

10¢

TEN

**10 STORIES
10¢**

DETECTIVE ACES

FEBRUARY



EMERY CLARKE

The
**SILVER
SNARE**

"Moon Man"
Novel By

FREDERICK C. DAVIS

**CORRIDORS
OF HORROR**

"Capt. Murdock" Novelet
By CARL McK. SAUNDERS

Also
J. LANE
LINKLATER
JOE ARCHIBALD

And

10,000

*More Words
In This Issue!*

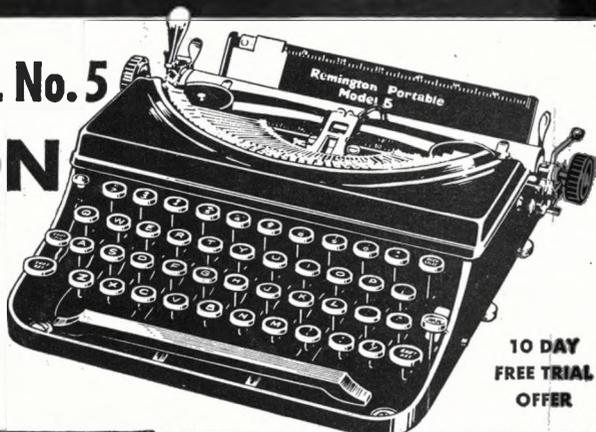
"A Cent a Story"

ANNOUNCING AMAZING TYPEWRITER BARGAIN

BRAND NEW MODEL No. 5

REMINGTON
PORTABLE
10¢ A DAY

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE



10 DAY
FREE TRIAL
OFFER

LOWEST PRICES IN HISTORY
ACT NOW! PRICE CANNOT
BE GUARANTEED

● Positively the greatest portable typewriter bargain ever offered! Now for the first time Remington, world-famous manufacturer, offers a NEW purchase plan... only 10¢ a day buys this latest model machine! Not a used or rebuilt typewriter. Not an incomplete machine. A beautiful brand new regulation Remington Portable. Standard 4-row keyboard; Standard width carriage; margin release on keyboard; back spacer; automatic ribbon reverse; every essential feature found in standard typewriters!

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Hundreds of jobs are waiting for people who can type. A typewriter helps put your ideas on paper in logical, impressive form... helps you write clear, understandable sales reports, letters, articles, or stories. A Remington Portable has started many a young man and woman on the road to success.



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If you want a gift for birthday, Christmas, or graduation... one that Father, Mother, Sister or Brother will use and appreciate for years to come... give a Remington Portable. It's the one gift that can be used with both pleasure and profit by every member of the family.

ACT... WHILE LOW PRICE HOLDS GOOD!

New wage scales in our own factories, and in the factories of the companies which make our materials, point definitely to higher prices. Stocks of machines on hand make possible the present unbelievably low cash price on this machine. Everything points to higher prices. We cannot possibly guarantee this low price in the face of constantly rising costs in every one of our departments. So we say... "Act fast!"

10 DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER

You can try this machine for 10 days without risking a penny of your money. Not even shipping charges. Send for complete details on this most liberal offer. Get attractive new catalogue illustrating and describing the many Remington models available on unusually low terms. Clip coupon today!

EVERY ESSENTIAL FEATURE found in Standard Machines

Buying a typewriter isn't like buying a suit of clothes. Many Remington portables, seeing 10 years of hard service are still in active use. When you buy... buy a machine with every standard feature. The Remington No. 5 is the most compact and durable portable ever built... includes all essential standard typewriter features. This beautiful machine

represents the height of economy... unequalled economy in cost... unequalled economy in service.

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Specifications...

The Model 5 includes every essential feature found in standard typewriters. It has standard 4-row keyboard, complete visibility, standard width carriage for long envelopes. Carriage return lever of exceptional design for easy and rapid operation.

tion. Margin release on the keyboard. Automatic ribbon spacer. Back spacer. Two color ribbon. Variable line spacer. Adjustable margin stops. Auto set. Top cover. Key case of the most useful design found on any typewriter. Weight 11 lbs., 13 oz. Furnished with pen or Elite type.

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When you get your new Remington No. 5, you will get with it... **ABSOLUTELY FREE**... a 15-page course in typing. It teaches the Touch System, speeds up work. It is simply written and well illustrated. Instructions are easy as A. B. C. Even a child can understand this method. A little study and the average person, child or grown-up, becomes a typewriter. Follow this course during the 10 DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER that we give you on your typewriter. At the end of that time, you should be able to dash off letters faster than with pen and ink.

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FREE



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Address _____
City _____ State _____

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SAVE ON TIRES NOW

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12

MONTH WRITTEN GUARANTY BOND WITH EACH TIRE

ALL TUBES GUARANTEED BRAND NEW

HOW TO ORDER

Send \$1 deposit with each tire ordered (\$4 with each Truck Tire.) Balance C.O.D.

If you send cash in full deduct 5%.

Remember - 12 months' guaranteed service or replacement at half price.

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30x4.50-21	2.40	0.85
28x4.75-19	2.45	0.95
29x4.75-20	2.50	0.95
29x5.00-19	2.85	1.05
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.05
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.15
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.15
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.15
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.15
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.25
33x6.00-21	3.65	1.25
31x6.50-19	3.60	1.35
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.35
34x7.00-20	4.60	1.65
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31x4		2.95	0.85
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33x4		2.95	0.85
34x4		3.25	0.85
32x4½		3.35	1.15
33x4½		3.45	1.15
34-x4½		3.45	1.15
30x5		3.65	1.35
33x5		3.75	1.45
35x5		3.95	1.55
Heavy Duty TRUCK TIRES			
Size	Tire	Tube	
30x5	\$4.25	\$1.95	
32x6	8 ply 6.95	2.75	
32x6	10 ply 7.95	2.75	
36x6	8.95	3.35	
34x7	9.95	3.25	
36x8	11.45	3.95	
40x8	13.25	4.15	
Heavy Duty Truck Balloons			
Size	Tire	Tube	
7.50-20	\$6.95	\$3.75	
8.25-20	8.95	4.95	
9.00-20	10.95	5.65	
9.75-20	13.95	6.45	

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Please mention MAGAZINE PUBLISHERS GROUP when answering advertisements

10 STORIES 10¢

TEN DETECTIVE ACES

"A Cent a Story!"

A. A. WYN, Editor

HARRY WIDMER, Associate Editor

VOL. XXII

FEBRUARY, 1935

No. 4

Ten Thousand More Words in This Issue!

Ten Complete Stories—No Serials!

1. THE SILVER SNARE ("Moon Man" Novel) . . . Frederick C. Davis 12
Detective Lieutenant McEwen, the notorious Moon Man's bitterest enemy, is accused of being the Moon Man—and it sticks.
2. PHANTOM FINGER Anthony Clemens 39
A corpse marks the spot.
3. MARRIED FOR MURDER Emile C. Tepperman 41
Marty Quade bucks a clever marriage racket.
4. I KILL THE DEAD! (Mystery Novel) Margie Harris 50
A liquor-sodden reporter and an ex-federal dick knew where to find the notorious Woman in Black
5. THE JUDGMENT RAY G. T. Fleming-Roberts 79
A murderer's account is strangely squared.
6. DEATH GAG J. Lane Linklater 82
Life was just a gag to little Algic. But being on a wild party with a gunman's doll wasn't his idea of fun.
- The March TEN DETECTIVE ACES 91
7. CORRIDORS OF HORROR ("Capt. Murdock" Novelet) Carl McK. Saunders 92
Murder was murder to hard-boiled John Murdock. And he didn't care whose toes he stepped on—noble or common.
8. INITIALS OF DOOM (True Crime Story) Cliff Howe 109
A killer leaves his hideous handiwork in a Canadian swamp.
9. FIRE CHEATERS ("Dizzy Duo" Yarn) Joe Archibald 111
Snooty's newspaper crusade boomerangs.
10. PICKED CLEAN Robert S. Fenton 120
A murderer's alibi is picked clean.

Cover by Emery Clarke. From "Married for Murder."

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Twelve Issues \$1.00. Single Copies Ten Cents.



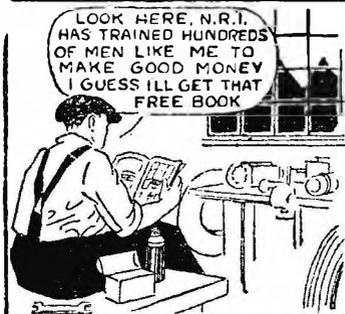
BUT JIM, I DON'T SEE HOW WE CAN AFFORD TO MARRY.



MARY'S RIGHT. I REALLY CAN'T SUPPORT A WIFE.



GUESS I HAVEN'T A RIGHT TO ASK A GIRL LIKE MARY TO MARRY AN ORDINARY MECHANIC.



LOOK HERE, N.R.I. HAS TRAINED HUNDREDS OF MEN LIKE ME TO MAKE GOOD MONEY. I GUESS I'LL GET THAT FREE BOOK.



THIS IS SWELL FUN, AND I AM BEGINNING TO MAKE MONEY ON THE SIDE ALREADY. RADIO SURE IS FULL OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRAINED MEN.



YOU CERTAINLY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER.

'THANKS' YOU SEE I HAVE TAKEN N.R.I. TRAINING.



OH! JIM, IT'S WONDERFUL. NOW YOU'RE ON THE WAY TO SUCCESS.

YES MARY, AND THERE'S A REAL FUTURE FOR US IN THIS RADIO FIELD.

I'LL TRAIN YOU AT HOME In Your Spare Time For A GOOD RADIO JOB

Mail the coupon now. Get the facts about Radio—the field with a future. N. R. I. training fits you for jobs in connection with the manufacture, sale and operation of Radio equipment. It fits you to go in business for yourself, service sets, operate on board ships, in bus, churches, television, aviation, police Radio and many other jobs. My FREE book tells how you quickly learn at home in spare time to be a Radio Expert.

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Many Make \$5, \$10, \$15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

Hold your job. I'll not only train you in a few hours of your spare time a week, but the day you enroll I'll send you instructions, which you should master quickly, for doing 25 Radio jobs common in most every neighborhood. I give you Radio Equipment for conducting experiments and making tests that teach you to build and service practically every type of receiving set made. Cleo T. Beller, 30 W. Beechwood Ave., Dayton, Ohio wrote: "Working only in spare time, I made about \$1,500 while taking the course."

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My book has shown hundreds of fellows how to make more money and win success. It's FREE to any ambitious fellow over 15 years of age. Investigate. Find out what Radio offers you. Read what my Employment Department does to help you get into Radio after graduation, about my Money Back Agreement, and the many other N. R. I. features. Mail the coupon in an envelope, or paste it on a 1c post card TODAY.

**J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 5BA8
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**

**J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 5BA8
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send your book which points out the spare time and full time job opportunities in Radio and your 60-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts.
(Please print plainly)

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ADDRESS.....
CITY.....STATE.....



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The man who has directed the Home-Study Training of more men for the Radio industry than any other man in America.

HERE'S PROOF that my training pays



With R. C. A. Victor I am with R. C. A. Victor. I have been promoted several times. Am in full charge of Radio Frequency Testing Dept. Louis F. Lyon, 17th Floor, Six, Philadelphia, Pa.



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Doctors Praise Cystex — Works in 15 Minutes

Cleans Out Acids and Poisons — Purifies Blood — Brings New Energy in 48 Hours.

There are 9 million tiny, delicate tubes or filters in your kidneys which must work every minute of the night and day cleansing out Acids, Poisons, and Wastes from your blood. If your kidneys or bladder do not function right, your body gradually becomes poisoned, you feel old and worn-out before your time, and may suffer from any of these energy-killing symptoms: Getting Up Nights, Loss of Vigor, Leg Pains, Nervousness, Lumbago, Swollen Joints, Rheumatic Pains, Dizziness, Dark Circles Under Eyes, Headaches, Frequent Colds, Burning, Smarting, Itching, and Acidity.

But you need not suffer another day from poorly functioning kidneys or bladder without the benefits of a Doctor's special prescription called Cystex (pronounced Siss-tex).

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Cystex is not an experiment—it is quick and sure in action and has been tested and proved in millions of cases throughout the world. Because it combats and corrects many func-



Dr. T. A. Ellis

tionally disordered, Cystex has gained a world-wide reputation as a successful treatment. Dr. T. A. Ellis, graduate of Toronto University, recently wrote: "Cystex's influence in aiding the treatment of sluggish kidney and bladder functions cannot be over-estimated. I have used a formula which I have used in my own practice for many years with excellent results. Cystex hastens the passage of over-acid irritants, thereby overcoming a frequent cause of burning, itching, getting up nights and frequent urination."

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Because of its world-wide success, in even the most stubborn cases, the Doctor's prescription called Cystex is offered to sufferers from poorly functioning kidneys and bladder under the late-pay guarantee to fix you up to your complete satisfaction or your money back on return of empty package. Get Cystex from your druggist and try it under the money-back guarantee. Beware of substitutes and remember that the kidneys are endangered by strait, irritating drugs or neglect. Cystex is the only specially-prepared Doctor's prescription guaranteed for kidney dysfunctions. Tell your druggist what you must have Cystex (pronounced Siss-tex). Look for it in the black and red striped package.



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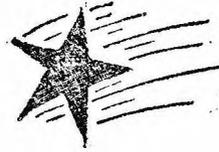
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forward to financial independence at 60

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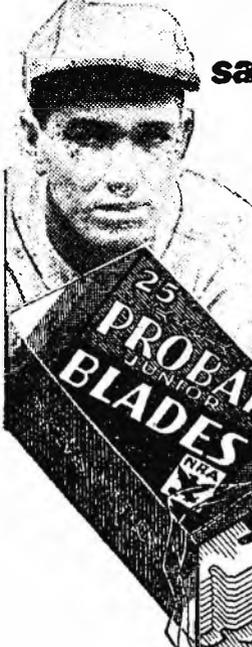
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Probak Jr. is the product of unequalled manufacturing methods and skill. It is automatically tempered, honed and stropped to give you a degree of shaving comfort never before obtainable at such a low price. Get Probak Jr. today—from your dealer. See why millions of men prefer them.

*Probak Junior is a product of
Gillette and fits all Gillette
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Beats Coal or Wood

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SALESMEN
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Slips Into Any Old Stove, Range or Furnace. No Dirt, Ashes—Twice the Heat, Half Cost!

COOKS A MEAL for 1¢

Beats any oil burner ever gotten out for low cost, perfect performance. Slips into any old stove, range or furnace; burns cheap oil a new way, without generating or clogging up. Intense heat instantly. BY SIMPLE TURN OF VALVE.



Here's a REAL one. Clark of Ind. sold 93 in 30 days. O'Toole of Mass. sold 114 in July. Get YOUR OWN oil burner FREE and Make REAL MONEY. Write quick.

TRY AT OUR RISK — 30 DAY TRIAL — dirt of coal or wood; cuts fuel bills in half, pays for itself quickly by what IT SAVES.

FREE SAMPLE TO AGENTS offered to one energetic man or woman in each locality who will demonstrate and take orders.

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Made in Paris

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- No. 1 Group consisting of 8 Picture Combination
- No. 2 Group consisting of 8 Picture Combination
- No. 3 Group consisting of 12 Picture Combination
- No. 4 Group consisting of 12 Picture Combination

The above include photos of men and women in interesting poses, women alone, etc., all real photos for the Lover of Art. Remember, they are all actual reproductions of genuine French Pictures.

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FREE—Send this ad with your first order and we will also send you absolutely free, the following: 12 Love Letters, read two ways, also some short stories and an illustrated booklet of interesting cartoon scenes. Get your order in NOW and get acquainted.

EVERYTHING MENTIONED ABOVE INCLUDED ALL FOR \$1.00

Send cash, money order or stamps. Sent sealed.

LE FLEUR COMPANY

Dept. S

548 Melrose Ave., New York City



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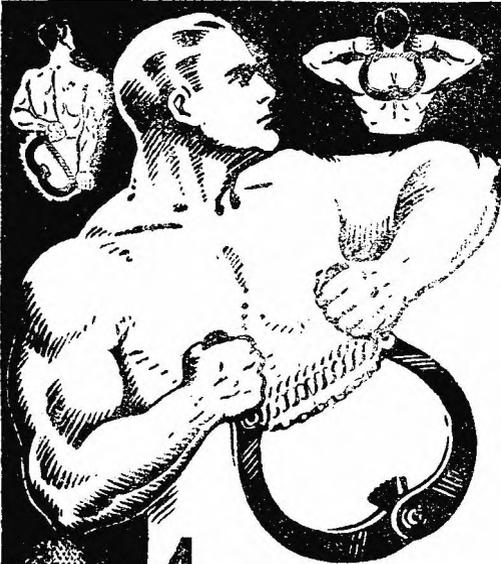
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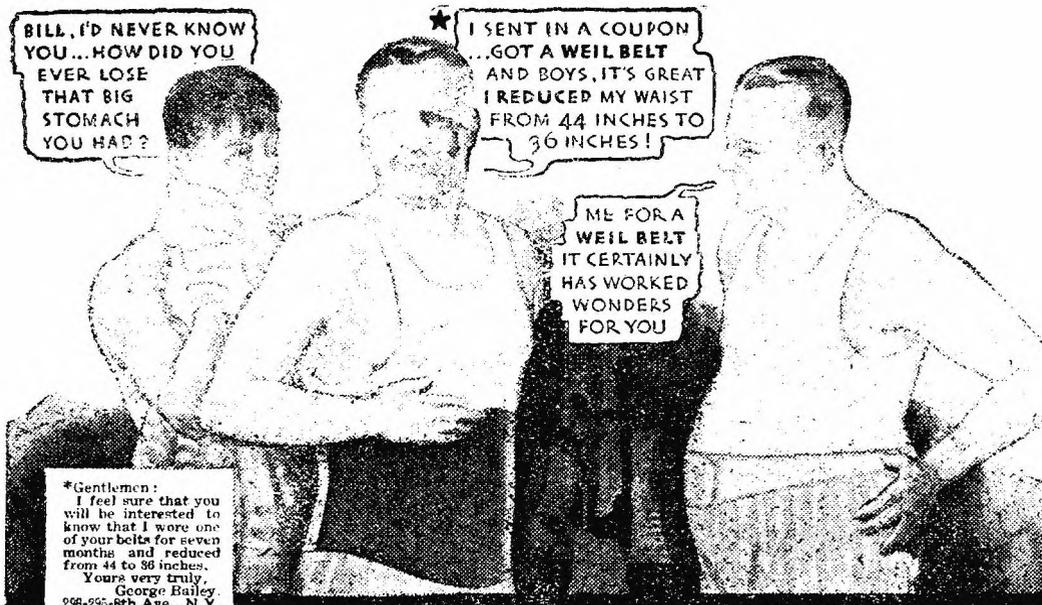
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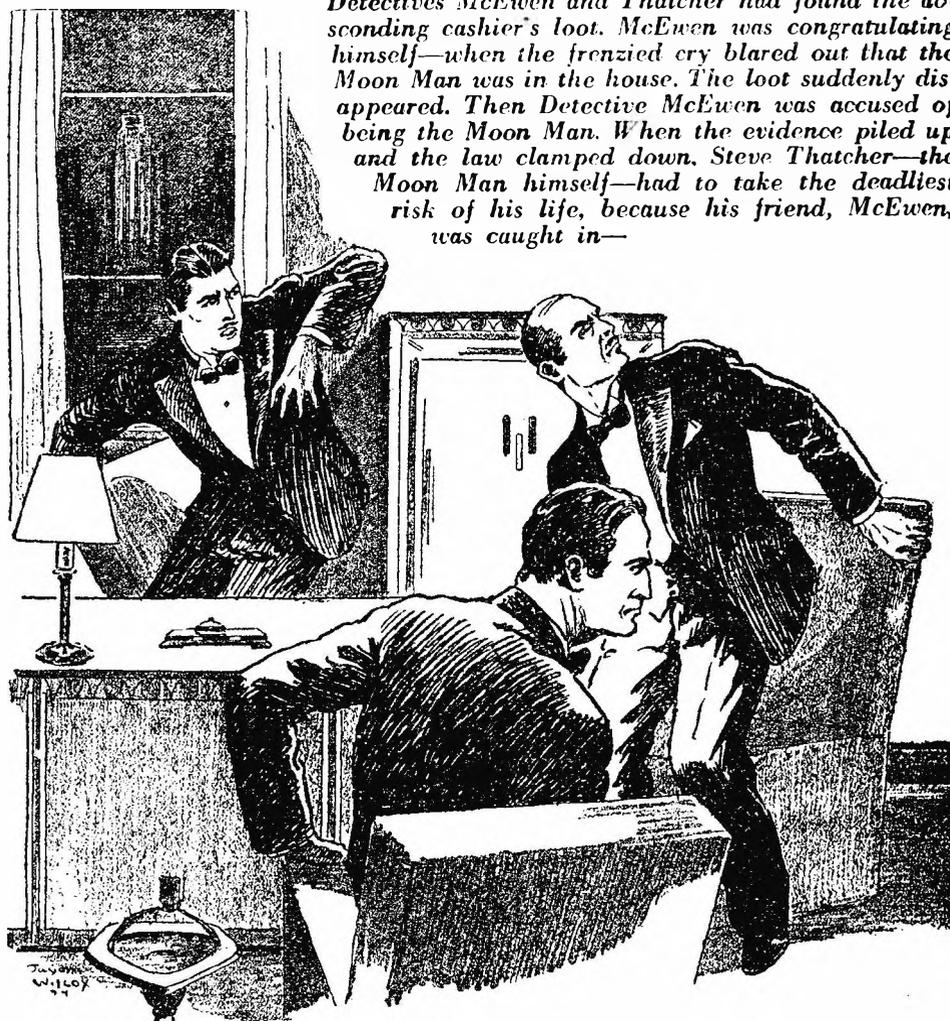
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Detectives McEwen and Thatcher had found the absconding cashier's loot. McEwen was congratulating himself—when the frenzied cry blared out that the Moon Man was in the house. The loot suddenly disappeared. Then Detective McEwen was accused of being the Moon Man. When the evidence piled up and the law clamped down, Steve Thatcher—the Moon Man himself—had to take the deadliest risk of his life, because his friend, McEwen, was caught in—



