioner cut in. "And it was just a bad break, eh? I'll tell you what the real score is, and then you can figure out who's smart and who's dumb—if you're not too dumb."

The commissioner was giving me my revenge, hitting where he knew, and I knew, it would hurt the worst—just as he'd told me that first day, up in his office.

"Detective Lieutenant Terence Brady here," he went on. I didn't catch the "Lieutenant" then, thought it was just a

slip—but I remembered later. "He ran the whole show himself, and you fell for his bait like the all-American sap you are."

"Why, I'll—" Gorman started.

"Shut up, you rat," snapped the commissioner. "Do you want to listen—or do you want us to all leave, and let you stay here alone—with Brady?"

That stopped him.

"You read the *News-Telegram* regularly, Gorman," the commissioner continued. "Brady tested you on that one. You showed it with your rotten letters, when he ran stories exclusively in that paper. On the seventh of this month you saw a half-page ad in the *News-Telegram* about the new book, of which Brady was the co-author, telling how criminals work and especially how the public could cooperate in apprehending you rats. And you, in particular.

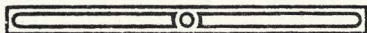
"You had to have that little book, Gorman. At least, that's how Brady figured, because it was written just for you. You couldn't safely go to the store for it, but the ad said, 'Free Delivery.' That was meant for you, too.

"So you put in your order by phone. You ordered several books, including this book *Trapping Rats*, that Brady wrote. The delivery boy who handed them to you, in a dim hallway, was a rookie police officer. And when you signed his receipt book, you left a nice thumb print.

"That book was only sold at that one store, and we checked every purchaser. Brady knew you'd buy one, somehow, so he made it easy for you. And how you fell! That thumb print made it perfect.

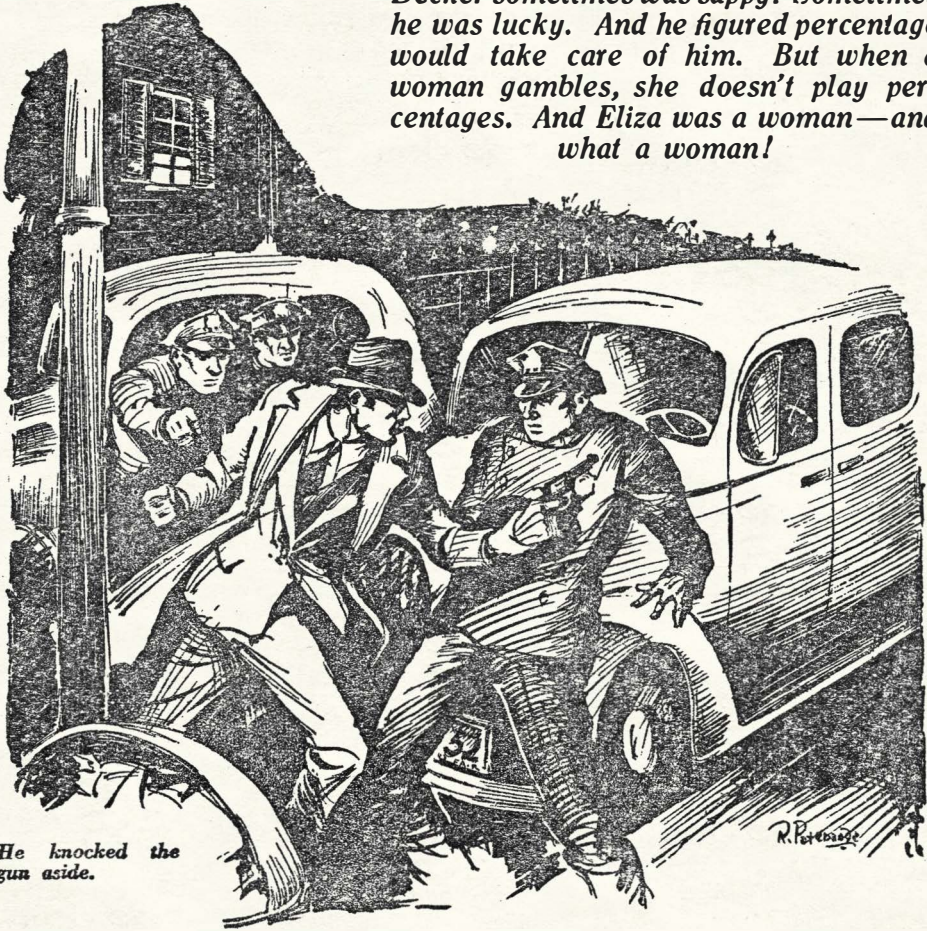
"That fire at your apartment house wasn't any bad break, either. It was no accident. Brady knew you were scared to death of fire, so he arranged the show with a few chemicals. There wasn't any fire at all! But you got panicky, just as he thought you would, and came down the ladder. The fire hose was Brady's idea, too, to knock you off your pins so he could get you alive.