Great "Moon Man" Novel

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CHAPTER I

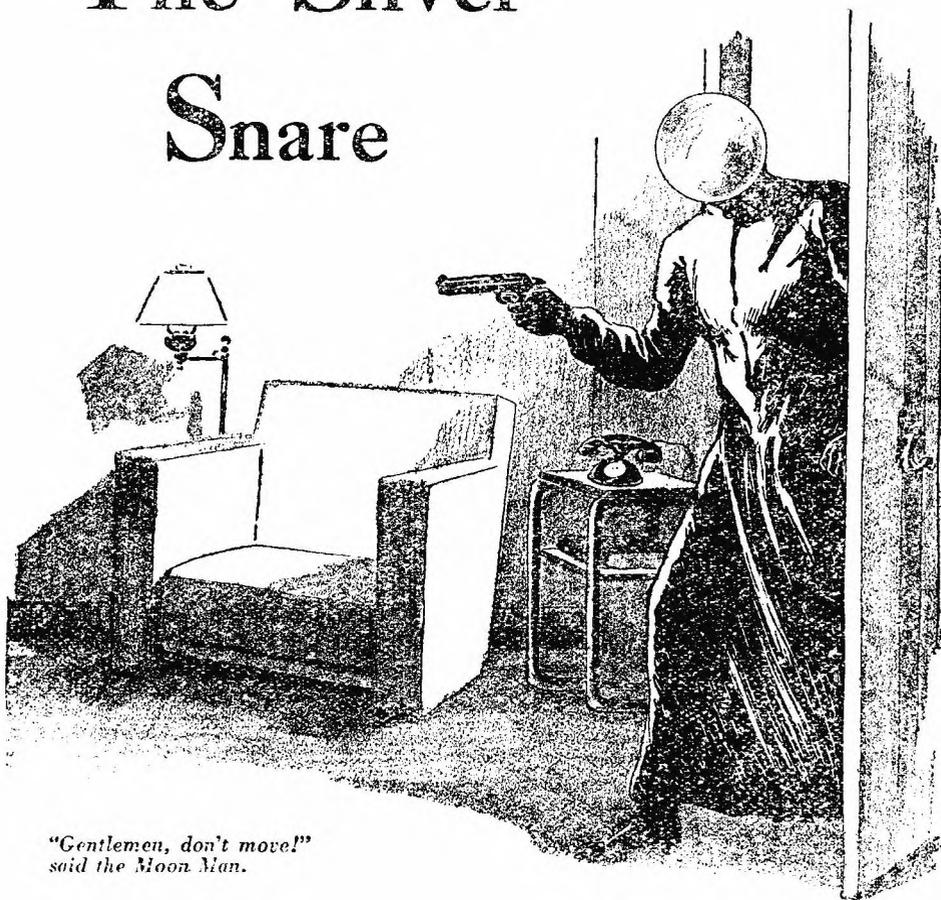
DOUBLE LOOT

STEPHEN THATCHER, detective sergeant, brought his roadster to a quiet stop in the black alley. He listened alertly through the soft playing of the car radio and heard no other sound. He gazed at the house sitting be-

yond the wire fence and saw no light, no movement. He slid from the seat, opened the rumble compartment, and carefully lifted out a black bundle.

He moved silently through the gate, into the dark yard. He took slow, noiseless steps toward the rear of the house. He stooped near a cellar window and tucked the bundle out of sight behind thick

The Silver Snare



*"Gentlemen, don't move!"
said the Moon Man.*

bushes. Still listening warily, he drifted back to the gate and climbed in behind the wheel of the roadster.

The dance music had ceased issuing from the radio under the dash and an announcer was speaking. "Bring you now the latest news bulletins. The police, under the direction of Detective Lieutenant Gilbert McEwen, are combing the city in search of Raymond Harte, cashier of the Great City National Bank, who fled this morning following the discovery that he had stolen many thousands from that institution. Harte is known to be hiding in the city."

Steve Thatcher rolled the car quietly along the bleak alley, toward the street.

"Over a period of months," the radio continued, "Harte had been skilfully covering his thefts. His embezzlements were discovered this morning. Questioned by Howard Blair, president of the bank, he denied the charges. When Blair began to telephone police headquarters, Harte struck him, knocking him down, and fled the bank. The police, notified immediately, began an intensive search for Harte."

Thatcher again turned the car toward the alley and the house, the rear of which he had just visited so cautiously.

"Harte is still missing. His wife is now at police headquarters, being questioned, but she denies all knowledge of her husband's thievery. The stolen money has not been reported located. Detective Lieutenant McEwen, backed by his ablest men, is concentrating—"

Thatcher clicked the radio switch and the ignition as he swerved to the curb beyond the one dark house on the block. With all lights out he waited in it. Presently another car passed his slowly and stopped. Soon a third followed, parking beyond. Three men walked toward him, and Steve Thatcher slipped out to join them. They were Detective Sergeants Mark Keanan, Hugh Sullivan, and Frank Packer.

They glanced cautiously up and down the street when they reached the dark house. They trod to the front entrance and knocked. A name plate was affixed to the door: *Harte*. It opened slowly and a grim-faced man looked out. He was Gil McEwen, ace sleuth of the Great City plainclothes division, hater of crooks, nemesis of hunted men.

The four stepped in and McEwen shut the door. He led them down the gloomy hallway. At another door he paused. He dug his fingers at the outer edge of one side of its frame. A grating sound came as the section of frame opened on hinges, revealing a hidden cavity. On thin shelves, one above the other, rested fat rolls of bank notes—many of them.

"There's the money that Harte got away with," McEwen told the others tartly. "Twenty thousand bucks."

McEwen's face, hard as old leather, was dark lined in the shine of a small night light in the lower hall. His gray eyes shone like burnished steel. He merely nodded when Mark Keanan said: "Good work, Gil!"

"Steve and I," McEwen said gratingly, "searched this place from attic to cellar this afternoon. I've been watching this layout ever since we found the money. I've got a damn' strong hunch that Harte's coming back for it—tonight."

"This is one job, at least," Keanan remarked, "that the Moon Man didn't pull."

McEwen scowled. "It's a relief to work

on a case the Moon Man's not mixed up in!" he declared sourly. "Harte can't stay in this town. It's too hot. I found out a little while ago he was planning to skip, anyway. There's a reservation on the eleven-fifty for Chicago tonight in the name of Martin, but the description of the man who made it fits Harte. His only chance of skipping town is to use that reservation and he knows it."

Steve Thatcher, young, clean-cut, brisk mannered, saw McEwen's eyes glitter coldly.

"He'll come here first to get the money. He must be planning to disguise himself somehow and start for Chicago on the eleven-fifty. He's not going to go any farther than this house. We'll get him cold—with the cash. It's almost eleven now. We won't have to wait long, by damn!"

"Okay, Gil," Steve Thatcher said quietly. "I'll take the back of the house."

"Right. Keanan and Sullivan, you watch the open side. Packer, take the other. I'll stay out in front. If you see Harte slip in, give him a couple of minutes to get the money. Grab him when he comes out. If he puts up a fight—well, don't kill him. Now go to your places."

McEwen stepped to the rear door. Steve Thatcher led the way out. Packer drifted into the darkness of the narrow lawn on the far side of the house. Sullivan and Keanan stole into the shadows across the driveway. McEwen waited at Steve Thatcher's side until they vanished.

"Keep an eye on Keanan, Steve," he said in a low tone. "That bird's too damn' ambitious. He wants to make himself the big shot on the force. He'll jump the gun and try to take Harte single-handed and probably wreck the whole works if we don't stop him. All set."

McEwen eased out of sight, past the corner. Steve Thatcher shifted aside. He stood motionless, listening. There was no sound, no suggestion that four men were hiding in the yard. His breath came more rapidly. His nerves tingled. He stooped and lifted, from behind the dark bushes, the black bundle he had secretly placed there.

He unrolled a long robe, dark as the

night, and shook it over his shoulders. He drew on black gloves. He fitted over his head the hinged halves of a sphere of silvered glass. In the gloom Steve Thatcher vanished. The ghostly figure that appeared in his place was that of the most daring, the most notorious criminal who had ever operated in the city.

The Moon Man.

MC EWEN had said: "It's a relief to work on a case the Moon Man's not mixed up in." McEwen's relief was doomed to be short-lived. The Moon Man was placing himself, at this moment, at the very vortex of this case.

"A relief," McEwen had said, because for months he had vainly trailed the notorious criminal. Again and again he had laid traps that the Moon Man had escaped. Repeatedly he had sworn to get the Moon Man, to send the Moon Man up the river and to the chair, but the ghostly crook was still at large.

McEwen hated the Moon Man as he hated no other crook operating. He was that notorious criminal's avowed enemy—and best friend. He did not dream that the Moon Man was Steve Thatcher, detective sergeant, son of the chief of police and the fiancé of his daughter Sue.

The chair—McEwen had promised him that. The Moon Man was wanted for murder. It was a murder he had not committed, but proving his innocence was impossible. He was wanted for two kidnapings. He was wanted for innumerable robberies. Time and again he had appeared out of the night as if with some power of black magic, seized his loot, and vanished. Tonight he was intent on taking for his own twenty thousand dollars of stolen cash.

The Moon Man stood a vague black figure, his head a mottled sphere of silver, peering across the dark lawn. The Argus glass of his mask looked opaque as a mirror from the outside, but through it he could see as clearly as though it were flawless crystal. His black-gloved hand swung an automatic. He moved with the silence of a shadow to the rear door of the house.

Out of sight of the four detectives

watching, he twisted the knob and sidled through. He paused in the dark hallway. The Moon Man, as Steve Thatcher, had become familiar with every cubic inch of the house that afternoon. He moved now according to plan. He opened one of the rear doors slightly and left it ajar. He made sure that all others were closed. He drifted to the panel of wood behind which the loot was hidden.

His black fingers pried it open. His black hands closed upon the rolls of currency, thrust them through slits in the sides of his flowing robe, and left them in a capacious pocket. His movements were quick; and when he paused the secret recess was empty. The twenty thousand had passed from the possession of one crook to another.

The Moon Man bore upon the wooden strip to close it, and a warning tingled along his nerves. A sound rattled in the hallway. It was the click of a bolt withdrawing from its socket. The Moon Man's robe flapped as he whirled away. He saw the front entrance opening. He saw a face, shaded by a hat, peering in. It was that of the absconding cashier, Raymond Harte.

Harte stopped short, staring in paralyzed surprise. The Moon Man's automatic flickered at him and stifled an exclamation in his throat. The Moon Man's voice rang at him through the shell mask.

"Stay where you are!"

The black figure whirled. His robe flicked through the door he had left ajar. He snapped it shut, turning across the large rear room. There were set-tubs against one wall, a washing-machine in the corner, a drying rack overhead. The Moon Man strode toward a window and stopped short. He brought up, rigid, because that window had been shut and now was open. Outside it, the head and shoulders of a man were silhouetted. Outside it, a pistol positive glittered.

The voice of Detective Sergeant Mark Keanan commanded: "Don't move, Mr. Moon Man!"

The Moon Man backed, his breath whistling past the deflector inside his silver mask. His black hand brought his automatic grimly into line. He pulled the

trigger. A shot smashed outward through the window.

Mark Keanan gasped when he felt the slug tear through the felt of his hat. He dropped below the sill. He shouted hoarsely: "The Moon Man's inside! The Moon—" He broke off because a long, black arm swung outward through the window and cracked the butt of an automatic forcibly against his head.

Keanan slumped.

The Moon Man retreated from the window. On the lawn outside he heard quick footfalls, the headquarters men closing in on the house. Swiftly, near the inner door, he lifted off his globular mask. Swiftly he jerked out of his robe and gloves. With breathlessly fast movements, he whipped the robe around the fragile glass shell. He lifted the shining lid of the washing-machine, dropped the bundle inside, and replaced the cover. All the while he peered in an agony of anxiety at the rear window that was open.

A shout sounded sharply outside: "The doors! Block all the doors!" And it was McEwen's command.

Steve Thatcher snapped into the kitchen. He shouldered into the hall and out the rear entrance. A dark figure swung into sight past the corner of the house as he faced the entrance and thrust it open again. To all appearances Steve Thatcher had just rushed to it from his hiding place in the yard. The man who sped into the house behind him was Sullivan.

At the front of the hall, the terrorized Harte was jerking the door open. He started through, stopped, backed. Packer was rushing at him from the lawn with the pistol positive leveled. Steve Thatcher and Sullivan closed in from the rear. Harte whirled, eyes widened, and retreated whimpering to the wall. Guns peered at him from both sides.

"Steady, Harte!" Packer warned. "You're got!"

AT the rear of the house, Gil McEwen's voice boomed. "Scatter! Watch the doors. Somebody said the Moon Man—"

His words echoed confusedly in the ears of Mark Keanan. Keanan was on hands and knees outside the open rear window, his ringing head drooping. He brought himself up dizzily, tightening his grip on the service gat he had almost dropped. As he rose he saw light appear inside the window. He dragged himself to the sill and peered in.

Gil McEwen, striding toward the window, stopped short and glared. "Oh, God!" he moaned. "You! Stay at that window!"

McEwen's heels hammered out of the laundry. He charged into the hall to see Packer poking a gun at Harte near the front entrance. Sullivan was guarding the door behind them. Steve Thatcher was stationed at the rear of the hall. McEwen stopped short and his eyes glittered.

"Who said the Moon Man was in here? Who said that, by damn!"

He waited for no answer. The mere mention of the Moon Man had thrown him into a frigid frenzy. He sped to the base of the stairs, knowing that the only two entrances to the house were well guarded. Steve Thatcher watched him climb out of sight. Heart pounding, lips tightened, Thatcher waited on guard.

He heard Gil Ewen tramping into all the rooms upstairs. He heard McEwen climbing into the attic. He saw McEwen hurry back down, jerk open the cellar doorway, and charge downward. Glancing aside, he saw the laundry door open and Mark Keanan appear. Keanan blinked in pain as blood beat through his head from the effort expended in climbing in through the open window. Out of the cellar, next moment, raced McEwen.

McEwen thrust an unlighted cigar into his teeth. His heels pounded as he made a circuit of the lower rooms. He came back into the hall, withered Harte with a stare, and stood while his face slowly became beet-red with wrath.

"Who said the Moon Man was in here?" he demanded again. "By damn, somebody's crazy!"

Keanan was peering at McEwen piercingly. "I said he was in here. He was. I saw him!"

"You saw a ghost!"

"I saw the Moon Man!" Keanan insisted. "I spotted him in the laundry. You heard the shot he fired. Look at the hole in my hat! He cracked me on the head. No ghost did that. The Moon Man was in this house!"

Sullivan declared breathlessly: "Steve and I came in the rear door a second after that shot was fired, Gil. I'm damn' certain no Moon Man got out that way!"

Packer asserted: "I stopped Harte when he was beating it out the front. Nobody else was in sight. The Moon Man didn't get past me!"

"Somebody's screwy!" McEwen snarled. "He's not in this house now. I'm positive of that! He couldn't've got out. Then he wasn't here in the first place. He wasn't—"

"I saw him!"

Raymond Harte, backed against the wall by the gun in Packer's hand, made the breathless statement. McEwen turned glinting eyes upon him. McEwen marched to him. McEwen thrust a warning finger at his nose.

"You did, did you? Lying's not going to do you any good, Harte! We've got you cold! You're going up for embezzlement and all the fancy stories you can tell about the Moon Man won't save you."

"He was here, I tell you! He was back there when I came in—at that door! He turned a gun on me! He—"

"That door!"

McEwen blasted it out. He strode to the door that connected with the dining room beyond. He dug his fingernails into the crack behind the hinged section of frame. He forced it open. He stood back and his teeth drove deep into his cigar as he stared at—empty spaces.

"By damn! By damn! The money's gone!"

He strode again to Harte. He slapped his hands over Harte's pockets. When he backed away his eyes were shining like ice. Suddenly he about-faced. Suddenly he grabbed at the telephone sitting on a taboret in the hall.

"Police headquarters!" he snapped. "Quick!"

Mark Keanan said evenly into the tense

silence that followed: "I saw the Moon Man in the laundry, Gil—and when I looked in again, you were there."

McEwen ignored that. "Brady!" he snarled into the transmitter. "Flash the radio room. The Moon Man's just skipped out of the Harte house with twenty grand in stolen money. Signal all cars. Order every cop out to find that crook. We've got to grab the Moon Man. This time we've got to collar that crook, by damn!"

Steve Thatcher was peering anxiously into the grim, hard face of McEwen; his heart was speeding with growing dread.

CHAPTER II

BLACK EVIDENCE

"CALLING all cars. Calling all cars. The Moon Man has been seen in the house at Code Forty Dash Six Two Five. Watch all main thoroughfares. Stop all light cars. Use caution. If trapped, the Moon Man may shoot to kill! Your orders are to take the Moon Man dead or alive. Calling all cars."

The warning echoed from the radios of scores of prowling cars patrolling Great City. It tightened the nerves of every cop who heard it. It sent them scurrying rapidly to strategic points, brought their eyes toward every suspicious vehicle and their hands to the butts of their guns. Again and again the signal drummed into their ears and their minds.

"Calling all cars. Take the Moon Man dead or alive. Anyone possessing information that might lead to the capture of the Moon Man is asked to communicate with police headquarters at once!"

In hundreds of homes, radios, turned to the police wavelength, reproduced the grim announcement. The words tightened the entire city into a desperate man-hunt, words droned into a microphone in a small room in the headquarters building, multiplying themselves as they lightening through the ether.

Steve Thatcher passed the radio room in headquarters and thrust open the door labeled *Chief of Police*. He found the office empty. From an adjoining room came voices, a breathless voice urged on

by a heavier, commanding one. Steve Thatcher was moving toward the connecting door when the entrance opened again. A girl came in.

She was strikingly pretty, in her early twenties—and alarmed. She was the only daughter of Gil McEwen, the fiancée of Steve Thatcher. The color faded from her cheeks as she faced the man she loved. She went to him quickly. Her small hands tightened on his arms.

"Steve, what have you done?" Sue McEwen asked in a whisper. "The alarm's still going out. Dad's more desperately in earnest than he ever was before. Oh, Steve, darling—"

"Easy, Sue!" Steve Thatcher glanced cautiously at the connecting door. "I had to do it, dear. That money is needed badly by people who are sick and hungry and suffering. They're going to get it. It was a narrow squeak, but—"

The girl gazed at him with intent anxiety. She was one of the only two persons in the world who shared the secret that Steve Thatcher was the Moon Man. She knew that he always stole from those who deserved to lose their money, that every cent of his loot was distributed to the poor and needy. She knew that he had broken the written law only in order to obey the higher commands of human mercy. And she knew that discovery would mean bitter tragedy.

The revelation that Steve Thatcher, detective sergeant, was the Moon Man, would break the heart of the kindly old man who was chief of police and Steve's father. It would crush even as tough a man as Gil McEwen for the grim McEwen would keep his promise and mete out to the Moon Man full punishment for every crime. It would destroy forever the happiness of Sue McEwen and the man she was engaged to marry. It would mean dishonor, heartbreak—and the electric chair.

Sue McEwen's hands closed hotly over Steve Thatcher's. "Steve, you mustn't—you mustn't take such a chance again! You've got to destroy the Moon Man. He's got to disappear, Steve—forever. Promise me you'll do that. Promise!"

"Sue, I—"

A quick step in the hallway broke into Thatcher's words. The door thrust open and Gil McEwen strode in. He greeted Sue with unmeant gruffness. He glanced sharply at Thatcher. He made growling noises in his throat as he trod across the office and back.

"He can't do that to me. By damn, he can't do it! Grabbing twenty grand right from under my nose. By damn, I'll get him for that! I've sworn a thousand times I'll send that fancy crook to the chair, and I swear it again. No matter who he is, I'm going to give him the works!"

Sue McEwen's eyes glimmered with dread. Steve Thatcher said tightly: "You mean every word of it, don't you, Gil?"

"Mean it! Humph!" McEwen glared. "I'd give him the chair if he was my own father! I'll give him the works even if you're the Moon Man, Steve!"

The girl's breath caught. A chill seized Steve Thatcher's heart. Together they watched the grim McEwen pound across the office and back.

"No sign of him! How the hell'd he get out of that house? How'd he know that money was there? Grabbing it right under my nose! By damn, I'm mad! I'll—"

He broke off as the connecting door opened. The man who came first into the room was white haired and ruddy faced; his movements were gentle, his blue eyes kindly. Chief Peter Thatcher nodded to Sue McEwen and his son. He ambled to his old roll-top desk and settled into his ancient padded chair as Keanan and Packer came in.

Keanan had a patch of plaster on his head. He peered intently at McEwen. He said: "Harte came across, Gil. He's just been giving it to the steno. He's told us all about how he did it. And he still insists he saw the Moon Man in the house just before we grabbed him."

"I believe him," McEwen growled sourly.

"Chief." Keanan turned to the desk, still eying McEwen. "Listen, chief. I've got something important to say. It's going to be hard as hell to say it, but—I'm a cop. I'm as determined to grab the Moon Man as McEwen is. I think—"

"If you hadn't gone busting into that house too soon, K e a n a n," McEwen snapped, "we might've grabbed him. I told you to wait until Harte came back out, but you didn't! By damn, we would have the Moon Man in the cooler now if you—"

"I think—" Keanan's voice grated as he interrupted. His gaze upon the grizzled detective sharpened. When McEwen paused he went on levelly. "I think I know exactly where I can put my hands on the Moon Man."

"You think—what?"

McEwen snapped it, and glared. Sue McEwen's hand raised unconsciously, tensely, to her red lips. Steve Thatcher stood cold, his heart trip-hammering. And Keanan continued to gaze shrewdly at McEwen.

"You're the Moon Man, Gil," he said.

MCEWEN laughed. There was no mirth in his hard, dry chuckle. He took the cigar out of his teeth, wagged his head, and said: "This is a hell of a time to start telling funny stories, Keanan."

"That's no funny story," Keanan said in a low voice. "I mean exactly what I said." He did not smile as he spoke. "You're the Moon Man, Gil, and I can prove it."

Chief Thatcher protested mildly: "Keanan, you're talking nonsense."

Gil McEwen scowled. He took a step closer to Keanan and punctuated each word he uttered with a thrust of his cigar. "Keanan, I know you're ambitious as hell. You want to get your name in the papers. You'd like to have my job. You'd enjoy having the whole town saying what a smart detective you are. You're going about it in the wrong way. That bump you got on the head is turning you screwy."

"I said that I can prove it, Gil," Keanan insisted quietly. "And I can."

"Sure, sure," McEwen said impatiently. "All these months I've been driving myself nuts trying to find myself and throw myself in the cooler."

Keanan's expression did not change. "I'm so sure of what I'm saying, Gil,"

he persisted, "that I've just asked the president of the police board to come down here and listen to the facts."

"You've *what*?" McEwen glowered. "Mead's coming down here to—"

"To hear the evidence that Gil McEwen is the Moon Man!"

McEwen straightened tensely. He looked around as though doubting his ears and searching for affirmation in the faces of Steve Thatcher and the chief. Steve Thatcher was gazing at Keanan in amazement. Sue's eyes were wide with astonishment. Chief Thatcher straightened with a stern frown.

"Keanan, you've made a serious charge against Gil. If you can't back up what you say, I'm going to dismiss you from the force instantly. You'd better explain right here and now."

"I'll explain, chief," Keanan said coolly.

McEwen's stare was still incredulous. "Me!" he burst out. "I'm the Moon Man? For God's sake! Are you crazy, Keanan? There are a thousand ways of proving I'm not!"

"Such as?" Keanan demanded.

McEwen jerked his wallet from his pocket. He removed from it a dog-eared photograph. It was a photograph of a doorknob, and on the knob was a clearly defined thumbprint. McEwen had studied that print by the hour. Every line of it was stamped on his brain. He had sought the man whose thumb had made it, sought relentlessly and vainly. Now he pushed the photograph at Keanan, and held up his right thumb.

"There's the Moon Man's print!" he snapped. "My thumb couldn't have made it! That settles the whole thing, doesn't it?"

"Hardly," said Keanan. "All we know is that you *say* that print was made by the Moon Man. You can't prove it. The fact of the matter is that it isn't the Moon Man's. Because you're the Moon Man, Gil, and that print is a fake you've been using to fool us all."

McEwen blurted: "By damn!" Suddenly he was cold and tight muscled. "Well, go on, Keanan. What's the rest?"

"I might ask you, Gil," Keanan

retorted steadily, "to produce some proof that you're *not* the Moon Man."

Steve Thatcher listened with growing fascination. Sue's eyes sought his worriedly. Chief Thatcher was glancing from McEwen's seamed face to Keanan's.

"Proof that I'm not—" McEwen choked. "By damn, I've been trying to grab that fancy crook month after month. I'm wearing myself out doing it. Isn't that proof enough?"

"Hardly," Keanan said again. "Chief, Gil has no proof that he isn't the Moon Man, no proof that will stand up. Have you ever known the Moon Man and Gil McEwen to be in the same place at the same time—two separate persons?"

"Certainly!" McEwen cut in for the chief. "It's happened again and again. I can produce plenty of witnesses who—"

"They'd be mistaken," Keanan said calmly. "Mistaken because, if ever you were seen near the Moon Man, Gil, the man wearing his robe and mask was somebody else. Ned Dargan, your sidekick, of course. Each time it was another trick to fool us."

McEwen drove his teeth into his cigar. "Go on, Keanan!" he snapped. "Go on!"

Keanan went on. "Let me refresh your memory, chief, concerning a few very significant incidents. Once the mask and the robe of the Moon Man were locked up in this office, in that safe. They disappeared. According to Gil, the Moon Man stole in and got them. Nobody saw him, but Gil says he did. Nobody knows the combination of that safe, chief, but you and Gil."

McEwen exploded: "The Moon Man can get into any safe ever made!"

"Again," Keanan went on, unshaken, "Dargan, the Moon Man's lieutenant, was held prisoner in a room upstairs. Gil brought him in. Nobody but Gil knew until afterward where he'd been kept. Gil alone could 've sneaked him out again. It was pretty hot for Dargan right then and it seems to me the Moon Man was grabbing a chance to hide him until things quieted down."

Chief Thatcher's blue eyes were widening. McEwen's teeth were gashing into his cigar savagely.

"Most significant of all, chief," Keanan went on steadily, "Gil's never succeeded in grabbing the Moon Man. The Moon Man has always managed to slip away. That's because, naturally, Gil drew the line at turning himself in. Gil himself has said repeatedly that the Moon Man is somebody who knows headquarters inside and out. We all realize that. There's no getting away from it. Nobody knows headquarters better than Gil."

MCEWEN exploded again. "By damn! I suppose your theory is that I'm the crook who grabbed the twenty thousand tonight. I'm the guy who shot at you and socked you on the head."

"Exactly!" Keanan said.

McEwen snarled. He jerked his pistol positive from its holster and held it toward Keanan. "There's my gat. See for yourself whether it's been fired!"

"You stayed at the Harto house after everyone else had started back to headquarters, Gil," Keanan answered coolly. "You had plenty of time to clean your gun."

"Oh, God!" McEwen moaned.

"You sneaked into the house from the front," the detective sergeant pressed on. "You put on the robe and mask that you'd already hidden there, in case you were seen. You took the money out of the door frame, hid it somewhere else, and started out. I was coming in the window and stopped you. The last thing I saw before I ducked was the Moon Man in the laundry. The first thing I saw when I looked in again was you, Gil, in the same room!"

McEwen peered around again. He saw a grave light shining in the eyes of the chief. He saw unmasked consternation on the face of Steve Thatcher, a growing concern puckering the lips of Sue. With a slap he returned his gun to its holster and demanded:

"For God's sake, chief, are you taking this stuff from Keanan seriously?"

The chief answered solemnly: "I'll have to hear him through, Gil. Go on, Keanan."

A tight smile played upon Keanan's lips. "A moment after that shot was fired,

Steve and Hugh and Frank were at the doors. Nobody had a chance to slip out of that house. Certainly Harte didn't. There was no sign of the Moon Man. We're sure of that because we all searched the place after you did, Gil. The Moon Man was still there—that's the answer—in the person of Gil McEwen."

"And what," McEwen demanded acidly, "did I do with the mask and the robe and the money, Keanan?"

"Hid them," Keanan answered calmly. "While I was knocked out. There are places in that house to hide such things. We didn't get a chance to look into all of them because you hurried us back to headquarters with Harte. Another search of that place might turn up something very interesting. The Moon Man's regalia!"

McEwen's jaw squared. "We'll see about that right now!" he asserted icily. "We'll go back to that house right away, and you can search it, Keanan, every inch of it! Come on!"

The grizzled detective strode toward the door. Steve Thatcher stood appalled, chilled. McEwen's firm stride was stopped by the solemn voice of Chief Thatcher.

"I say again, Keanan, that if this charge you've made against Gil blows up, you're going off the force instantly."

Now Keanan smiled wryly. "I'm taking my chances on that, chief. I know what I'm talking about. I've been thinking this thing out for months, very carefully, and tonight gives the final proof. I'm going to the Harte house with Gil, and I want you to come along. I want to look very especially in that laundry room."

Steve Thatcher's lips pinched. His haggard eyes searched Sue's as McEwen jerked open the door, as Keanan trod after him, as Chief Thatcher followed. The three men were tramping down the stairs when McEwen paused to growl through the open door:

"Come along, Steve! I want you in on this!"

Tightly Thatcher answered: "Coming, Gil. I'll follow in my car."

As the three went on, as Steve Thatcher stepped quickly to the door,

Sue's hand caught his. He peered in agony into her eyes. He blurted in a whisper:

"God, Sue! It seemed impossible at first, but Keanan's got a case! He's pinning everything I've ever done on Gil. If they find that robe and mask in the laundry, the case will look open and shut. The stuff's there, Sue—where I left it!"

"Steve!"

"Wait here!"

Steve Thatcher sped down the stairs. He hurried into the desk room and thrust through the gate. Behind it a man in blue shirt, the telephone sergeant, was making connections at the red-studded switchboard. Thatcher's imperative gesture slid him off the chair. Thatcher ignored the flashing signals, plugged into a main light, brought his lips so close to the transmitter that no one in the room could hear his voice, and spoke a number known to only one other in the world.

"Angel!" he whispered when the distant answer came.

"Boss!"

The voice on the line was that of the ambassador extraordinary of the Moon Man, the lieutenant of the notorious criminal who was being sought as grimly by the police as the Moon Man himself—the ex-pug named Ned Dargan.

"**A**NGEL, you've got to move fast! Hop into the roadster. Drive as fast as you can for the Harte house, Six Two Five Rossmore. Gil's heading for it now, but you're closer. Hide the car and wait in the alley for me to show up. It's important, Angel, the most important job you've ever tackled!"

"I'm on my way, Boss!"

Thatcher hurried from the switchboard, across the hall. He saw, on the stairs coming down, Sue McEwen, her eyes ashine with anxiety. He sped into the adjoining police garage where he had left his roadster. He swung it into the street and pressed the accelerator down hard.

He glanced back and saw no cars parked at headquarters. McEwen and Keanan and the chief were already on

their way. The distance was not far. Steve Thatcher sent his roadster over a street which he knew McEwen had not taken. His one hand hammered the horn button as intersections flashed past. The green sticker on his windshield signaled the traffic cops and they waved him on. The speedometer flickered high.

Keanan's words echoed mockingly in Steve Thatcher's mind: "I want to look very especially in that laundry room." And in that laundry room was regalia of the Moon Man and the money he had stolen were hidden, proof waiting to strengthen the case against McEwen!

Steve Thatcher swerved on whining tires into Rossmore Street. A sigh of relief burst from his lungs when he saw no headlights near the Harte home. He swung to the curb near the corner, clicking off ignition and lights. He ran through tree shadows to the entrance of the house. He sidled into the gloomy hall, started toward the rear, and stopped short.

The surging of a motor sounded in the street. Steve Thatcher spun to a window to see a car drawing to the curb in front of the house, a police sedan. He whirled back to the entrance and shot the bolt. Breath surged into his lungs as he darted down the hallway. He snapped the laundry room open; he slid the cover from the washing-machine. His blood coursed cold as he brought into his hands the regalia and the loot of the Moon Man.

He started out and stopped again as the rattling of the doorknob mixed with McEwen's rasping voice:

"That's queer. I left this door unfastened. Stay here, chief. I'm going around to the back."

Steve Thatcher darted to the rear door. He opened it and eased out while fast footfalls sounded on the walk beside the house. Instantly he pressed back again. His breath beat hotly as he closed the entrance without sound, as Gil McEwen and Mark Keanan turned to it. He spun again, to the door in which the stolen thousands had been concealed.

The back entrance opened as Steve Thatcher closed the way behind him. Gil

McEwen's heels thudded in as he slid along the wall. He opened another door and looked into a closet. He slipped into it and closed the door. In thick darkness he stood, his breath caught, and Gil McEwen's voice reached him:

"All right, Keanan. Start searching that laundry. When you're finished with that, we'll go through every cubic inch in this house. If the Moon Man's stuff is here, by damn, we'll find it."

Steve Thatcher stood motionless in the closet, the robe and mask and money held tightly under his arm.

Thatcher heard McEwen tramp to the front door and admit the chief. He heard them approach the laundry and stop, while sounds beyond indicated that Keanan was beginning a thorough search. The lid of the washing-machine clanged twice. Thatcher gripped the inner knob of the closet door and opened a crack.

"Not many places to look in here," Keanan's voice carried. "The machine and the tubs, that's all. There's nothing doing in this room. Let's look farther."

"Go as far as you like!" McEwen bade laconically.

Steve Thatcher tightened in agony as the dining room door began to open. He stepped back, closing the crack, his blood pounding. He heard a step, then a click, then sounds farther away. He ventured to peer out again. He saw that the connecting door was again closed.

"All right, take the kitchen next, then," McEwen was growling. "Then the dining room. Don't overlook a single bet!"

Thatcher's breath returned as he sidled out of the closet. He knew that McEwen and the chief were in the hall, that both the entrances of the house were within their sight. He hurried across to a window, loosened the catch, opened it. He swung his legs across the sill. He dropped out and slid the window down. He made each move with consummate care, with heightening fever.

He darted across the back yard to the gate in the wire fence. He stepped quietly into the thick shadows and eased along the rear of the garage. When he was pass-

ing it, a soft whisper came out of the gloom.

"Boss!"

"Angel!"

From the darkness beside the garage, Ned Dargan appeared. He was a stocky figure, neckless, his face shaded with a cap. From the first he had served as the Moon Man's emissary, distributing the loot to those who must have help or perish. He paid in loyalty for the Moon Man's having saved him from sickness and starvation. He and Sue McEwen, and no other person living, knew that the Moon Man was Steve Thatcher.

"Angel, take this stuff. Carry it back to the house. Watch sharp. Don't let anyone see you! Every prowler car in town is looking for me—and you."

"Sure, Boss!"

"Keep it there until you hear from me, Angel. Stay handy. I'm going to need you. And look out for McEwen. He's going to come after us this time as he never has before."