"You're going to burn, *Sucker* Gorman!"



The Percentage in Murder

For a smart private detective, Staige Decker sometimes was sappy. Sometimes he was lucky. And he figured percentage would take care of him. But when a woman gambles, she doesn't play percentages. And Eliza was a woman—and what a woman!



He knocked the gun aside.

By Harold F. Sorensen

Author of "Death Takes Over," etc.

STAIGE DECKER yawned, stretched, put the four legs of his chair on the floor and opened the box of cigars. "Have one," Decker motioned to Parks; he stuck one in his own mouth. "Then I've got to be getting along home, and changing my clothes. It's out for me, tonight."

Parks was standing with his arms

folded. "Elizabeth Gough?" he asked grouchily.

Decker hurried to blow the smoke out of his mouth. "Sure. You're getting pretty good at guessing, Parks. If you hear a big wind tonight, don't be frightened; it's not a hurricane, it's Eliza and me stepping fast between the spots."

Parks grabbed a cigar, bit a big piece off the end and spat it noisily aside. "Why don't you tend to your work, Decker?"

"I've got nothing that can't wait the due processes of an eight-hour day."

Parks glowered, stuck his lips out as he ungracefully lit the cigar. "You got nothing that your full attention would hurt, either."

Parks was a hard guy to figure. Angular, awkward, big, Parks looked older than he was because of a neutral shade of hair and a total lack of anything that might be called complexion. And he looked worse than he had to because of a knack for selecting and wearing clothes least suited to him; on Parks, the clothes always had that look of being long out of style.

Decker sat back, tried to catch his eye, stared into his face. "If you have anything to tell me, Parks, why not come out with it?"

"I'll tell you this." Parks came to the desk. "If you go there tonight, you'll be a sorry man for it."

Decker restrained himself, kept his voice down.

"Is that a threat, Parks?"

Parks sneered. "It's a threat like a promissory note, with a stinger in its tail and all the certainty of fate behind it."

Decker bounced his fist on the desk, got to his feet. "You're getting my goat, Parks."

Parks was stony, aloof, an attitude Decker had never witnessed about Parks before.

"Any consequences attached to getting your goat, Decker?" Parks asked, with a wintry smile.

Decker nearly bit through his lip; he slapped the cigar down into the tray, shrugged, walked round the desk.

"You're too much for me, Parks, you don't seem exactly human, and never did. The ways and means I'd use with anyone else would be a loss of time with you. If you have anything more to say, come out with it. If you haven't—" Decker jerked his head towards the door.

PARKS didn't look at him. He had made a mess of the cigar by biting off too much of it, and was trying to hold it together with his fingers while he puffed at it. He took his hat and walked out as if the office were empty.

Decker watched the door close behind him, sighed, took up his cigar again and got into his hat and coat. . . .

Decker drew up to the house, a few feet up along the curb from the entrance, slowly hauled himself from behind the wheel and got out of the car.

Something in the shadows along the front of the house moved. Decker kept on going, entered the house. In the hall, he waited a few moments. Then he turned on his heel and walked back out again, headed for the car.

The man had come out of the shadows and was walking towards the curb. He whirled at the sound of Decker's steps. A big man, with a padded muscular figure, a tanned face and a heavy mustache, he cocked his head as he studied Decker's moves.

Obviously caught out, Decker tried the door of his car, found it locked, grinned.

"Thought you were a friend of mine."

The man took a piece of candy from a bag sticking from his pocket and put the candy in his mouth.

"Maybe I am," he said, carelessly.

Decker eyed him by the poor light. "What might that mean?"

The man chewed his candy, stuffed it aside in his cheek, to say: "I'm not against you, friend. And maybe if I knew you, I'd be with you. So maybe I am a friend."

Decker pushed his hat back and shook his head. "Must be nice to have things thought out like that. I guess you're by way of being a philosopher, if you keep at this sort of thing. Good night."

"'Night." The man was masticating the candy.

Decker went into the house, muttering: "I've got that guy Parks on the brain, think every shadow I see move, is Parks watching me, or watching over me, or whatever he's doing."

Decker went upstairs, rang, knocked

on the door with the tiny brass knocker. Elizabeth Gough opened the door, smiled, beckoned him in.

"Let's get going," Decker suggested.

Elizabeth went on into the next room, turned in the doorway. "Let's have a drink first, Staige. You're early. Come in and sit down."

Staige Decker started in, removing his coat as he walked. His arm bumped something; he turned and caught a tottering coat-tree.

"Well, well—" Staige Decker hung his coat on it—"a coat-tree, eh? Doing better for yourself, are you, Eliza?"

Decker watched the flashing of her trim silken legs as she went for the drinks. He got a good view of her face as she came toward him with two drinks and passed close to a lamp. Beautiful as ever, something was different close to her eyes, gave her the appearance of being under strain; and the pinched, white look about her mouth added to this.

Decker reached up from the divan, took a glass from her hand, his eyes on her face. "What's up, Eliza?"

She shrugged, sank down beside him, sipped at her glass. "Nothing that calls for your talents, Staige."

"Some people—" Staige Decker sampled his drink liberally—"think I must be a rotten detective because I can't solve all sorts of riddles, puzzles, and guess what verdict juries will bring in. But, here you are with a human interest problem and you tell me it's nothing that calls for my talents."

Eliza's eyes flashed. "It isn't that, Staige. Just that I can make my way through this on my own."

"Sure," Decker commended, "you think I'm rotten at my business, too."

"Oh, I don't," Eliza looked into his face.

Decker put his empty glass down on the small table. "Let's be on our way."

Eliza caught his arm, jerked him down onto the divan. "Not—not yet, Staige."

"What are we waiting for?" Decker asked.

"Waiting?" she raised her voice slightly with surprise. "Waiting? Not at

all. Staige, I'm not even sure I want to go out. Would you hate so much to spend the evening here?"

"Well—" Decker slumped and stuck his feet way out—"I have a lot of steam on the boilers. It's going to be tough, to sit here and let it ooze out."

"I know," Eliza acknowledged quietly, "I did promise to go out with you."

Decker caught her hand in his.

"Eliza, tell me what's wrong. That will keep me interested and keep us here. Go ahead, what is it?"

Eliza put her glass down beside his. "A man was here—" her eyes were down, her voice confidential—"he was quite unpleasant. About you. So I suppose you must know him. Bill Parks."

DECKER started. "Bill Parks! I thought you were just a name to him. So the big rowdy had the nerve to crash in here. Did you tell him off? What did he want?"

Eliza turned her face up to his. "Staige! I knew him before I did you. He wants me to marry him. Meanwhile, he objects to anything I do that does not include him—or isn't according to his orders."

Decker was thunderstruck. "A guy like that! Just goes to show you. I thought he was a museum piece or something. And he wants to marry you. You going to?"