"Gosh, Boss. Watch yourself!"

"On your way, Angel."

Thatcher returned to the gate as Dargan darted away through the shadows. He waited until he heard the purr of a motor in the gloom beyond—Dargan starting off. He hurried silently across the lawn and rounded to the front entrance. His manner eased when he opened the door.

He stood by while Mark Keanan continued the painstaking search of the house. He studied the sober face of his father, the icy eyes of McEwen. There was no word spoken until at last, dirtied by dust in the attic and coal in the cellar, Keanan made a gesture of finality.

"Well, you haven't found the stuff!" McEwen challenged. "Maybe now you're not so cocksure, by damn!"

"It only means," Keanan declared grimly, "that while you were alone in this house, after we left, you had a chance to get the stuff out, Gil. That's added proof that you're the Moon Man—because you were here then and no one else! We'll see what the president of the police board has to say about this case."

CHAPTER III

MASKED IN SILVER

STEVE THATCHER sat tensely at his desk in police headquarters, peered through the open door, and listened to voices speaking inside the office of the chief. The one that rasped with anger was McEwen's. The one that rose with an insistent twang was Keanan's. The one that spoke little, but then decisively and curtly, was that of the president of the police board, Curtis Mead.

Steve Thatcher and the chief had followed McEwen and Keanan from the Harte house. They had found the rod-backed Curtis Mead waiting for them. Thatcher had heard the inquisition begin, had seen the emotionless gleam in Mead's eyes grow brighter minute by minute as Keanan talked. He had withdrawn quietly; and now he listened with nerves growing hot.

Sue McEwen sat watching him intently. She had waited at headquarters for his return. The worry in her eyes was deep and growing deeper. Her hand went to Thatcher's.

"Steve, Mr. Mead is prejudiced against dad. They've had trouble between them, too much trouble. Dad's being accused of—" She bit her lips. "I can't think!"

Grimly Thatcher said: "This is my job, Sue—proving Gil's not the Moon Man. Accusing him of it is incredible, but Keanan has built up a tough case. Men have been convicted of murder on less evidence than he's piled up against Gil. I've got to prove it. I've got to show them Gil's not—"

"How can you do it, Steve?" the girl asked wretchedly. "How can you, without exposing yourself? You—you can't do that!"

"There's got to be a way. I thought getting rid of the mask and the robe would help, but instead it's made matters worse. I'm going to get Gil out of this, Sue, no matter what it costs. No matter if—"

"Steve!"

The girl's tortured eyes pleaded with Thatcher's. His jaw muscles hardened; his lids lowered thoughtfully. Suddenly

he opened a drawer of his desk and removed a sheet of plain paper and an envelop. He dipped a pen and transferred it from his right hand to his left. He wrote rapidly, paused, wrote again. He rose, blotting the lines, folding the sheet, stuffing it into the envelope, his face dark lined.

"It's a chance, Sue! A chance!"

Steve Thatcher strode to the chief's door and thrust it open. The four men were seated around Peter Thatcher's desk; they gave Steve Thatcher only a glance when he entered. McEwen's face was reddened and grave. The chief's was solemn. Keanan's was animated, determined. That of Curtis Mead was stern, square, and inscrutable. As Thatcher stepped in, McEwen uttered a mirthless laugh.

"You're doing a good job, Keanan, by damn!"

"If I gave you this much evidence against some one else, Gil," Keanan declared shrewdly, "you'd believe him guilty. I'm playing fair. I haven't distorted the facts. They speak for themselves. I'm sure of what I'm after."

"So am I sure of what you're after!" McEwen retorted bitterly. "My job!"

Curtis Mead came to his feet briskly. "Gentlemen," he announced in his clipped manner, "I have heard enough. I realize the evidence is circumstantial, but circumstantial evidence is sometimes the most convincing. McEwen, I am frankly appalled. There are numerous clues pointing to your being the Moon Man, but not one which proves you're not!"

McEwen blurted: "For God's sake! Do you mean he's made you believe—"

"Keanan has presented a very strong case," Mead interrupted. "If you're the Moon Man, McEwen, it accounts for a great deal that is difficult to explain otherwise. It accounts for the Moon Man's uncanny knowledge of affairs inside this headquarters building. It explains the lack of results in this case. It makes clear why you've never apprehended the Moon Man. I'm forced to conclude that, of all the persons the Moon Man might possibly be, you are the man most likely."

McEwen stared.

"Not long ago," Mead continued curtly, "I was obliged to dismiss you from the force because of lack of results in the Moon Man case. You were reinstated because you succeeded in breaking up a dangerous gambling ring after you were off the force. It is your outstanding ability as a detective that makes me regret this exceedingly. Yet it is significant that your remarkable talents have never been equal to capturing the Moon Man. He is the *only* criminal, McEwen, who has succeeded in eluding you. It is very possible that Detective Sergeant Keanan has explained why."

The grizzled detective snorted. "I admit he's got a case, but I'm telling you again I'm not the Moon Man, by damn! I'll do my damndest to prove I'm not. Until I can—what're you going to do about it?"

CURTIS MEAD answered by turning to Chief Thatcher. "Chief, strong as the evidence against McEwen is, the extraordinary nature of this case makes me feel that our proof must be absolutely conclusive. My instructions to you are to concentrate on gathering more evidence. Detail every man you can spare to the job. If McEwen is guilty, we will soon be positive of that fact!"

"That's right," McEwen grated. "Hunt for evidence to prove I'm guilty. Never mind any evidence that proves I'm not. Put my own men on the job of railroad-ing me!"

Mead stared coldly. "You will receive fair treatment, McEwen. While this case is in progress, you will continue on the force—inactively, of course. You may consider yourself technically under arrest and placed under your own custody, and accordingly you will make your whereabouts known to the chief at all times. If you choose to make trouble, I will order you locked up. I think, gentlemen, that is all."

Steve Thatcher had listened with growing apprehension. Now he stepped forward. He slipped the envelope from his pocket and proffered it to the dazed McEwen.

"A messenger just brought this, Gil. It

might be important. Better read it right away."

Thatcher's suggestion checked McEwen's move to tuck the letter absently into his pocket. He ripped the flap open, snapped the sheet flat, and read. As he read his eyes grew round, his teeth crackled into his cigar, and the cords in his neck went white.

"Wait a minute!" he blurted. "By damn!"

Curtis Mead paused at the door. Chief Thatcher stepped from the desk anxiously. Keanan frowned. And Steve Thatcher watched McEwen's face keenly as the grizzled detective marched to the president of the police board.

"I'm the Moon Man, am I?" he snarled. "You've got an open and shut case against me, have you? Well, by damn, read that!"

Curtis Mead read it:

My dear McEwen:

I grasp this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to you for unknowingly revealing to me the hiding place of the stolen bank money. I have, as you already know, seized upon it for charitable purposes. I am one, of course, who intensely dislikes moneyed selfishness and I am sure that the Great City National, having sponsored a number of bond issues with the full knowledge that the bonds were almost worthless, as indeed they are now, can well contribute this sum to the poor.

Since you have been so kind, I will go so far as to say that my next attack will be upon those who squander their money uselessly on doubly high life, paying almost one dollar per cup for coffee—but I warn you, you will not be able to trap me in the cabs. I shall set out upon this little exploit of mine tomorrow night without fail, believe me.

MM

"The Moon Man sent that!" McEwen exploded, as Keanan took the sheet and read it. "That's his mark. By damn! You said that came by messenger, Steve. Where's that kid? I'll trace that—"

"Gone, Gil," Steve Thatcher answered. "I didn't suspect that this was a message from the Moon Man, or I would have held him, of course. I met him when I was going out. He asked for you and I took the letter. He's on his way back now and—"

McEwen snapped open the door of the adjoining office. "Sullivan! Hop onto that phone. Find out what messenger boy came here a minute ago with a message. Western Union, Steve? Western Union, Sully. I want to know where he got that message and who gave it to him. Snap it up!" And McEwen spun triumphantly to face the box-shouldered Curtis Mead. "Well?" he demanded. "That clinches it, doesn't it? That shows I'm not the Moon Man!"

Steve Thatcher saw Keanan smile tightly. "Scarcely, Gil," Keanan said. "You merely sent this note to yourself. If it's not your disguised writing, it's Dargan's. You knew, back there in the Harte house when the money disappeared, that I was suspicious of you. You decided then on this letter, as a trick to make it seem you're not the Moon Man. It's no use, Gil."

McEwen snarled: "I wish to hell I was as smart as you think I am!"

Keanan lifted the Moon Man's letter to the light. "This paper," he said, "seems a bit familiar." He turned to the chief's desk and took a blank sheet from it. "Just like this one. The fact is"—he handed both sheets to Curtis Mead—"they both have the same watermark. The page the Moon Man wrote on came from our headquarters supplies!"

Steve Thatcher suppressed a moan of agony. Gil McEwen swallowed hard. Curtis Mead inspected both pages of paper against the light. He marched to the chief's desk.

"Hold both of those," he directed, "as evidence!" He about-faced to McEwen. "My previous orders stand." He returned with stiff strides to the office door. "When further evidence is found, I want to be informed of it immediately. Gentlemen, good night!" He strode out.

McEwen looked dazed. He flung his cigar into the chief's wastebasket. "By damn!" he exploded. "There's one way I can prove I'm not the Moon Man, one way that'll prove it so completely that even you'll have to admit, Keanan. That's by grabbing that crook. I'm going to do exactly that!"

Chief Thatcher declared slowly: "Gil,

I'm forced to say this looks very bad for you."

"Chief! You're not going to hold me to Mead's orders. You can't expect me to be inactive now. Not now! I'm hitting this case harder than ever, Mead or no Mead. I'm going to do my almighty damndest to collar the Moon Man. It's my only chance!"

Keanan observed skeptically: "That'll prove it, all right, Gil—if you do."

McEwen stared at Detective Sergeant Thatcher. "You'll help me do that, won't you, Steve?"

"You can count on me to the limit, Gil!" Steve Thatcher blurted.

"Good boy! God, I don't know where to turn. That letter may— Soon as Sully gets the dope on that messenger— By damn, I'm dizzy. I've got to think this thing out. I'll be sticking around headquarters for a while longer, chief."

McEwen wandered out the door, wagging his head in confusion. Steve Thatcher hurried into his office. Sue was waiting there. Her eyes searched his. Thatcher saw McEwen ambling down the stairs and closed the door.

"Lord, Sue! The letter hasn't helped Gil. It's hurt him. Twice I've tried to help, and twice I've made matters worse. It's only because I'm so determined to get Gil out of this that I—"

"I know, Steve!"

"I can't make a mistake next time. Next time I've got to prove, once and for all, that Gil's innocent. If there's no other way—"

"What are you thinking of, Steve?" Sue asked breathlessly.

"Of telling the truth. Of confessing. If any more evidence is found against Gil, Sue, I'm going to tell him that I'm the Moon Man!"

CHAPTER IV

ROBE OF DOOM

GIL MCEWEN drifted down the worn wooden stairs of headquarters, scarcely aware of his surroundings. His head wagged with bitter irony. His lips curled mirthlessly. Automatically he wandered toward the desk room and paused

at the door as a patrolman came out.

The big, blue-uniformed man was Tom Keeley. Patrolman Keeley had a long, spotless record, a soft heart, and a loyal admiration for Gil McEwen. He fumbled with a bit of paper in his hands and blinked sympathetically.

"I heard about 'em putting the heat on you, Gil—accusing you of being the Moon Man," he said. "They're crazy. It's the damndest thing I ever heard of."

"Thanks, Tom," McEwen answered gratefully. "Keanan hasn't overlooked any bets. He's almost made me believe that I am the Moon Man!" He eyed the slip in Keeley's hand. "Got a call? Where are you going?"

"Call," Keeley nodded. "Woman just phoned in, name of Clayton. Says she thinks there's tramps in the empty house across the street from her. They're pretty nervy tramps if it's so. It's only a few doors from the chief's home."

"Is it?" McEwen looked interested. "Once the Moon Man hid his sidekick Dargan in the chief's attic. It'd be just like him to— Say!" McEwen tugged the slip from Keeley's fingers and peered intently at the address written on it. "By damn! Before you start out, Tom—wait a minute!"

McEwen strode into the desk room. He slapped through the gate and took up one of the telephones sitting beside the books. He called the number of the Mrs. Clayton who had entered the complaint. In a moment the woman was on the wire and McEwen was identifying himself.

"Have you seen anybody entering or leaving that house?" he asked quickly. "If so, did you notice—"

"I saw a man sneak in there a little while ago," Mrs. Clayton answered nervously. "I was watching because I'm scared. They might be burglars or kidnapers. I saw him sneak in. He was wearing a cap and carrying a black bundle and—"

McEwen cut in ringingly: "What! Sure of that?"

"I told you I was watching. I think that man's got a car, too, a roadster. I saw him driving past the house a couple of nights ago. The woman who owns that

house is out of town, and she's a friend of mine, and I know she doesn't know—"

"Mrs. Clayton," McEwen snapped into the transmitter, "say nothing more about this to anyone. That's important. I'm going to look into this thing myself!"

His gray eyes glinted dangerously as he left the instrument. He growled to the surprised Keeley: "Never mind, I'll look into it!" and strode across the hall to the garage. He climbed into his police sedan, kicked the engine into action, and curled tense hands on the wheel. The woman's words were ringing in his mind.

He did not know that Detective Sergeant Keanan, coming down the stairs, had seen him hurry toward the car. He was thinking only of that startling information.

Black bundle—roadster—sneaking in a little while ago—following the Moon Man's escape from the Harte house!

McEwen spurted out of the garage. He swung onto the shortest way to the house around which the suspicious activity had centered. He was not ware that Keanan, in another sedan, had turned into the street behind him.

He drove swiftly. He cut corners on singing tires. He rolled past the home of Chief Thatcher, then peered at a lightless house sitting on the opposite side a few doors down. He swung past the intersection, drew to the curb, and walked back. He gave scarcely a glance at the car that whirred past. He did not know that Keanan was in it.

When McEwen reached the corner of the yard he darted across uncut grass and slipped into deep shadows. He peered through the gloom coldly. This house was just such a place, Gil McEwen knew, that the Moon Man would choose as a hideaway!

The grizzled detective stole silently to the front entrance. His twist at the knob told him it was bolted. He eased around the house to the rear. At the back porch he tried another door. Breath sucked into his lungs as it responded to his push. He stood taut, listening into ringing silence.

He slipped inside. The kitchen he entered was bare except for stove and sink and shelves. He brought his pistol posi-

tive into his hand, drifted across, and entered an empty room. He trod forward through other empty rooms. He climbed an uncarpeted flight and slowly, silently, made a circuit of the second floor. He noted that there was no attic, and descended to the cellarway. He peered about the dusty basement. When he returned to the front vestibule, he was certain there was no one hiding in the house.

His steely eyes narrowed thoughtfully. He opened a cupboard door. He looked into a closet. He looked into another. When he opened the third, a short gasp passed his lips. Against the floor lay a blot of blackness. He reached and felt soft fabric covering a hard, round thing. He rose with it in his hands. He muttered: "By damn!"

McEwen had found the regalia of the Moon Man!

Grimly he unwrapped the robe. He felt a weightiness in it, probed into the pocket, and discovered tight rolls of bank notes. McEwen knew that the total of that currency was above twenty thousand dollars. It was money stolen first by the absconder Harte, next by the Moon Man. And within the robe also lay the precious, fragile mask which for months had hidden the face of that notorious criminal.

In cold triumph, McEwen inspected the gloves, the automatic, the hinged hemispheres of silver provided with pads and a deflector inside. He stood still and forced himself to think carefully. That this house was a secret rendezvous of the Moon Man he could not possibly doubt; that the Moon Man would sooner or later return to it was a certainty. And if he returned—

McEwen stiffened at a sound. It was a stealthy rustling, disturbing the quiet with a regular rhythm. Some one was moving through the untended grass of the yard. McEwen moved quickly to the side of the room and peered out the window. He saw a drifting shadow, a black figure creeping away from the street, deeper into the gloom at the rear of the house.

"By damn!"

It whispered from his lips when he

saw the ghostly form shift toward the rear door. Quickly he snatched off his hat, rolled it, and stuffed it into his pocket. He thrust his arms into the black robe and shook it down over his shoulders. He tugged on the black gloves. Carefully he closed the sphere of silver glass over his head. One moment transformed him into a phantom figure.

McEwen stood with heart pounding coldly, stood in darkness, garbed in the regalia of the Moon Man!

MC EWEN peered about in amazement, seeing as clearly as though the globular mask did not exist—and listened. A click sounded at the rear of the house, the back entrance opening. Steps thudded through the kitchen. In the open doorway, McEwen saw a silhouetted figure appear. He slipped his black-gloved hand through the slit in the cape, pushing the automatic out of sight, and tensely waited.

In the doorway, Ned Dargan paused. He started across the room toward the closet. He had left it shut and now it was standing open. His hand swung toward the automatic in his hip-pocket, and again he stopped. In the shadows at the side of the room he saw a black figure standing, an almost shapeless form, dark as the gloom, its head a gleaming ball.

"Boss!"

Dargan stepped close to the robed apparition. McEwen's nerves went hot. He could scarcely believe that Dargan could not see his face, though he could see Dargan plainly. His hand tightened snugly on the automatic. He peered grimly through the silver shell and said nothing.

"Gosh, Boss, I didn't know you were coming!" the ex-pug blurted. "I just slipped out to get a bite to eat. What's up, Boss? What're you going to do?"

McEwen's mind lightnined. When he spoke, his tone was low and disguised. It issued muffled through the shell of the mask. He said deliberately:

"I've got a plan. We're in a tight place. I need your help."

"You know you can count on me, Boss! To the limit! McEwen is doing his damndest to grab you this time!"

Within the gleaming sphere, McEwen's lips twirled wryly. "I know he is," he declared in the same cautious tone. "It's dangerous. I don't intend that McEwen shall find out who I am."

"Oh, gosh, Boss! If he ever finds out—"

"You have no intention of turning me in, have you?" McEwen demanded shrewdly. "You're not going to tell him that I'm—" And he broke off.

Dargan stared. McEwen waited with stopped breath for him to complete that sentence, to fall into the trap, but Dargan did not. The ex-pug's eyes narrowed sharply. He exclaimed:

"You never said anything like that to me before, Boss! You never doubted me. Gosh, Boss, you know I'd take the chair myself rather than see you take it. I—I don't get you!"

"I have to be careful," McEwen said. "I'm being run into a corner. If you ever betrayed me—if you ever tipped off McEwen that I'm really—"

Again McEwen laid the trap. He waited for Dargan to speak, to betray the name of the Moon Man, but Dargan was silent. The ex-pug straightened, peering so intently at the silver mask that McEwen began to lift the automatic inside the robe. Dargan spoke in a burst of breath.

"You don't need to worry about that, Boss! Listen. We'll go through with our plan. I'll beat it out of town in the car tonight. You watch your chance and follow me. We'll meet at Hudleston and take cover, like you said, until this blows over!"

The silver head nodded. "All right. "You'd better start right away. Wait at Hudleston until—"

"You're not the Boss! You're not the Moon Man!"