Eliza shook her head.

Decker demanded: "You make that clear to him?"

She nodded.

"And," Decker pursued, "that ends it—right?"

Eliza shook her head. "Parks is a very stolid man. He takes it for granted that no one knows what she is doing. That means he has to stick around and direct things, regardless of whether I realize how indispensable he is, or not."

"Stop worrying about it," Decker directed. "My boot and his pants have an urgent engagement. I'll kick him so far from his complacency that he'll have to arrange for a rendezvous with himself by mail."

"No, Staige," Eliza pressed his hand

between both of hers. "I can handle him. I don't want to have you get in trouble with a man like Parks."

"Just what sort of man is he?" Decker demanded.

Eliza stared into his face. "Staige, just what do you know about Parks?"

Decker shrugged impatiently. "Nothing. I met him just when I did you," Decker paused. "The same doesn't apply, Eliza. But just last week—at the Artists' and Models' Ball—I ran into Parks. He got talking to me, then he showed up at my office. Came in several times. Never said anything."

"Well," Eliza informed him, "Parks is a very wealthy man, Staige. Manufacturing. He didn't mention you by name, but he hinted about you. Seemed to know you were coming. And he told me he'd take good care of you—put money your way, you know, if I would be nice about telling you to get a new hobby for your spare time."

"I wish I'd known this this afternoon," Decker gritted. "Parks gave out queer noises, about how much better it would be if I didn't come here, but I thought he was a stuffed owl. Wait till I see him, that's all."

"No, Staige." Eliza's hold on his hand tightened. "Tell me you don't mean that."

"I'm not going to be violent or childish," Decker assured her. "I won't bring your name into it, but when I get done, Parks will understand in a nice way, that he's well along the road to bringing out the worst in me. If he wants to go on from there, it's up to him."

Eliza earnestly put her face close to his. "Promise me there won't be anything of the sort."

Decker sighed. "All right, Eliza."

She pressed her cheek to his. "Staige, it's all been rather tough on me. I've an awful headache."

Decker got to his feet. "I get it, kid. It's all right, I'll run along. You get some shut-eye. Give you a call in the morning."

Eliza rose, stood close, turned her face up to him. "Kiss me, Staige."

Decker slowly put a hand on each of her silken clad shoulders, drew her to

him, pressed his lips on hers, slowly, strongly and more strongly, his hands sliding down from the shoulders to the bareness of her back. His arms cradled her in the hug of a considerate grizzly.

Eliza put her hands against his chest, gently pushed away.

She whispered: "You did, and how well you can."

"All without practice." Decker smiled, wagged a finger.

Eliza laughed. "Oh, that's likely."

"Well, good night." Decker slowly turned away and walked out to the foyer. He put on his hat, took his coat from the tree and buttoned himself into it.

THE DOOR closed reluctantly behind him, narrowing the glimpsing of Eliza's smiling face that he had.

Decker came out into the street. Some one was in the shadows. Without hesitation, Decker stalked up to him.

It was his same, dark-faced, muscular acquaintance. The man stuffed a piece of candy into his mouth, balled up the paper sack, and threw it towards the curb.

"Guess it's a stand-up for me," he commented to Decker.

Decker shook his head. "You sure have patience."

The big man shrugged. "You know how it is. You begin with patience, then you work round to where you're waiting just in hopes that you'll get a chance to tell the dame off."

Decker's eyebrows went up. "Just as well as she didn't show up, then."

"I suppose so." He swallowed the candy. "So long."

He walked off down the street.

Decker put his hand into his overcoat pocket, frowned, stuck his other hand into the left side pocket. Withdrawing the keys, he opened the car, got in, and started away.

Decker drove slowly down a quiet street that was more like a lane, arched over with the heavy, leafless boughs of big trees. The light was not very good and it was full of shadows.

Bright lights blazed up behind him.

Decker stuck his head out and looked back. Coming up fast was a coupé, a large green light atop it, blinking. Police car. Decker stepped up his speed, got over nearer the curb, to let them go by. The siren of the police car let out a whiny growl.

"What do they want," Decker murmured, "the whole world?"

Another coupé, with green light blinking came down the street, headlights on bright, darted over in front of him. The car from behind squeezed up alongside of him. Decker jammed on the brakes, waited.

"Come out of there with your hands up," a cop advised, showing him the bore of a large revolver.

Decker came out, hands up close to his shoulders.

The policemen from the coupé in front ran round to the side of Decker's car, opened the doors. One of the policemen opened the back door on the near side. The policeman with the gun felt Decker over, took a gun from under his arm.

"It's here all right," one of the cops exclaimed.

Decker turned his head, moved slightly, and looked into the back of his own car. The police had their flashlight turned on a blanket they had just turned back. The light revealed the body of a man, moved up, showed his face.

Much changed in death, darkened with color, twisted with pain, it was the face of Parks.

Involuntarily, Decker groaned.

Keeping his hands up, he bent over, peered at Parks's clenched right hand that was dirty and sticky with brown stuff that had been squeezed out of it.

Decker's eyes darted covertly to the cop who had the gun on him. Grimacing, the cop was also looking at the face of the murdered Parks.

"Choked to death," one cop croaked.

Decker knocked aside the gun pointing at him, sprang clear, around the back of his car and ran up on the sidewalk. He ran for a head-high hedge, barged into it. He muddled his shoulders through; his feet caught, and he tripped.



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The police guns blasted at him, broke glass in the house.

Decker yanked his feet through.

"Don't shoot," one cop directed, "you'll kill everyone around here except him."

Decker ran, crouched over, face near the ground, combining the effort to get up with the vital necessity of running. Feet pounded after him, the policemen spread out.

Decker managed to clear the corner of the house. His head came up, he ran faster, down along the side of the house, over the concrete walk at the back.

"There he is."

Two pistols cracked at him.

DECKER jammed himself between two garages, kicked his way through a small hedge, came out between two more garages. He ran up on the dead grass, down along the driveway to the street, across it and up towards the house.

He heard the cars, the sirens starting to wail.

Running right on through, out into the next street, Decker crossed, sprinted for the backs of the houses. At the end of the block he came out in the middle of the cross street, took a look and threw himself on the ground.

The police car skidded round the corner, came towards him, threw her wheel hard over. It squealed into the driveway, slowed and began to work its way cautiously down.

Decker crawled out to the street, stood up and walked away fast.

Back at the apartment house, Decker paused, breathed hard. Glancing up and down the street, he went out to the curb, picked up a white mass. He found it was crumpled paper sack and stuck it in his pocket. He went upstairs, rang long, hammered with the knocker, rang again.

Eliza opened the door, looking more lovely with her black hair shaken out loosely, the waves allowed to dip in long swells. Her black lace negligee seemed to be trying to evaporate and reveal more of a figure that shouldn't be hidden.

Decker pushed his way into the foyer, shut the door.

Eliza murmured, meaninglessly: "Staige!"

"How's your headache?" Decker tramped on in after her.

Eliza smiled. "Much better."

Decker's lips and face twisted as if he had a mouthful of something bitter and couldn't get rid of it.

"Sometimes I'm sappy," he muttered, "and other times I'm so dumb!"

Eliza murmured sympathetically: "Staige, and there's nothing you can do about it."

Decker clenched his teeth, regarded her thoughtfully. "Maybe I'm not altogether licked."

Eliza sank down on the divan. "Oh, you're a fighter, Staige. No doubt of it."

"Yes." Decker threw his hat down. "And I've got something in here—" he tapped his head with a finger—"though everyone doubts it. I've got enough in this skull to figure out part of this evening."

Eliza sat up, snapped: "Then you'd better take care to keep it in there to figure out the rest of the evening—and maybe a lot of days to come."

Decker's eyes narrowed. "You're going to help me do the rest of my thinking, Eliza."