Dargan blurted it, his hands suddenly curled into white fists. McEwen jerked back, snapping the automatic upward. Inside the mask exploded a violent "By damn!" He tilted the automatic, covered by the black robe, into line with Dargan as the ex-pug stepped forward. Dargan's blow was black lightning.

His hard fist slammed to McEwen's body below the breastbone. He whirled

aside as McEwen staggered backward with a violent gasp. He grabbed at McEwen's right arm, dragged up, and glimpsed the glitter of the automatic. His horny fingers trapped the gun and twisted sharply. McEwen moaned with pain as it came away in Dargan's hand. Still gasping beyond all control he lurched forward, and Dargan's knuckles drove hard again.

The second blow to McEwen's solar plexus sprawled him backward in an agony of paralysis. Dargan whipped away. He leveled the automatic at the squirming black figure. The lungs of the man in the robe were working spasmodically, violently. Dargan reached for the silver mask.

"The Boss and I never had any plan like that!"

His fingers stopped short of the silver sphere. He jerked back, his blood rushing hot. In the street he heard the squeak of brakes. He whirled to a connecting door and peered through grimy panes to see two cars stopping in front of the house. Prowl cars!

"God!"

Dargan darted across the dark room. He sped through the kitchen to the rear entrance. He heard the footfalls of the men at the front as he sidled through. He heard a muffled voice command:

"Take the front. I'll close in the back."

He did not know that the grim orders were issuing from the lips of Detective Sergeant Keanan.

He leaped across the porch as heels beat the ground in a fast rhythm. He swerved to keep the house between himself and the approaching man. He ducked down at the rear fence. Tempered muscles carried him over it. In the gloom he crouched, gripping the Moon Man's automatic, peering through the slats at the dark figure that appeared.

Dargan saw Keanan spring to the back entrance. He saw a uniformed squad car man hurry alongside. They thrust the door open. They pushed into the deeper darkness inside. Dargan waited to see no more than that.

He scurried past a garage, to the side of a house, to the street. He hurried

through the shadows of trees. Two blocks away his car was parked. Toward it, his lungs working hotly and swiftly, he hastened.

He passed out of sight, out of hearing, of the house that had been the rendezvous of the Moon Man.

Inside the back entrance of the house, Keanan and the patrolman paused. Their pistol positives peered into the gloom. They heard a painful panting in the next room, a scraping of heels on the bare floor. Fingers tightening on the trigger, they shouldered through. They whirled, their guns covering a black figure. It was rising from the floor, braced against the wall, a vague form that had a spherical head of silver.

"Raise your hands!" Keanan snapped. "You're cornered, Mr. Moon Man!"

He gestured the patrolman forward. The patrolman poked his pistol against the robed body. Keanan pocketed his gun and closed his hands upon the fragile shell of silver. He halved it and lifted it off. He backed, peering in grim triumph at the dark-lined face revealed in the gloom.

"I think," Keanan said with a rasp, "this case is closed, Gil!"

CHAPTER V

FORCED CONFESSION

STEVE THATCHER, seated at his desk in the headquarters building, heard heavy shoes tramp up the wooden stairs. Sue McEwen turned to look out, and her hand groped to Thatcher's. The worry in her eyes became horror. Her pressing fingers trembled. Her voice came a whisper.

"Steve! Steve, it's dad—in—"

Jerked to his feet, Steve Thatcher peered in frozen astonishment. He gazed upon a figure that struck his mind numb. He saw McEwen climbing the stairs, McEwen wearing the black robe of the Moon Man!

Beside the leather-faced McEwen, Mark Keanan strode to the chief's door, carrying the precious mask of the Moon Man in one arm. Two squad-car men followed them. They thrust into the chief's

office, and Keanan's rasping voice drummed in Steve Thatcher's ears.

"Call Mead down here again, chief! We've got all the proof we'll ever need to convict Gil McEwen of being the Moon Man!"

The door closed. Steve Thatcher peered into Sue's white face. The girl's hand was still clutching his, still trembling. "God!" he blurted. "For God's sake, Sue!" He tore from her fingers and strode swiftly to the door of the chief.

Sue pressed in beside him. Chief Thatcher was standing behind the desk, listening to the swift words of Mark Keanan. Gil McEwen was facing them, his face hard as rock, his eyes shining like ice. He was a grotesque figure, an incredible figure, garbed in the cloak of the Moon Man. At him Chief Thatcher was staring, shocked rigid.

"If you find it hard to believe what I'm telling you, chief," Keanan was suggesting with elaborate irony, "ask these men. Fulton saw me take the mask off his head. Mead asked for absolute proof that McEwen is the Moon Man and, by God, I've found it!"

McEwen growled: "Let him finish, chief. Let him finish. I can explain this thing."

"Mead warned McEwen to keep you informed of his whereabouts, chief," Keanan pressed on, "but he didn't tell you he was going to that house, did he? I saw him sneak out of here. I followed him. I looked through the window of that house and saw him putting the robe and mask on! I put in the call for the prowling cars because I was positive I had the goods on him!"

Steve Thatcher gazed with profound concern at the hard-lined face of Gil McEwen. Sue lowered herself into a chair weakly. The hall door open, unnoticed by anyone in the room. Steve Thatcher was jerked back to himself by a touch on his arm.

"Telephone call for you, Steve," a blue-shirted man told him. "I knew you were somewhere in the building. It's on your phone and I think it's important."

Keanan was still talking, tightening the case against McEwen, when Steve

Thatcher left the office. In a daze he lifted the telephone on his desk. He said: "Hello?" and jerked. Over the wire came:

"This is John Mason talking, the real estate agent. You are interested in a certain house."

It was the voice of Ned Dargan!

Thatcher's fingers wrapped white around the instrument. "Yes—yes, Mr. Mason. I can't talk to you about it now. I'm leaving headquarters on an urgent matter. Please call me in five minutes at this number."

He gave the number from memory. The voice at the other end of the line said: "Very well, Mr. Thatcher" and the connection broke. He sat back, his throat dry and aching. Suddenly he took up the instrument again while he paged through the telephone directory. He gave another number; his call clicked through.

"National Express Company," came the answer.

"This is David Williams talking," Steve Thatcher said. "I am expecting a box. It was shipped from abroad and I know that it has already cleared the customs in New York. It should be here now. Has it arrived?"

There was a pause before the answer came: "No, Mr. Williams, it isn't here. The last shipment of express from New York for today has just come in. You might call again about it tomorrow."

Thatcher was pale as he rose. When he passed the chief's door, McEwen's voice was speaking emphatically. He ran down the stairs, pushed out through the entrance. He crossed the street to the cigar store on the opposite corner. He slipped into the end telephone booth, but he made no call. He waited.

The bell jangled.

"Boss!" The voice of Ned Dargan sounded again through the receiver pressed hard to Thatcher's ear. "God, Boss, I was almost grabbed! Somebody got into the house and put on your robe and mask and—"

"I know, Angel!" Thatcher cut in. "It was McEwen!" He sped on, ignoring Dargan's gasp of amazement. "They're clamping down on him, Angel, building a

case to prove he's the Moon Man! Thank God he didn't collar you, but—"

"God, Boss! What can we do?"

"It's a matter of what we *must* do, Angel! We've got to stop at nothing to clear McEwen of the charge. At nothing! It may force us to run the most dangerous chance we've ever faced, Angel—but there's no choice!"

"I'm with you, Boss!"

"Bless you, Angel! Listen. Keanan has my robe and mask. There's no chance of my getting them back, not a chance in the world. And I can't work as the Moon Man without that mask. Finding that mask on McEwen was damning enough, but my losing it puts him in an even more dangerous situation, Angel."

"Boss—watch yourself! Whatever you do—"

"Wait! Some time ago I ordered a duplicate of the mask. I wanted a second in case the first was broken. It has been made in the factory in France, it has been shipped, and it's on its way to the city now, but it hasn't yet arrived. I've managed it so that it can't be traced, but I've got to have that second mask the minute it's taken off the train."

"I'll get it, Boss. Trust me!"

"Call National Express first thing in the morning and learn when all express shipments from New York are due. Check each arrival. Keep in touch with me wherever I am. I'll keep you posted. The name is David Williams. Once that mask is in your hands, Angel, you've got to bring it to me."

"I will, Boss. Nothing'll stop me!"

"That's all, Angel. Watch sharp!"

Steve Thatcher left the booth with throat aching, with eyes burning and lips pressed tight.

WHEN he reached the top of the stairs in headquarters, Thatcher heard a new voice speaking inside the chief's office in clipped, cold syllables. It meant that Curtis Mead had returned. Opening the door, Steve Thatcher saw Mead facing McEwen sternly. McEwen had removed the robe. His face was a dull, furious red. He was tooting an unlighted cigar savagely.

"That's my story!" he declared, interrupting Mead. "And you believe Keanan in preference to me, by damn!"

"I am considering the evidence impartially, McEwen," the president of the police board declared. "The fact that you had been knocked down means that you and Dargan had come to blows, but it doesn't prove you're not the Moon Man. That mask and robe are damning evidence. I cannot forget, McEwen, that when the mask was first traced, we found it had been shipped to this city from France in *your* name!"

"That was a trick of the Moon Man's to cover himself!"

"Perhaps." Mead's shoulders squared. "Furthermore, it's significant that we haven't been able to locate the messenger who brought the Moon Man's letter to this headquarters tonight. You took care we wouldn't."

"I know we haven't found that messenger!" McEwen snapped. "That means there wasn't any. Another trick of the Moon Man's!"

"Wait a minute!"

Mark Keanan was peering at Steve Thatcher. His eyes were alight with a startling thought. He stepped forward while McEwen rushed on.

"Call in your handwriting experts!" McEwen challenged. "Ask them if the writing in that letter is mine. I know damned well they'll say it isn't."

"Possibly you're right, Gil," Keanan observed. He was still gazing intently at Steve Thatcher. He asked, firmly, quietly: "Did *you* write that letter, Steve?"

Steve Thatcher's heart stopped.

McEwen snarled: "Leave Steve out of this!"

Keanan persisted. "No messenger brought that letter. It was written on headquarters paper. I get it. Steve wrote it. He wrote it because he's your best friend, Gil, and because he's trying to save you. That's the truth, isn't it, Steve? You're trying to save Gil because *you know* he's the Moon Man!"

"I'll stake my life," Steve Thatcher asserted through dry lips, "that Gil is not the Moon Man."

Curtis Mead gestured sharply.

"Enough of this! McEwen, I am forced to act drastically. You are not only under arrest, but you are now charged specifically with every crime committed by the Moon Man. Chief, my orders to you are to lock McEwen up. He is to stand trial on these charges, and he is to be held without bail. Put him in a cell at once!"

New horror shone in the eyes of Sue McEwen. Cold fury swept through Steve Thatcher's body and whirled into his mind. His hands curled into white fists. He spoke in an incisive tone that turned every eye toward him.

"Wait! I tell you I know positively, beyond all possible doubt, that Gil is not the man you want!"

Quietly Keanan asked: "How do you know that, Steve?"

"Because I am. Because I'm the Moon Man."

"Steve!" Sue McEwen rose quickly from her chair. "Steve, what are you saying!"

Chief Thatcher blinked. Curtis Mead's sternness became even more forbidding. Mark Keanan began to smile slowly.

"I'm guilty of everything you're accusing Gil of." Steve Thatcher heard his own voice speaking distantly. "I wrote the Moon Man's letter tonight, yes. I stole money from the Harte house. I'm ready to make a complete confession that I'm the Moon Man."

He stared in astonishment at the reactions his statements brought.

Curtis Mead gestured impatiently and turned again to the bewildered Chief Thatcher. "You understand my orders. McEwen is to be locked up at once and held without bail. I'll see that he stands trial on these charges at the earliest possible moment." And the president of the police board marched again toward the door.

Keanan was gazing at the white-faced Steve Thatcher, still smiling wryly. "It's no go, Steve," he said. "No go."

McEwen blinked in bewilderment. "God! Mead knows the only chance I have of clearing myself is to grab the Moon Man, and he orders me locked up! He knows I've got to keep working on this case to stand a chance of beating

the rap, and he orders me held without bail! By damn!"

Chief Thatcher was frowning. "Gil, I've been a cop all my life and I've never risked being broken before, but I'm going to do it now. I'm not going to follow Mead's orders and lock you up. I'm not going to book you for the Moon Man's crimes. Mead can kick me off the force if he pleases, but I won't take away your only opportunity to prove yourself innocent."

McEwen swallowed with difficulty. "God, chief! You're white!"

"So far as I'm concerned, you're not under arrest. You're free to handle this case as you please. You've got to make the best of it, Gil, because once Mead finds this out, he'll break me and make a prisoner of you. You've got to work fast."

"Thanks, chief!" McEwen blurted. "Thanks!"

He turned away, gazing at Steve Thatcher. His hard lips curved into a warm smile. He raised a trembling hand to slap Thatcher's shoulder gently.

"Okay, Steve," he said softly. "I know you only said it to save me. It means a hell of a lot, Steve—your thinking so damn' much of me. There isn't another man in the world who would have done that. Okay. Sue, you're going to marry the finest guy that ever lived."

The girl was still peering in agony into Steve Thatcher's face. Suddenly she hurried out the door, a sob trembling on her lips. Steve Thatcher followed her into his office. She flung her arms around his shoulders and pressed her cheek to his, a cheek that became wet with tears.

"God!" Steve Thatcher breathed. "I told them the truth. I told them I'm the Moon Man—and they didn't believe me!"

THE girl backed away, brushing her handkerchief across her eyes. She saw a new, alert light in Steve Thatcher's eyes. She asked quickly: "What are you going to do, Steve? What are you thinking?"

Grimly he declared: "There's just one more chance, Sue. One last chance!"

He strode back to the chief's door

quickly and thrust in. McEwen was slumped in a chair, gnawing his cigar. Keanan was leaning on the chief's desk, eying him. Chief Thatcher was rubbing one blue-veined hand across his wrinkled face. His son strode to him.

"Dad, I want to see the Moon Man's letter." He took it up and studied it. He peered at Keanan intently. "Look here. Suppose for a moment that Gil's not the Moon Man. Assume that this letter is genuine, that it means what it says. The Moon Man has been bold enough to say that he's going to pull another job tomorrow night."

"He won't," Keanan snorted. "Not if Gil's locked up."

Thatcher went on levelly. "The Moon Man is daring enough to make his promise good, assuming that Gil is not that crook, Keanan. What does this letter say? It speaks of 'those who squander their money on doubly high life.' It mentions their paying almost a dollar a cup for coffee. 'You will not be able to trap me in the cabs'—that means something! The Moon Man is deliberately hinting where his next job will be pulled!"

McEwen was sitting up. "Yes, by damn—but where?" he demanded.

"The price of the coffee means an exclusive, expensive place, of course—a night club," Thatcher hurried on. "'Doubly high' may mean a night club on the top of a building. That's it! 'Cabs' doesn't refer to taxis. It means elevator cages. It fits together. There's only one place in town that the Moon Man can mean."

McEwen jerked to his feet. "The Stratosphere Club!" he exclaimed. "By damn! On the sixtieth floor of the Apex Building."

"Exactly!" Steve Thatcher peered at Keanan. "If the Moon Man means what he says here, he's going to try to rob the Stratosphere Club tomorrow night. Keanan, you said you were playing fair. Now's the time to show it. Here's the opportunity to give Gil his only chance of proving himself innocent before Mead clamps down on dad. We'll go to the Stratosphere Club tomorrow night. We'll wait for the Moon Man to appear. If he

does—Are you sporting enough to play that chance, Keanan?"

The detective sergeant's eyes glittered. "Sure," he said. "Provided Gil stays in sight every second of the time."

"We'll see to that!" Steve Thatcher was speaking rapidly. "Dad, in order to keep Mead quiet tonight, lock Gil up now. Let him out tomorrow night. Gil and Keanan and I, and any picked men Keanan wants, will go to the Stratosphere tomorrow night and start a still hunt for the Moon Man. Our object will be to close in on him, when he appears—and unmask him. If the thumb of the man we capture matches the print McEwen has—that will be absolute proof that Gil McEwen is innocent!"

Steve Thatcher watched the three men nod agreement and his eyes burned with a bright, determined light.

CHAPTER VI

HIGH STAKES

THE WHITE spire of the Apex Building reached to the zenith of Great City. By day thousands of executives, stenographers, secretaries, salesmen, swarmed in and out of its entrances. At night parades of costly cars discharged ermine-wrapped women and silk-hatted men into its foyer. A special gold-decorated elevator cab carried them to the heights of the skyscraper where the Stratosphere Club, the most exclusive and the most expensive in the city, became the rendezvous of the elite.

In the flock of rich cars tonight appeared one that was worn and dusty, carrying the gold initials *P. D.* Gil McEwen, Steve Thatcher and Mark Keanan stepped out of it. McEwen looked uncomfortable in his chesterfield and derby. Steve Thatcher's gaze shone brightly beneath the brim of his black homburg. Keanan, ill at ease in a gray topcoat and felt hat, frowned his skepticism. Before they entered the building, they turned to a second police sedan which drew to the curb behind theirs.

"Camp in the lobby," McEwen directed the men. "There's going to be a telephone line open between you and the

club constantly. If the alarm comes, close that building up tight. If the Moon Man shows himself in there, we've got to grab him, and no slips. You know what this means to me."

"Trust us, Gil!"

Steve's lips pressed wryly as he went with McEwen and Keanan to the elevator. They saw three detectives station themselves in the lobby before the ornate cab lifted them. They stepped out of it into an elaborately decorated reception room into which a tinkling melody penetrated. They surrendered their hats and coats. McEwen adjusted his bow tie nervously.

"I've doped this all out with the boss of this place," he declared. "Chap named Harrington. The cashier is behind the orchestra platform, and tonight the money's going to be transferred to Harrington's office almost as soon as it reaches the till. Keanan, you and I are going to be there. Steve, you're going to watch from the other end, in a room that's used for private dinners. If the Moon Man shows up, he won't stand a chance!"

Cynically Keanan suggested: "Let's go."

McEwen turned to the entrance of the famous Stratosphere Room. It was finished in airy blue and gold; its ceiling was high and vaulted. Scores of immaculate tables surrounded the oval dance-floor; couples in evening dress were dining and dancing to the rhythmic beat of the orchestra. The headwaiter approached stiffly. McEwen, in a low tone, explained their purpose.

"Mr. Harrington is waiting for you, sir, in his office. One of these gentlemen is Mr. Thatcher? There is a call at the telephone for him now."

"I'll take it in the private room," Steve Thatcher said with simulated casualness.

He watched McEwen and Keanan stride past the tables to the far end of the room. The headwaiter led him to a door in the corner. Thatcher closed it behind him; he strode at once to a telephone in the corner. The voice that came over the wire said:

"Mr. Williams?"

"Okay, Angel! Have you—"

"The box hasn't come in yet, Boss. God, you can't do anything without the mask. There's another train from New York in twenty minutes, carrying express, but the box might not be on it. It's the last tonight, Boss!"

"When that train comes in, Angel," Steve Thatcher demanded tightly, "call me here—at once!"

"Sure, Boss!"