Eliza hummed a snatch of song, broke off. "Why don't you go before I call the police?"

"You've called them once tonight, for me, and here I am. Or at least your horse-faced friend called them."

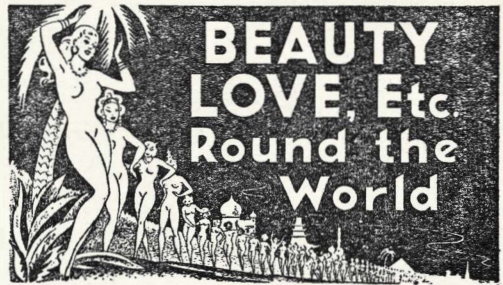
Eliza doubled a leg up under her, leaned towards him. "All right, so here you are. Why not use your head, if it's good for such things, and keep on your way. You can't get anything here."

"I think I can," Decker declared. He opened his coat, got a cigarette, lit it. "In fact, I'm willing to wait here for the police. Now go ahead and call them."

She jumped up. "You think I won't?"

"I never thought you were crazy. Now I know how smart you are, I know you're not going to make a call like that."

Eliza took a drink. "You're bluffing, and I'm going to call."



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"Even with the deck marked," Decker retorted, "I have a good hand. You know Parks was killed, you know everything that went on tonight. I know enough, and I'm going to learn the rest."

SHE put the cigarette down. "Look." She rolled her eyes towards each other, opened her mouth, let her tongue hang out of the corner drooling, altogether a hideous, revolting caricature of herself.

"I could stay like this for weeks," she said thickly. "Till the police got sick of it. Sometimes I'm sappy. I could stay like this till the police began to check the homes for the weak-minded; they'd swear you stole me out of one, and kept me a prisoner in this love nest."

"Maybe," Decker admitted, "but they'd never know why, if you looked like that."

"That's your headache," she shrugged, snapping her face back to normal.

"We seem," Decker scoffed, "to be playing headache, headache, who has the headache. All right, I have it now, worst. But you can't throw me to the lions. I can drag you down with me."

"Prove it," Eliza demanded. "Maybe if you're not as sappy as I took you to be, I can help you out of town."

Decker held up thumb and finger, close together. "With just that much of my brain, I know your candy-eating dope out front was a plant. Sure, Parks was dead then. While I sat talking to you, candy boy opened the door, took my keys, put Parks in the car, and returned the keys. But he made more errors than a whole World's Series."

A flicker of doubt crossed Eliza's beautiful face. "For instance?" she asked, quietly.

"He put the keys in the wrong pocket of my overcoat," Decker answered. "I noticed it, but I was still on my heels from that send-off kiss you gave me. I see you believe the condemned man ought to get something nice towards the end."

"If you're still thinking that you have a hand of cards," Eliza relaxed, "you'd better count that one as a deuce. That would sure get you out of your trouble. Your keys were in the wrong pocket."

"Maybe," Decker advised, "you'd bet-

ter think of it as the joker, to go with some aces, and build up my hand. Another thing, I could find this hot candy friend of yours, identify him, and maybe make the cops work him over, if I don't get the chance. You never can tell what might come to light."

Eliza shook her head. "You think you could find him?"

Decker nodded. "Without looking far. Despite the fact that he walked away from the house—and undoubtedly to use a public phone to telephone the cops—I know he has an apartment in this house."

She started to suck in breath, turned it into a yawn. "Oh, you do."

"You worked fast, and I'm working fast," Decker said. "You worked too fast. That coat-tree was a plant, to keep my coat near the door where he could get at it. The coat-tree is in this house. I'll go through every inch of every apartment if I have to, and I don't care if some one calls for the police while I'm doing it. But I'll find that coat-tree, and when I do, I'll find our friend."

Eliza waved deprecatingly, dropped down on the divan.

"You have a chance! You're going to identify a man and a coat-tree. You couldn't even describe the man, to begin with."

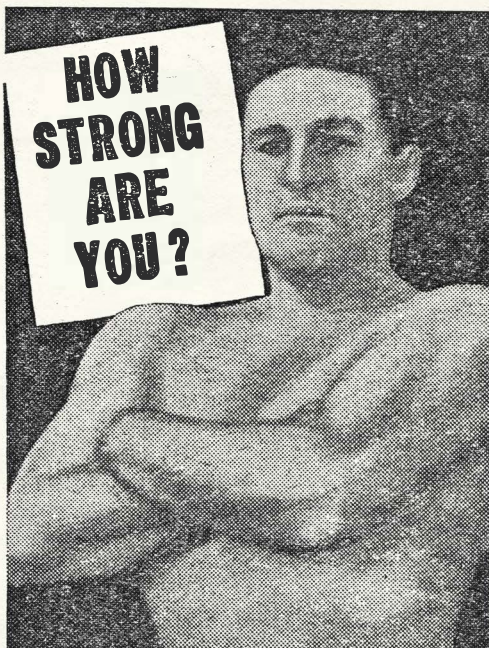
"How about this? A man about Parks's size—heavier, more muscle. He had to have, he managed to choke Parks to death. Dark skin, large, passive face. Black mustache. Eats candy as if he'll never get enough of it. Too bad about that candy."

Eliza turned her head slightly, called: "Jim! Jim!" She turned to Decker. "I want you to meet Big Jim Esler."

JIM ESLER came out of the bedroom, a box of candy in one hand, a gun in the other. He was scowling. Fair-skinned, he had blond hair, and no mustache. But the size was there.

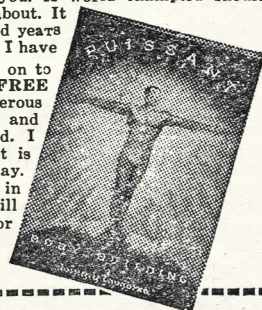
Esler scowled at Eliza. "You didn't have to call me into this. You had him licked."

Eliza shook her head quickly. "Sometimes he's sappy—he admits it. Just



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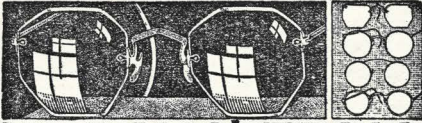
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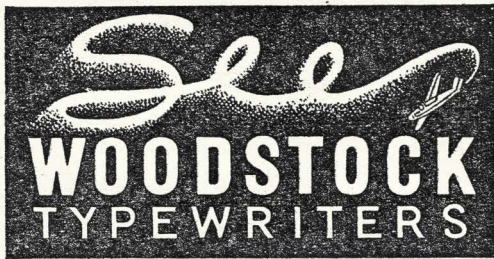


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now," she commented, "he's got another ace. I can tell it by the look of him. All right, Stacie, come out with it."

Esler grouchily set the box down on the radio and took a candy, stuck it into his mouth.

Decker dropped his cigarette into the tray, lit another one. "I don't know if I will. It's foolproof, and it's my out. I can get all the way out on it."

Esler's face reddened. "See how far you can get." He wagged the gun in his hand.

"Don't let the clam in you come to the surface now," Eliza advised. "You've been talking right along, get out the last of it."

Decker nodded. "That's right, I've been doing all the talking. All right, now I want to do some listening. I want to know how long I've been marked down for the slaughter. Since the beginning, eh?"

Eliza murmured: "Vanity, vanity. All is vanity."

"You fitted in nicely," Big Jim Esler remarked. "We thought we might need something like you."

"Stop it!" Eliza ordered, turned her eyes to Decker's. "That's what he thought, Stacie. I liked you." She glanced at Esler. "Can't you see the poor boy's ego is just quivering, begging for some gentling?"

Stacie picked up the ash tray, scrounged his cigarette into it, then broke the cigarette apart, scattering the tobacco and ash about the tray. Nervously, he did the same with the cigarette he had already deposited there, and lit another.