Thatcher left the telephone. He peered out the window, at the lights sparkling far below, at the tiny cars crawling and insect-people swarming. In the lobby below detectives were on watch, alert for an alarm. Here, sixty floors above the street, Gil McEwen was gambling on a secret rendezvous with the Moon Man, gambling on the electric chair.

Steve Thatcher strode to the door and bolted it. He turned to the window and slid the sash upward. He slipped off his coat and vest. The removal of the inner garment revealed circles of rope wrapped snugly about his waist. Quickly he loosened yard after yard of the thin, strong strand from the coils.

One end he knotted tightly around the leg of a heavy modernistic buffet sitting against the wall. He dropped the coils out the window and moved the buffet closer to it. He looked down the sheer side of the building and saw the strand whipping in the wind, terminating between two windows, three and four stories below. Gripping the rope, he climbed on the sill.

His hands wrapped the rope tightly as he lowered himself. The wind souged past him. He went down slowly, rubbing against the white wall of the building. Beneath him the chasm of the street yawned; the pavement lay more than seven hundred feet below. The light of the city gleamed faintly on him as he crawled down the singing filament.

Every muscle of his body was aching when he braced himself against the narrow sill of the window three stories below the level of the Stratosphere Club. He pried at the sash. The dizzy height made window catches unnecessary; the

sash rose. Steve Thatcher hooked one leg inward. Breathless, his blood rushing hot, he slid into the darkness of an office.

He left a partitioned space open behind him as he strode toward a pebbled-glass door, connecting with the corridor. On it a name read backwards: *GREAT CITY MORTGAGE CORP.* Thatcher drew the spring bolt out of its socket. He tested the door to make sure he was leaving it unfastened. He returned quickly to the partitioned space and the open window.

GRIPPING the strand again, he climbed out. He straightened, reaching up along the rope. He pulled himself and dangled, swinging slightly in the wind. He pressed the rope between his knees, drawing himself slowly upward. The climb, the nervous tension brought by the deadly height, drained his strength rapidly. He hooked an arm through the open window of the private dining room and gulped in air.

He pulled himself over the sill, spun to the door and listened. The dance orchestra was playing a rumba; castinets were clicking; and Thatcher peered out to see a dancer whirling in a spotlight on the oval floor. He bolted the door again. He brought a small whisk broom from his pocket and brushed white from his trousers. He slipped again into his vest and coat. He stood tensely near the telephone, waiting.

Twenty minutes, Dargan had said. For Steve Thatcher, twenty minutes of strenuous effort, of threatened death and agonized waiting.

At the jangle of the bell, Thatcher jerked the telephone up. His breathless voice brought an explosive response from Ned Dargan.

"Boss! It's here! It came on the last train! I've got it!"

"Thank God, Angel! Listen. Get into the car and take it out of the box. You've got the baccalaureate robe with you? The gloves? An automatic? Good! I told you to bring wrapping paper—yes. Wrap them all, Angel. Bring them to the Apex Building as fast as you can drive."

"Okay, Boss!"

"Angel! Watch sharp on your way in. There're three detectives in the lobby. They may spot you. Don't take the special elevator. Get off at the fifty-eight floor. You'll find the door of the Great City Mortgage Corporation unlocked. Go to the open window. I'll be waiting directly above."

"I'm on my way, Boss!"

Steve Thatcher turned from the telephone to listen at the door again. The dancer had ended her number. A male quartet was singing a parody of a popular song. Thatcher turned to perch on the window sill, peering down. Again he waited.

A black movement flickered below. A head looked out the open window three stories down. Shining eyes turned upward.

"Boss!"

"Thank God, you passed the cops, Angel."

"I'm all safe, Boss. I've got the stuff."

"Tie the rope around the bundle, Angel. Make a good job of it. Hurry it."

Thatcher saw Dargan pull the strand into the window. Stiff paper crackled. When Dargan looked out again he had the rope in his fist, and a round bundle was dangling from it. Quickly Thatcher, reaching far below, drew it upward. He brought it into the room and called down again.

"Wait there, Angel. Listen carefully. There'll be no time to talk later. When I lower the bundle to you again, grab it and run. Loosen the spring bolt as you go out into the corridor. Go down to the sixth floor—the sixth. Number Six Twenty-one, Angel! It's a small office. I rented it this morning under a false name. It's empty and it's not locked. The window opens onto the roof of the building behind the Apex. There's a fire escape down the back of that building. It's a clear get-away!"

"Okay, Boss!" Dargan's voice carried up.

"If I don't have a chance to lower the bundle, Angel, get out through that lower office as fast as you can in any case. It will mean that McEwen's grabbed me.

And your orders are to keep yourself safe. Strict orders, Angel!"

"God, Boss!"

"Now wait!"

Thatcher turned from the window. Quickly he untied the rope and cord from the bundle. He unwrapped the black robe and shook it over his shoulders. He pulled on the black gloves. Gently he lifted the new sphere of Argus glass, carefully hinged together and fitted with a deflector. He closed it over his head and took the automatic into his black hand.

Steve Thatcher had vanished; the Moon Man had appeared.

AT the door the Moon Man listened. A new number was being played. A woman was singing, softly, vibrantly, in French. The Moon Man drew the bolt, snapped off the lights, opened a thin crack in the door. He looked across the room draped in darkness save for a deep blue spotlight playing on the *chanteuse*.

The Moon Man, in the person of Steve Thatcher, had visited the Stratosphere Club often. He had known that this number would come, to fill the lofty hall with an eye-baffling gloom. He knew that the Frenchwoman's singing brought rapt, unbroken attention from those at the tables. He knew that the office of Harrington was reachable by two different doors. Tonight, he realized, that office was holding a neat sum of cash. Bent now on making desperate, daring use of that knowledge, he stepped into the dim blue light.

His long robe rustled, his silver head glistened as he took swift strides along the aisle behind the tables. He became a ghost in the blue gloom. He darted the length of the room to a door at the rear. There he paused, making sure that every eye was on the ginger, that even the waiters were listening in fascination. There were no sounds save the caressing voice and the muted orchestra, and the flutter of the Moon Man's movement through the door.

He paused at another. It opened, he knew, into Harrington's office. It was not, he knew, the entrance McEwen and Keanan had taken. He twisted the knob

silently, tensing. He leveled his automatic and poised. He stepped forward swiftly, thrusting the door open, closing it behind him; and his muffled voice rang from his shell of a mask.

"Gentlemen, don't move!"

McEwen and Keanan were sitting in chairs facing the opposite door; between them Harrigan was tilted back in a chair. McEwen sprang up, whirling. Keanan snapped to his feet with a gasp. Harrington abruptly stopped teetering and twisted to stare wide-eyed. Into their faces the glitter of the Moon Man's automatic played.

"Don't move!" the muffled voice warned again. "I should dislike very much having to shoot you. If you reach for your guns, I shall be obliged to take that regrettable step. I've come to steal, not to murder."

McEwen blurted: "By damn!"

Keanan exploded: "You're Dargan!"

Harrington sat and stared at the ghostly black figure with the silver head, stared pale as death.

"First," the Moon Man said in his muffled tones, "I will receive the money in the cash box you have before you, Mr. Harrington. Don't bother to empty it out. Simply hand the box over. Delay may force me to take more persuasive means of— Thank you!"

Harrington had lifted the green metal box from the desk. The Moon Man slipped it deftly under his left arm. His silver head glittered as he peered at McEwen and Keanan, and inside the shell a chuckle sounded.

"Dargan?" he asked. "I? That's palpably absurd, Keanan. You have Dargan's description. You know he is both shorter and stockier than I. Nor am I, as you must now be convinced, Gil McEwen. I have been very amused, McEwen, by Keanan's charges against you. I know you've sworn to send me to the chair, but I have no desire to see you finish in it. Permit me."

The Moon Man, while speaking, had deftly transferred his automatic to his left hand. Now he was working his fingers inside his right glove. He slipped the thumb out — the thumb only. He

stepped forward, his glistening head bowed, his gun still leveled.

Deliberately he pressed his thumb to the top of the polished desk. Deliberately again he impressed his print upon the glass shade of the desk lamp. A third time—as another chuckle sounded within the silver shell—he touched his thumb, to the smooth bottom of a chromium ash-tray.

"Now, gentlemen," his muffled voice came. "I bid you good night!"

The Moon Man whipped out the door through which he had come. He turned toward the next as Gil McEwen's voice roared from Harrington's office.

"Call the cops in the lobby! Stop that guy! Stop him!"

The Moon Man whirled into the deep blue light of the big room. The Frenchwoman was still singing softly into utter silence—silence until the Moon Man's robe flapped as he dashed behind the tables. Silence until Gil McEwen slammed out the door with a pistol positive in his hand. Silence until—a thundering shot!

Then screams. Then a discordant crash from the orchestra, the slam of chairs falling back, the gruff exclamations of men and the quick moving of feet. Rising bedlam, punctuated by the sharp slam of a closing door!

The Moon Man whipped into the private dining-room. His breath whizzed inside his shell mask as he shot the bolt and spun. On the opposite wall was the scar of McEwen's bullet. The Moon Man darted to the window, pulling off his gloves, whipping off his robe. Swiftly he removed the fragile mask. Swiftly he began crashing the stiff paper around the bundle that contained his regalia and loot.

On the bolted door—heavy hammering! Through the panels, the grating voice of McEwen.

"Open this door. We've got you cornered. Break it down! Bring a table! Break that door down!"

Steve Thatcher circled the rope around the bundle and knotted it tight as the first thumping blow hit the door. He swung the bundle out the window and lowered it quickly. He saw Dargan reach for it.

"Skip, Angel! Now!"

Twice again the door shook with the power of the blows McEwen was driving upon it. Steve Thatcher drew his pistol positive from his pocket. Deliberately he struck himself with it, driving the butt against his forehead. His own blow stunned him and brought a rush of blood to the bruised skin. He dropped the gun. He snatched a pair of handcuffs out of his pocket. He clicked one circle around his wrist and the other around the leg of the heavy buffet.

A deafening crash shook the door. The screws of the bolt socket ripped out. The door flapped open and Gil McEwen charged into the room with gat leveled. He stopped short, peering at Steve Thatcher. Thatcher was squirming on the floor as if only half-conscious, his forehead marked lividly. McEwen's voice roared through the babble from the big room.

"By damn! He went out that window! Find out what office it is, Keanan! Harrington! Telephone the men in the lobby to let nobody out! By damn!"

Steve Thatcher suppressed a wry smile as he tugged to free himself and weaved to his knees. This frantic turmoil, this desperate rush, this fury of McEwen's, would all come to nothing. Once more the Moon Man had eluded the law.

UNDER a gleaming light, in the fingerprint room of headquarters, lay a lamp shade and an ash tray. McEwen had rushed to headquarters with them the moment he had become certain that the Moon Man had vanished into thin air. Under Keanan's eyes he had brushed the smudges left by the Moon Man with mercury-and-chalk. Now he peered through a magnifying glass, studying the gray lines grimly, while Steve Thatcher watched.

Sue McEwen's arm was circled snugly around his. Her eyes were alight, her lips were happily curved. She watched her father straighten and pass the glass to Keanan.

"It's the same as that photograph! That proves the old print belongs to the

Moon Man! That proves I'm not the Moon Man and never was! What do you think of that, Keanan?"

Keanan's shoulders were sagging.

"You come with me!"

McEwen tugged Keanan from the table into the hall. He guided Keanan to the chief's door and through it. He took the lampshade and the tray with him and his eyes glittered like steel. Steve Thatcher and Sue, following, paused outside the door.

"There you are, chief! Complete vindication before Keanan's eyes. This case is closed, is it? It is, by damn, as far as anybody's suspecting me of being the Moon Man goes!"

The chief's voice carried into the hall gravely. "Keanan, you remember my warning. Your case against Gil has collapsed completely. I've just had Curtis Mead on the wire, and even Mead admits that Gil is cleared. That being the case, Keanan, you are dismissed from the force."

"Hold it, chief!" Gil McEwen chuckled. "I've always said that I'm going to give the Moon Man the works no matter who he is. With me it's a fight to the finish,

with Keanan it was ambition overreaching itself. All the same, he was doing his job. He did what I'd expect any cop to do under the circumstances. I want you to do me a favor, chief. Keep Keanan. Don't fire him off the force. He's a damn' swell detective."

"Why, very well, Gil, if you want that. Very well, Keanan—you stay."

Keanan blurted: "My God, Gil, you're a swell guy!"

"Forget it!" McEwen growled. "From now on, Keanan, you and I are going after the Moon Man together. And the day's coming, I promise you, when I'm going to get him cold!"

Not even hearing that darkened the smile on Steve Thatcher's face. His arm tightened around Sue's waist. She was laughing deep in her throat, gazing into his eyes with unbounded admiration.

"Sue, darling," Steve Thatcher said, "this calls for a celebration—a big one! We're going to step out and forget about crooks and cops and—the Moon Man. We're going to go to the swellest place in town tomorrow night and dance ourselves dizzy. It's a date, Sue—the Stratosphere Club!"

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Phantom Finger

By ANTHONY CLEMENS

Author of "The Red 21," "Death on the Dock."

THE woman who was with Lister that evening shuddered; she saw his eyes for the first time as he helped her out of the taxi under the lights of the Tattoo Club.

"Gee, big boy," she said to his back while he paid the driver out of a bulging wallet. "you looked at me that time like you wanted to strangle me!"

When he turned back to her, his eyes were veiled. "That wasn't for you, baby. I was thinking—of somebody."

He took her elbow and piloted her under the canopy toward the entrance. His gaze, meanwhile, was searching the shadows beyond the lights.

She stole a side glance at his thinned, taut lips, and shivered daintily. "Gee! I'd hate to be that somebody!"

At the door he stopped, gave her a little shove. "Go on in, baby. I have to phone somebody. I'll join you in a couple of minutes."

She pouted, started to protest, then looked up at his face, gulped and obeyed.

When she disappeared, Lister walked a few steps to a little cigar stone next door to the club. He went into the phone booth, consulted a slip of paper from his wallet, and called a number in Jersey—Hilldale 4040.

"Hello, boss," a voice answered him. "Everything's jake. We're moving the stuff in an hour."

Lister asked: "Where's Gumbo?"

"He went to New York, like you told him, boss. He's waiting for you outside the Tattoo Club, watching till you meet that guy, Benny."

Lister said: "Okay. I'll call back later." He hung up and went out. A man was standing at the curb, away from the light. This man was short and slight,

with a thin, sharp face and long, dexterous fingers.

Lister gazed down at him for a full minute before he said: "So you're Benny! Why don't you stick to picking pockets in the subway instead of mixing in hot stuff like this?"

Benny squirmed, then raised his sharp chin defiantly. "What I know ought to get me a fair cut. I seen the whole thing."

"And you'd squeal?"

Benny shrugged. "Why not? I come out of the subway station just when the two guys shot the truck driver. I seen them dump his body out in the gutter and drive the truck away. And then, right on top of it, this Sergeant Scovill is on the spot, an' he grabs me. I had lifted two leathers in the subway, an' I hadda ditch 'em both right under Scovill's nose, with the dough still in 'em.

"An' Scoville says to me, 'Benny, that's murder, an' a truckload of silk's been hijacked. Come clean—did you reco'nize them hijackers?' An' I say no. But I did. I knew all the time that they was Gumbo Soper and Lou Razzio. So why shouldn't I get a cut when I buttoned up my lip!"

"All right," said Lister. "But how did you come to connect me with them? Why did you call me up?"

Benny laughed. He said: "That was easy. I know Gumbo and Lou work for you. You're a silk fence, ain't you?"

Lister said: "I see."

"Look here," Benny whined. "You're gonna take care of me, ain't you? Business is terrible in the subway these days, even for a expert like me. An' I could send you to the chair."

Lister's hand went to his breast pocket. Benny gulped, whispered: "There's a cop on the corner. You couldn't—"

Then he stopped, sighed. Lister had only taken his wallet out. While Benny watched, Lister extracted ten one hundred dollar bills. "There's a grand—on condition you leave town."

BENNY seemed to gain confidence from Lister's easy surrender. "Nix. That load was worth a hundred G's, according to the papers. Where do you come off with that piker stuff! Fifteen or twenty grand would be a right cut!"

Lister's lips compressed into a thin line. He returned the money to his wallet, and the wallet to his pocket.

Benny began to tremble. "M-make it—ten grand."

Lister considered, gazing across the street. He had seen a figure move in the shadow of a doorway there. Suddenly he said: "All right. But I can't give it to you now. Be at my hotel in the morning, and you'll get it."

Benny nodded. The sweat stood in beads on his forehead. He gripped the lapels of the other's coat, said eagerly: "You mean it, Lister? You ain't gonna wipe me out or nothin'?"

Lister smiled faintly. "I wouldn't touch a hair of your head."

Benny said doubtfully: "Okay, I'll be there." He raised the collar of his coat, shoved his hands in his pockets, turned away. "You can depend on it, nobody'll ever hear a peep outta me."

"I'm sure of that," said Lister with a thin grin.

As Benny hurried up the street, a figure crossed from the other side, came up to Lister and said: "What's the word, boss?"

Lister spoke slowly, like a judge pronouncing sentence. "Take him, Gumbo, and call me back at the Tattoo Club. Don't flop, now. He wants ten grand or he'll squeal."

Gumbo said: "The rat!" He slid along into the darkness.

Lister turned, strolled under the canopy, and entered the Tattoo Club. The

woman was waiting for him outside the coat room.

He said: "Let's eat, baby. How does lobster à la Newburg sound to you?"

She put her arm in his and pressed it, allowing a slow smile to spread over her face. "You sure know how to show a girl a good time."

Their table was an excellent one, close to the floor show.

Over the demi-tasse, the woman said: "Gee, you're a swell guy. A girl would do lots for a guy like you." Her eyes were soft, yielding.

He leaned over the table, smiling, started to say something, and stopped as he saw the woman suddenly gape at some one behind him.

He turned.

The head waiter was escorting a squat man toward their table. The man waved the waiter away, and stood over Lister. He palmed a shield and showed it. "Detective Sergeant Scovill—homicide," he said.

Lister frowned. "I don't understand—"

His mouth stayed open and he said nothing more. For Scovill now had a gun in the other hand. His eyes were gray, hard. "Come easy, Lister. I'm taking you downtown."

Lister's cheeks were ashen. He stammered: "This—this is an outrage!"

Scovill put up a broad hand. "What's the use, Lister! We got the goods on you this time. I had the Jersey police check on Hilldale 4040. They raided the place. It's a garage. They found that hijacked silk truck, an' they're holding Lou Razzio for us." He added, grinning broadly: "Those Jersey cops are hard guys—and Razzio talked plenty."

Lister swallowed hard. "But—but—how—"

Scovill's broad face broke into a grin. "How did I get the telephone number? That's funny. It'll hand you a laugh, Lister. A cheap dip by the name of Benny was shot and killed around the corner a little while ago. And what do you think I found on him? Your wallet—with the phone number in it!"

Marty Quade, Private Dick, Finds a Woman Who

Married for Murder



Flame lanced
as Serrano
fired.

By

EMILE C. TEPPERMAN

Author of "Devil's Commission,"
"Warden of Death," etc.