"All right," Esler barked. "Have it any way you like. Things were working up to a point. Some one was going to be in trouble soon, and anyone that liked to be around, just to look at Eliza and ask no questions, was liable to come in handy. Spit it out. Decker, what's your story?"

Decker hesitated, spat a shred of tobacco from his lip.

"I don't know enough yet," he argued quietly. "I want more. What was Parks to you two, and you two to Parks?"

Esler's lips puckered sullenly. "He's stalling." Esler glanced towards Eliza for confirmation.

Eliza studied Decker critically, nodded. "He is stalling."

"Then why do we have to be bothered with him?" Esler argued. "Let's get rid of him. Turn him out. What's he got on us? The coat-tree? I'll have that so far away by the time the police start listening to him, not to say believing him, that no one will ever believe there was such a thing. It sounds silly anyway. There's probably a dozen of them in the house."

Eliza raised her hand, shut him off. "Staige, you're stalling."

Decker snuffed out his cigarette, broke it up in the tray.

"You're stalling, Staige," Eliza went on, "but you're keeping something back. What is it?"

"You heard my question." Decker lit another cigarette.

"You going to tell him?" Esler burst out.

ELIZA nodded. "Don't you notice how nervous he is? Smoking cigarettes half-way, tearing them apart. We may as well go the whole way with him. Staige, times have been hard—"

"Suppose you skip that part," Decker suggested. "I know it well, and times are going to be so much tougher for you two that the past doesn't count anyway."

"But you're going to help us, Staige," Eliza pleaded. "And we're going to help you. You can't get out without us, and maybe we're stuck without you. Murder has a way of not working out even and clean. I told Jim not to kill Parks. Now, we're in too deep. Here it is in a few words."

"We were handling dope. Making nice money. Some one was after us. Parks, we found out. We kept him off. Then he got too much on us. Tonight, he told us, the jig was up. Jim killed him. Parks didn't know Jim was standing within a foot of him, behind the curtain. It was so easy, Jim choked him to death."

Esler confusedly ate another candy.

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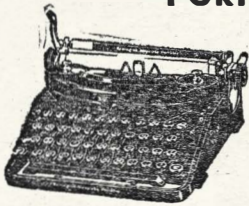
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"Fair enough," Decker admitted. "You've told me, I'll tell you. While Jim was choking him to death, Parks fought back, I guess. Then he knew it was no use fighting. He used his head, he wanted to leave something that would point to Esler. Parks took a candy from your pocket, Esler, squashed it in his hand in his death throes.

"Candy means you. The candy in his hand, the candy that was in the paper sack you threw away. The candy that is in your stomach. Ever hear of a stomach pump? If all that candy matches, where are you?" Decker raised his voice. "You're on your last box of candy now, Esler."

Esler spat a candy out of his mouth.

"You've talked yourself to death," Esler growled, his face mottled. "You're not going to live to tell that. No one can trace it out but you. You've got the sack, heh? I'll get it. What I've eaten—it won't matter."

Esler brought his gun up.

Decker remarked: "Kill me here? The police are very likely to check my movements earlier tonight."

Esler turned his eyes towards Eliza. Before she could answer, Decker swooped, grabbed her up in his arms and held her in front of him.

"Take him, Jim," she ordered.

"I can handle him," Esler strode in. "Brave guy, using a woman for cover, heh?"

Esler was a step away. Eliza brought her heel up hard against Decker's shins, sprang away as he let go, winced. Decker let go, grabbed up the ash tray, flung the ashes and tobacco into Esler's face, ducked the wild shot Esler fired.

"I made that dish especially for you,"

Decker announced.

Stepping in fast, he hooked a swift right to Esler's chin, hit him again. He stepped after him, broke the gun out of his hand.

Eliza was tearing a drawer open. Decker put the gun on her. "Hold it, Eliza. Now you two get over here while I get to the phone. Come on. Sometimes I'm sappy; sometimes I'm lucky. Percentage takes care of me."

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