Cuvillier was the only man in town with the brains to work that marriage racket. And Private Detective Marty Quade was the only man smart enough to stop him. Marty had been out to get Cuvillier for a long time. But now, when he had the chance—Cuvillier tied him in a knot.

MARTY QUADE leaned forward in the cab and tapped on the pane. "This is it, Moe. Number forty-two. Pull up right here."

The driver nodded, braked before the aristocratic old brownstone house. He said over his shoulder, as Marty got out, "Looks like they got dough, Mr. Quade. How do you always manage to get clients that are filthy with dough?"

It was the kind of house that inspired one with the feeling that its owners had lived in it for generations, and could live

in a palace if they were not tied to this place by reasons of sentiment and pleasant association. Set far back from the building line, it had a well-kept lawn, which, in this section of high real estate values alone represented the price of a dozen buildings in a poorer neighborhood. The house reminded Marty of an old bottle of Napoleon brandy that might look musty and cobwebby, but was priceless.

As Marty got out of the cab, he stopped for a moment at the curb,

glanced down the street. Moe followed his gaze, peering in the rear vision mirror on the fender.

"There they come, Mr. Quade," he said, as a maroon sedan swung around the corner, and slowed up, crawling down the block toward them. "They stuck like leeches."

Marty nodded. He waved the driver away. "Drive around the corner and park the cab with the flag down—I'll pay the tariff. Then come back, and if the birds from that sedan have come in the house after me, you just ring the bell hard, and beat it back around the corner. Wait for me there, and don't pay any attention if you hear shooting in there."

The driver said, "Okay, Mr. Quade. It sounds screwy to me, but I guess you know what you're doing."

Marty didn't bother to answer. As the cab pulled away, he walked up the short path flanked by tall umbrella trees, then up the short flight of stone steps, and rang the bell. He stood sideways to the door, with his hand halfway across the white bosom of his dinner jacket, close to the butt of the automatic in his armpit holster.

He kept his eye on the maroon sedan, which had slowed down to a snail-like pace, was still half a block away.

He waited what seemed a long time, but did not press the bell button again. At last he heard light, faltering steps inside. The curtain behind the glass panel of the old-fashioned door was pulled aside and some one peered out at him from the murky darkness of the interior.

Then the door opened, and Marty stepped into the dark hallway. He still held his hand close to the automatic, his whole body tense, ready for action. The door closed, shutting out what little light the street lamp had thrown into the house. Some one moved quietly beside him.

Marty caught the faint rustling of a dress, the sweet scent of a woman's hair. A soft body brushed him, a light hand fell on his sleeve.

"Come this way, Mr. Quade," a girl's voice said to him. "Hold on to me. I—I'm afraid to make a light."

Her voice spoke of refinement. Also, it hinted of nameless fear.

Marty put out a hand, touched a soft, cool, bare arm. "All right, Mrs. Boynton," he said. "Take me where we can talk."

He followed her through the dark hall and up a flight of stairs. She walked with the sure step of one who knew the house well. It was Marty's left hand that held on to her; his right was still free.

Down at the middle of the upper hall she turned and led him through a doorway into a room that was just as dark as the rest of the house. She closed the door, and Marty heard a switch click. The room was bathed in soft light from a small lamp on a writing desk in the corner.

Marty's eyes swept the room. He saw that it was large, thickly carpeted, expensively furnished. Heavy drapes covered the two windows, permitting not a single streak of light to shine through.

The girl who had brought him here was tall, slim, with a slender throat and patrician features. She was somewhere between twenty-four and twenty-eight. Despite her slimness she had attractive curves; and Marty knew she was soft and pleasant to the touch.

"Well, Mrs. Boynton," he asked, "what makes you think you need a private detective?" Somehow, in that large room, his voice sounded hollow, almost unreal.

THE girl was close to him. Her eyes sought his appealingly. She was breathing rapidly, shortly, almost in sobs. She spoke fast, tremulously, one hand clutching his sleeve.

"Were you followed here, Mr. Quade?" She didn't give him time to answer. "I'm sure they knew you were coming. I'm sure they've tapped my wire. They must have listened in when I called you."

Marty nodded slowly. "I was followed, all right; a maroon sedan. It's outside now." He took her arm, led her to a settee at the other end of the room, and sat down beside her. "Now, suppose you take a deep breath and tell me what's your trouble—and who *they* are."

She clasped her hands in her lap,

looked around fearfully. "If they're outside, they'll come in, I'm sure. *I'm sure!*" Her voice rose, became slightly shrill. "I shouldn't have called you. I should have paid them. Now they'll come in and kill us—kill us both!"

Marty rose disgustedly. "Listen, lady, you and I will never get along like this. Now—do you talk sense, or do I go home?"

She bit her lower lip, controlled herself. She nodded. "I'm all right now," she said, low-voiced.

"Fine," said Marty. He sat down again. "Now spill it."

"It—it's my husband," she began. "Alan—he's a—a—bigamist!"

"Then he's crazy," Marty told her.

She smiled half-heartedly. Even in her state of fear, she was, womanlike, susceptible to a compliment from a man like Marty.

He grinned. "Now we're getting the situation under control. So tell me when you found out about this, and what the birds in the maroon sedan have to do with it. Also why you're all alone here in the house, shivering in your shoes."

She was a little calmer now. Marty did that to people. His broad shoulders and square face that reflected power and reliability, his imperturbable, easy manner, seemed to inspire men and women with confidence, with a sense of safety.

She unclasped her hands, started to twirl the diamond wedding band around her finger. "Alan told me himself. He—he hasn't been home for three days. He called me on the phone day before yesterday. They made him marry this woman before a justice of peace up in Connecticut. But he can't prove that he was forced. They just stood there as witnesses, but they had their hands in their pockets, with guns; and they would have—*killed* him if he hadn't gone through with it!"

Marty's eyes had a far-away look. "Sounds like a new kind of racket to me," he said reflectively. He swung on her brusksly. "Go on. What happened?"

She had forgotten some of her fear now, in the telling of the story. She went on eagerly, "They've got Alan some-

where. He went with them willingly, so it can't be called kidnaping; Alan told me that on the phone. Then yesterday, they came to see me, showed me a photostat copy of the marriage certificate. They want a hundred thousand dollars, or they'll have the woman they married him to prosecute him for bigamy!"

Marty whistled. "It took brains to figure that one out. Who's this *they*?"

"Two men," she told him, "named Cuvillier and Serrano."

Marty started, tensed. "Cuvillier! I might have known he's the only one in town with the brains for such a stunt." He turned to her grimly. "What did you do?"

"I—I was willing to pay it, if they'd give me the original marriage certificate and a release from the woman. But no—they wouldn't do that. Cuvillier told me, with that maddening smile of his, that the hundred thousand was only the first installment—they'd be back for more in a year or so. They're going to hold that over Alan's head for the rest of his life!"

"So you refused to pay up?"

"I did." Her mouth set in a stubborn little line. "I *won't* have Alan bled—and bled—forever!"

Marty looked at her admiringly. "So what did my pal, Culliver, do?"

"He—he only laughed. He said he was letting me off easy. If I don't pay by tonight, they'll kill me—and Alan. And the woman will inherit all of Alan's estate. They'll get all his money at once!"

Marty's eyes were bleak. "He'd do just that, too. Cuvillier's got away with murder more than once in this town."

The girl stirred. Impulsively, she put a hand on his knee. "That's why I called you, Mr. Quade. I *can't* go to the police. Alan is vice-chairman of the League of Decency. He could never prove he was forced to marry the woman. Can you imagine the scandal?"

"Yeah," said Marty. "I can imagine." He rose, carefully brushed off the lapel of his coat, upon which he had detected a slight speck. "Where were you sup-

posed to get the hundred thousand? Could you put your hands on it?"

She nodded. "I could sell some securities. The property and securities are all registered in our joint names." She got up, clutched his coat at the shoulder. "Please, please, Mr. Quade, do something. They told me if I called in any one they wouldn't wait. They'd start killing."

MARTY growled, "What the hell can I do? Cuvillier has you tied up in a knot."

Her eyes were large, trusting. "You can do *something*. Everybody talks about you. They say you *never* fail in any case you take."

"Yeah," said Marty. "But I haven't taken this yet. I've had it in for Cuvillier for a long time, but this doesn't look like a spot. He's been too clever. Of course, if he should go in for murder—" his eyes regarded her somberly — "but that wouldn't do you any good. You'd be past enjoying it."

"Help me," she pleaded. "Help me. I—I'm so—alone. I'll pay you—whatever your bill is."

Marty shook his head. "I can't see it, Mrs. Boynton. You better do business with Cuvillier—and hope he slips some other time. It's—"

He stopped at the sound of stealthy movement from the hall door. He whirled, his hand streaking for the automatic; but he didn't touch it. For the door had been silently swung open, and out of the darkness of the hall a shadowy shape loomed, a hand with a revolver was thrust into the room. And the revolver was pointing at him.

"Don't do it, Quade," said a voice. The voice sounded a little worried. "Maybe we can talk this over."

Marty grinned, but kept his hand close to the butt of the automatic. "Okay, Cuvillier. I won't hurt you. Come on in."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Mrs. Boynton, eyes distended and mouth open in terror; she was clutching his sleeve again, and would have made it a little difficult for him to draw and fire if he'd had to.

She said hoarsely, "He'll kill us both now!"

"Don't worry, lady," Marty reassured her. "Mr. Cuvillier won't do any shooting right this minute. If I thought he would, I'd have pulled my gun anyway."

The shadow from the hallway drew into the room, materialized as a large, paunchy man with a wide head and ears that stuck out at right angles. He wore a soft felt hat with a wide brim, which was intended to camouflage the large ears somewhat. There was a sharp cut to the hard chin, and a ruthless look in his eyes, which proclaimed Cuvillier to be a dangerous man. He was holding a revolver.

Behind Cuvillier there entered a small man with a shriveled face and black eyes set deep back under a high forehead. He was skinny and wizened, but the bony hand that held the automatic trained on Marty did not waver by so much as the sixteenth of an inch.

Marty laughed harshly. "Helko, Serrano. I see you got a new job now. You're a sap. Don't you know it's poison to be Cuvillier's bodyguard? He'll leave you holding the bag, the way he did the others."

Serrano scowled. His nose wrinkled into ugly shape from the grimace as he said to Cuvillier's back, "Lemme give it to him, boss! What's he buttin' in for anyway? It's his own funeral!"

Cuvillier jerked his shoulder impatiently, barked, "Lay off, Serrano. I'll do all the talking." He kept his eyes on Marty. "Look, Quade—I don't want any fuss with you. I know you can pull that gun of yours awful fast. You'd maybe get me, too, even with us having the drop on you. But you'd be dead as a herring, and you couldn't make any more dough."

Marty reached over with his left hand and gently disengaged the girl's clutch from his sleeve. He felt better now. His fingers, splayed like talons, hovered over the butt of the automatic, which was already partly showing under his coat.

"So don't take this here dame's case," said Cuvillier. "You can get out from under. She's got to pay. There's no out

for her or for Boynton. I got them sewed up tight. And believe me, when I say tight, I mean tight!"

The girl said to Marty almost under her breath, "No, no. I *won't* pay—unless they give me the marriage certificate and a release."

Marty sighed. "To be frank with you, Cuvillier," he told the big man, "I wasn't going to take the case. But now—"

He stopped as the doorbell downstairs rang loud and long. Serrano jerked around at the clatter of the bell. Cuvillier ordered, "Go see who that is. Chase 'em away. We're busy."

Serrano backed out of the door. "It might be Boynton an' Luella, from the car," he said. "Maybe Luella thinks we're givin' her the cross."

"If it's them, bring them up. We'll have Boynton tell Quade with his own tongue that he don't want any dicks mixing in here!"

When Serrano was gone, Marty grinned and said, "That's not your pals from the car, Cuvillier. It's just a little alarm bell of my own that I arranged for, in case you followed me in the house—only it came a little late." He lowered his hand slowly from the region of the shoulder clip. "You won't do any shooting now, Cuvillier. You were seen to come in by the man who rang that bell. And he'd make a swell witness to pin a murder rap on you."

CUVILLIER breathed a sigh of relief, lowered his revolver. "I'd rather not trade shots with you, anyway. Wait'll Boynton comes up an' tells this dame here to pay over."

Marty cast a glance at the stubborn set of the girl's mouth. She was standing tensely, her eyes lancing hate at Cuvillier.

Marty said to her, "What about it, Mrs. Boynton. You willing to pay, or should I take the case? I think that you can beat this frame of Cuvillier's. It's blackmail, and he can go up the river for ten years."

"If you prove it," Cuvillier pointed out. "I ain't said a word about blackmail. Why, it was her own husband that told

her on the phone to turn over that hundred thousand."

"I can't understand it!" the girl exclaimed. "That Alan should have let them *force* him to marry the woman—"

Marty patted her shoulder. "Don't worry, Mrs. Boynton. It was a good stunt, but they won't get away with it. No one would believe that a man like your husband would actually go through with a marriage ceremony—commit bigamy with his eyes open!"

They heard Serrano opening the downstairs door, heard loud voices—a woman's shrill one, and a man's troubled, subdued tones. Mrs. Boynton said:

"That's Alan!"

There were footsteps on the stairs. In a moment Serrano appeared in the doorway, and behind him a woman, no longer youthful, with bleached blonde hair and rings under her eyes. She was poorly dressed, and Marty noticed a run in her stocking.

After her came a man in his late thirties, dignified, but with a harried expression on his face. As he entered, Mrs. Boynton cried, "Alan!" in a choked sort of voice, and started to run to him; but stopped, with her hand to her mouth as she saw something in her husband's eyes.

Serrano grinned, waved his gun toward the frowzy woman, said, "Meet Luella Haines, ladies an' gents."

The woman brushed past him, put a hand on her hip, and stood as if flaunting herself before Boynton's wife. "The name," she said, "is Mrs. Luella H. Boynton—like it or not!"

Marty had been studying the husband, disregarding Cuvillier and Serrano. Now he turned to the woman, frowning at her. "You don't have to rub it in, Luella," he said. "In a racket like yours, you're supposed to treat the customers nice and gentle. All you want is the dough, isn't it?"

She sneered at him. "Wise dick, ain't you? That's how much you know about it. We're getting the dough, *and* I'm rubbing it in. What do you think of that?"

Marty looked at her reflectively for a

moment, and then he started to grin slowly. He saw that Boynton was squirming uncomfortably, and that Cuvillier and Serrano were red in the face. Serrano was fingering his gun suggestively as if he wanted to rake it across the woman's face.

Marty goaded him. "What's the matter, Serrano? Is your lady-friend talking too much for everybody's good?" He glanced at Cuvillier. "Your hired help seems to be getting out of control. There's more to this than just a black-mail racket, Cuvillier. Why don't you open up to me. I might be able to straighten out the whole jam."

Cuvillier threw a nasty glance at Luella, then hastened to assure Marty, "There's nothing to it, Quade. This is just the way it lines up. Luella here's been married to Boynton, and there ought to be some kind of settlement. Luella'll take a hundred grand and forget she's his lawful wedded wife—for a while. Of course, there'll be more payments due in the future; a guy as rich as Boynton can't marry two women cheap nowadays."

Marty was laughing silently, in Cuvillier's face. He turned to the bleached-blonde woman. "Come on, Luella, open up. If you have any rights, they'll be taken care of—without Cuvillier's assistance." He pointed a finger at Boynton, who had become very pale. "What about it, Mr. Boynton—won't you take care of Luella?" He demanded it sharply, imperiously, as if the answer had to be yes.

Boynton fidgeted, looked at the woman, then at his wife, then at Cuvillier. "Why—why—I guess so—of course." He squared his shoulders. "See here, Mr. Quade. Why should you mix up in this? My wife acted hastily when she called you in. I'm perfectly willing to deal with these men; it's the only way out."

Cuvillier nodded, grinning broadly. "That's the stuff, Mr. Boynton! Nothing like settling these things friendly like. You're a reasonable man!" He held out his hand, palm outward, to Marty, in a gesture of satisfaction. "You see, Quade? Just as I told you—you're not

wanted here. How about fading out and leaving us to settle this between ourselves?"

Marty shook his head slowly, still grinning. "Can't be done, Cuvillier." He took Mrs. Boynton's arm. "The lady, here, won't agree. She's not going to pay out this hundred thousand till she knows the inside of the deal." He pressed the girl's arm. "Am I right, Mrs. Boynton?"

The girl's eyes were wide, fixed on her husband, with mingled concern and fear. She hesitated. "Well, if Alan—"

Marty increased the pressure on her arm, squeezed hard. "Am I right, Mrs. Boynton?"

The pressure of Marty's hard fingers seemed to reassure her, to give her courage. Her little chin went up, she swept the others with a disdainful gaze. "I won't pay!" she said. "Unless they give up their hold on Alan. I won't! I won't!"

MARTY shrugged. "You see, Cuvillier? Your racket is swell, but it's no good with this lady. Too bad—"

Cuvillier's face had assumed an ugly expression. Serrano swung his gun to cover Marty, muttering, "Troublemaker!"

It was Boynton who interrupted Marty. He said hastily, "Never mind. I'll pay the money myself. As long as my wife knows—"

Marty stopped him. "You can't, Mr. Boynton. You need your wife's signature. It's no good." He spoke to the husband, but he had his eyes on the bleached blonde. "How come you let them marry you to this woman? You don't look like the kind of guy that could be intimidated. And a dame like her—"

Mrs. Boynton broke in. She was looking appealingly at her husband. "Oh, Alan! Why did you let them do it? Why? Why? You've put yourself in their hands!"

Boynton veiled his eyes. "I'm sorry, dear. This woman—"

The bleached blonde had been listening to the conversation avidly, seeming to gloat over Mrs. Boynton's misery.

Marty was watching her carefully, noting her reactions.

Now he said to her, "See? You're nothing but a tool of Cuvillier's. Boynton hates you."

The woman's attitude seemed to change at Marty's words. Her mouth twisted into a vicious line. Her eyes snapped venom. "He hates me, does he! He calls me *this woman!* I'll show him about *this woman!*"

She whirled on Boynton. "You—you —" She seemed to choke up with rage and hate. But her hands moved swiftly. She snatched a small-calibered gun out of her handbag, backed away, and pumped four shots into Boynton.

Marty got to her before either Cuvillier or Serrano, slapped her gun-hand down. Another bullet plowed into the floor. Serrano raised his gun, fired a single shot into the woman's body.

"Damn you!" he screeched. "A hundred grand gone!" He swung his gun toward Marty. "You too, you—"

Marty's right hand, which was free of the woman, streaked to his armpit. At the same time he dropped Luella, and sidestepped. His hand flashed out with the automatic, and flame lanced from it just as Serrano fired. Serrano's aim was thrown off by having to follow Marty's moving body, and he missed. But Marty's slug caught him between the eyes. He was slammed backward into the hallway, his convulsive finger holding down the trigger. His automatic continued to spurt lead, described a wild arc. And in the radius of that arc stood Cuvillier.

Cuvillier dropped like a log, shot through the throat by his own body-guard.

Marty, breathing hard, looked over the room. It was a shambles. Mrs. Boynton was standing stiff and frozen, shocked by the terrific explosions and the swift death that had come into the room.

Marty gripped her arm, led her to the settee. "Sit down and take it easy. It's all over."

Her eyes seemed to come to life, roved the room, and rested on her husband. "Alan!" she moaned. "He's dead."

Marty patted her shoulder, went over and knelt by the bleached-blonde woman. Serrano's bullet had caught her over the heart. There was no life in her.

From outside came voices; a police siren.

Marty went swiftly through Cuvillier's pockets. He found what he sought—a long envelope, with two documents in it. One was old and musty, the other brand new. Marty glanced only a moment at the old one, put it hastily in his pocket. The other he brought over to the settee, handed it to the girl.

She looked up at him with dull eyes.

"It's the marriage certificate," he told her.

She shivered. "Alan's dead. What good is it now?"

"Don't you want to protect his name, and yours? You want this to get out?"

Heavy feet sounded on the stairs, commands in an authoritative voice.

She continued to look at him uncomprehendingly. "But—but how—"

"How to cover it up? You just follow my lead. Let me do the talking."

He turned to the door as a couple of uniformed figures burst in. They were the crew of a radio car. Behind them came Moe, Marty's taxi driver.

The uniformed men had their guns out, took one look at the place, and swung on Marty.

Moe shouted, "Hey, wait. That's Mr. Quade. He ain't one of the crooks!"

Marty said, "Thanks, Moe." To the cops he explained, "We had a little shooting scrape. Some people got killed."

"Yeah. So we see. How come?"

Just then another uniformed man, and one in plainclothes came in. Marty greeted the one in plainclothes, who was Detective Sergeant Sayre of homicide. "Hello, Dave. Late, as usual!"

Sayre scowled at the room in general, turned an inquiring glance on Marty. He grinned sourly. "I see you done your good deed for the day, Quade. Cuvillier, huh? I thought that bird was too slick to lay himself open to getting shot by you."

"He was," Marty grinned. "I didn't shoot him. Serrano did. Serrano also shot

the woman, and the woman shot Mr. Boynton. I had to kill Serrano to keep him from doing further damage."

"Sounds screwy to me," Sayre growled.

"That's what I said," Moe interrupted eagerly, "when Mr. Quade—"

Marty froze him with a glance. "It's not screwy when you know the facts, Dave. Those three were a gang. They threatened to kill Mr. and Mrs. Boynton. So I was hired to protect them. Only I came just a minute or two late. The shooting had started, and they they found out they were double-crossing each other, so they kept on shooting—at each other."

SAYRE glanced at him suspiciously, turned to Mrs. Boynton. "What about it, Mrs. Boynton? Let's hear your story."

Marty raised a hand, looked outraged. "Why, Sergeant Sayre! You wouldn't subject Mrs. Boynton to questioning after she's just gone through such an ordeal!"

Sayre glowered at Marty, but the girl rose from the settee. She said brokenly, "It's all right, Mr. Quade. I—I'll answer the officer's questions." She turned her large eyes on Sayre. "You want to know what happened?"

"That's right, madam."

"Well, you see, these people were a gang. They threatened to kill Mr. Boynton and myself if we did not give them money. So we hired Mr. Quade, but he came too late. They had already started to—"

Sayre turned away from her disgustedly. "Yes, I know—they had already started shooting. The woman shot your husband—" He swung around and glared at Marty. "How did you manage to coach her so quick?"

Marty said sharply, "You're nuts, Dave! This is murder. Are you hinting that I'm not telling you just what happened?"

Sayre said wearily, "Oh, all right. I'll take your stories as they stand. But I hope the bullets in the right bodies belong in the right guns."

"You can depend on it, Dave, they will."

"I guess you're right," Sayre agreed reluctantly. "I've never known you to condone murder."

"You're damn right!" Marty growled. He took Mrs. Boynton's arm, led her out. "We'll be in the next room when the inspector comes," he called back. "There's no need to keep this lady here any longer."

The girl seemed to be holding her own. She said, "In here, Mr. Quade, please," indicating a door off the hall. This was a sitting room.

She seated herself before a writing desk, drew a folding check book out of a pigeon hole. Marty could see that she was exerting supreme control over herself. Perhaps in an hour or two she would yield to shock, perhaps not.

She picked up her pen, said, "About your fee, Mr. Quade?"

Marty shrugged. "I didn't do so much for you, Mrs. Boynton. I couldn't stop—"

She raised her hand. "I think you're doing more for me than you want to tell me. What was that worn-looking paper you took out of Cuvillier's wallet, and put in your pocket?"

Marty started.

She smiled wanly. "I saw you take it." She held out her hand. "You might as well show it to me. I can stand anything now."

Marty was reluctant. "What's the use—"

"If you don't show it to me, I'll guess—and it couldn't be worse—than my guess."

Marty looked at her for a long minute; then he nodded. "Okay."

He reached into his pocket, took out the old, crinkled paper, spread it open on the desk. It was coming apart at the folds. He smoothed it out, and they both read it. Then they looked at each other silently.

It was a marriage certificate, dated the fourteenth day of February, 1920. It certified that on that day, one Alan Boynton had taken to wife one Luella Haines.

The girl read it through twice more before she raised her eyes, full of questioning pain. She said very low, "Alan was already married to her. He really became a bigamist when he married me!"

"That's right," Marty agreed. "Luella must have caught up with him, and then told her story to Cuvillier. Cuvillier probably made his play to your husband, hit him up for heavy dough. But your husband couldn't draw that much money without explaining to you, so he figured out the stunt of staging a *second* marriage to Luella Haines, and then tell-

ing you he'd been forced to marry her. See it?"

There was a tear in the corner of each of her eyes. "I see." She swallowed hard. "Poor woman. How she must have hated him for deserting her!"

She threw her head back, dabbed at the tears with a tiny handkerchief, and picked up the pen.

"This check, Mr. Quade," she said, "is going to be *good*."

As she wrote the check, Marty slowly tore the marriage certificate into small bits.

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Sensational Mystery Novel



By MARGIE HARRIS

There was a sinister warning knifed to the grave of Willinger, Public Enemy Number One. That warning said: "We'll get her, pal!" And it meant the mysterious Woman in Black who had fingered the notorious killer. Two men knew where that Woman in Black lived. Two men—a liquor-sodden reporter, and an ex-federal dick. But they didn't figure on Fate's double-cross.

CHAPTER I

WOMAN IN BLACK

THE ghastliest thing that can happen to a man in the dick game, particularly an ex-federal like myself who was given the gate for muffing a

chance to snare Willinger, big bank- and-kill Public Enemy, is to come alive after a daylight nap and discover he has a son-of-a-bitch.

That's what I'd done. The world was purple and green. It smelled high. People were finks and worse—and *they* smelled.

Some twenty or thirteen of my former confreres, the Department of Justice lugs, had just finished ventilating Mister Bad-Man Willinger as he came out of a theatre in what he believed was a fool-proof disguise.

It was a triumph for what we laughingly term law and order, but it was tough on Del Sarg—which is me. Right from the moment when I'd fozzled my chance to grab the tough guy at a mountain resort, I'd sworn to be the one to put him away. And when the attorney general handed down the word that I wasn't needed any more, I swore to get Willinger before my one-time brothers in arms turned the trick. And now both oaths were flops.

Nor did it make me any happier to know that he'd been fingered by a dame, the Woman in Black. In my game, a finger's a finger—and fortunate is the guy who can promote a good one.

I bathed, shaved, presently got myself into some decent duds and was figuring what to do, when the word "Riccatone," came to my mind.

It's my favorite dish, a wide, flat, big-brother of ordinary macaroni, baked with a sauce of braised tomatoes, bacon, garlic and what have you; served piping hot with meat balls and plenty of Roman cheese sprinkled over the top.

Tony Cannata, manager of the Club Italiano, took my order in person and slipped me a scoop of Chianti to make waiting easy. For a few moments I smoked cigarettes. I was gandering at the good-looking gals at the other tables when I heard a commotion at the outer door, then angry voices.

After that the curtains parted and Hap Caswell, police reporter for *The Times*, tumbled down the three broad steps leading from the entrance hall. It was one of those sprawling, unresisting rolls that only drunks achieve, muscles loose as motion picture morals. But in the last split-second he twisted like a cat and came to his knees not five feet from my table.

"You," I told him. "And I still say your comedy's lousy."

He opened his eyes wide, stared.

"Del!" he shouted. "I've been looking for you." Then caution took him. He scrambled erect, came closer. "I got the dope on Woman in Black, Del," he bleated. "Y'know, the tip-off shyster in Willinger case. Know her name, where she lives, all 'bout her."

I kicked him hard on the shin, nodded toward the waiter who was hovering in the offing with my dinner.

I told Hap: "Sit down and eat. Waiter, bring another set-up."

When the man had gone I sat for a moment staring at Hap. He's the eternal sophomore, but set fire to him and he'd burn eight years with a slow, blue flame. Finally I said:

"The dear God made you, and He lets you live, but if you don't stop blatting things like that around places like this, somebody'll see to it that He takes you back."

He hiccupped fraternally. "Pearls of wizzom—widsom—aw, skip it—from zhe lips of zhe great Del Sarg; the man who's had zhe finner—fin-ger—on him more times 'n I've been cockeyed."

I passed it, asked him: "What about the Woman in Black?"

But suddenly he turned stubborn. "Nope," he answered heavily. "Tell you nothin'; posolutely nothin'. Take you 'n show you, but no tell. C'mon."

I looked longingly at my tray of food, but he shook his head.

"Nor 'r never" he mumbled, getting to his feet. He swayed slightly but there have been times when I'd prefer Hap, half canned, to others cold sober.

"Lisshen" he continued, "an' 'member thish. I ain't the guy Uncle Sammy canned for messin' up a pinch. It's jussa story to me—but it's comeback for you."

That lifted me out of my chair, slammed me onto my feet. "Call you," I told him. "We'll go see this tip-off moll."

I caught up with Hap at the check window. "And listen, son," I warned, "if this turns out to be a bum rap, what you'll get from me will make a Sunday morning hangover seem like a pair of slippers from your Aunt Eunice.

He birded me, beat it for the front door. When I got there he was waiting with a cab. The Drexel Boulevard address he gave to the driver made me raise my eyebrows. He winked owlishly.

"Out among the nice folks, Del," he mumbled.

I lighted two cigarettes, gave him one. "Out with it," I demanded, "and just remember you're not a damn bit cute when you get lit and start playing your childish games."

THAT brought a dismal grunt from him. He favored me with a vacant glare and lapsed into a drunken doze. As he slept there in the half shadow, he looked like Missis McCarthy's angel Mickey. But his jaw was slack and he was drooling like an overfed infant. He was handsome, brainy — and not worth the powder to blow him to hell.

Presently he stirred nervously, coughed; put a handkerchief to his lips. When it came away it was pink-stained. Then I knew. And that hurt, too.

When the cab swung into Indiana Avenue, I stirred him gently but without effect. Finally I snapped a hard finger end across the tip of his nose. He came half awake and snapped,

"Lay off of me, you big lug."

But he was coming out of it. A moment later the driver swerved to miss a collision and spilled Hap off the seat. He looked out for a moment before he said:

"I remember — Girl in Black. We're mos' there."

"Who is she?" I asked politely.

He gave me a dirty laugh. "Just a li'l lavender flower. Maybe a li'l bit mussed, palsy-walsy, but—"

He ended his monologue suddenly, pointing down the block. "That U-shaped joint with a fountain inna center," he said. "Hey, driver, rest the hosses. You can pull up here."

Then I twisted about, determined to know something. "Tell me," I demanded brusquely. "I'm not playing it blind."

He nodded in sudden agreement, as a drunk will. He seemed to emerge all at once from the alcohol haze. "It started with a hunch, Del. I was gamming with

the federal D.A. when a call came through. His face got red and he was wishing that I was in hell with a broken back.

"Some strange woman was calling for a date tomorrow morning. I wouldn't have known a thing about it if he'd kept the receiver to his ear, but it's one of those loud-speaker things and I heard as much as he did.

"What she said was: *'That note on the grave with a knife stuck through it— 'We'll get her, pal!' Well, they're after me.'*"

And was that hot? Like an assayer's crucible!

"But," I asked him, "how'd you get the rest of the dope on what—and who—"

"The old S.A., and my fatal charm of conversation. There's a homely girl on the switchboard — but we're like that. There's a rule that all calls go through a secretary and each is registered with street address and telephone number. The switchboard gal got it for me."

"And so?"

"So I got busy here and there, picking up things. The name she'd given was Jessie Carson, but when I found her picture in *The Times* files, I recognized it as Billie Maxim, from over-the-Rhine in Cincinnati. And one time we'd been like that, too."

"But how will we get to see her?"

HAP chuckled again. "I called her, gave her a thrill; told her to watch for me every hour and every half hour until midnight. I'd be in a Crimson cab and I'd have my hat lying on its top."

With the words he took off his disreputable slouch hat and pitched it to the roof of the cab. "Watch the south corner, seven floor," he told me. "I'm too bleary to see it."

Presently the corner window opened and a woman looked down at our bus. She went back and immediately the window above flew up and some man pitched out a cigarette butt. I didn't know it then, but that was the finger.

Seven, eight, ten minutes passed. Hap chuckled. "Billie always was a slow dresser—" he began, but then the lights

in the seventh floor corner went out. A second later the curtain of the end window directly above flew to the top.

"Listen," I told Hap. "There's a fix up there, and it's lousy."

But he was whisky stubborn again. "I told you this is a pers'nal date."

While he mumbled, a big, black car rolled up behind us, fender lamps burning dimly. But instead of angling in behind us, the driver kicked on the gas and the gears whispered sharply.

Common sense was tugging at my elbow, sent my hand flashing to my armpit gun, but just then the driver's foot came off the throttle and the big car slowed again. After that, it rolled ahead slowly, while I sat there like a dizzy chump, my fingers still on the gun butt.

It was but a matter of seconds before the apartment door swung open and a trim girl, wearing a dark dress and with a smart little hat perched over one eye, came out.

She didn't have a chance.

Spurts of flame leaped from the tonneau of the drifting car. There were the brittle thuds of Tommy-gun explosions, crash of glass and the whine of slugs against stone walls.

The girl paused in her stride, skidded her purse along the walk like a swimmer tossing a cigarette aside. After that her knees buckled and she sat down suddenly, wonderingly: her weight supported on the palm of her right hand.

Hap, suddenly sober, cursed and tugged at the door lever at his right. It took him a second to work it. Meanwhile the girl's hand had slipped aside and now she lay on her side like a sleeping child.

I finished drawing my gun, yelled, "Hold it!" at Hap. It didn't mean anything to him except to slow him long enough for me to burn three caps before he got between my gun muzzle and the speeding car.

The next seconds were filled with movement. One of my slugs must have bopped the driver, for the car skidded, jerked left, then right. Briefly, it seemed that it would turn over. It was reeling, tires screeching.

Hap, running stumblingly, was trying

to shout but he succeeded only in making sounds like a sleeper at the height of a nightmare. Lights were flashing on in the apartments and sashes were flying upward.

IT takes a long time to put it into words, but almost before the echoes of my last shot had died away, some one had straightened the wheel of the death car, and it had disappeared about the first corner.

Instantly I was out of the car, running after Hap toward the dead girl. Other feet were slapping the pavement near at hand, but we were first.

She lay as she finally had fallen. The silly, cocky little hat was down over one eye, and twin fountains were pulsing from her chest. But somehow she seemed suddenly at peace.

"This the girl?" I snapped, squatting beside her.

Hap nodded. "Yeah—Billie Maxim."

Before I could say anything, a cop's nightstick was prodding me back out of the way. It was a harness copper, the man on the beat.

"What the hell?" he demanded. "You guys see it?"

"Three gorillas in a black car—with a typewriter," I told him. "I think I got the driver with a slug."

That brought more suspicion to his eyes. "You and your gun," he grated. "Now, where do you figure in this?"

Hap answered for me. "This is Del Sarg, ex-federal, private shamus now. I'm Caswell, crime man on *The Times*. I had a date with the girl here. Del came along for the ride."

We showed our credentials. The cop looked them over, handed them back.

"Stick here," he grunted. "Here comes the squad car now."

It stopped with screeching brakes and five men got out. One of them was Lieutenant Jenkins, shunted to the South Side from the Loop recently.

The harness cop saluted. "Tommy killing, lieutenant. These two, a private dick and a reporter, saw it. The shamus says he thinks he got the driver of the death car."

Jenkins looked us over, grinned at Hap. "You," he said. "And who's the boy friend?"

After Hap had told him, he got chummy. "Heard of you, Sarg," he said quickly. "Now, about this—do you know anything?"

"I never met her." I told him truthfully.

Jenkins eyes came up with a jerk. "Hey," he said, pointing. "What's the idea? Whose lid is that on the cab?"

"Mine," Hap answered. "That was my signal to her."

"Sidestepping a sweetie—jealous husband?"

Hap spread his hands. "I hadn't seen her for several years, loot. She's been going by the name of Jessie Carson, but when I knew her she was Billie Maxim, a honkatonk hooper. And that isn't for the other newshounds, either."

Jenkins swung back to me. "It don't add up. This one of your cases—a tailing job?"

I shook my head. "I never saw her until she started taking slugs there in the doorway."

Hap met his gaze innocently. "One thing, loot. The guy behind that Tommy-gun knew his onions. Look at that line of lead pimples in the stone, the holes in the glass. He started shooting, held steady across the window and let the forward roll bring her under the gun."

"Yeah," Jenkins said. "But I still think you birds are holding out on me—us."

We couldn't get the thought out of his thick head. So finally we all piled into the cab and went down town to detective headquarters in the Loop. The other dicks stayed behind to scout for clues.

CHIEF of Detectives McCurdy said, "Sure" when Hap asked for the use of a phone so he could send in the yarn to his paper. But five minutes later a civilian clerk came in and handed the chief a typewritten sheet. He read it, looked at Hap over his glasses.

"Where'd you know her as Billie Maxim?"

Hap stared at the paper, let his jaw fall. He'd talked over a split line, and

a police steno had copied it for McCurdy.

"Cincinnati—several years ago," he replied at last.

"And how long has she been here?"

Hap nearly tripped over that one. McCurdy was a smartie, with a criminal attorney's mind. But Hap caught himself in time.

"I wouldn't know, chief. Somebody told me awhile back that she'd been one of Caparrelli's dancing dolls over on the South Side; before that, she'd been working in Cicero hot spots."

That was the blow-off. McCurdy began smelling like a bullfrog. He was Scotch-Irish and short-tempered. "You're lying—both of you," he roared. "You've been tipped off on this woman and you've been tailing her—and this is one time I'm going to find who tipped you."

"On what?" I yelled back at him. "Who was she—Queen Marie?"

"Damn well you know who she was," he roared back. "Maybe you tipped her to the killers—for all I know."

That burned me up, but Hap interrupted with a nasty chuckle:

"Don't you just love him when his eyes pop like that?" he asked judicially. "But I'll bet his arteries aren't any too—"

If he was trying to drive McCurdy frantic, he got his wish. The chief came out of his chair like a rubber ball, and started a sizzling right at Hap's jaw. I butted him with my head as he flew past me; threw him off his stride. Then Jenkins and I got between them until McCurdy cooled off.

A long ring on the phone helped. He answered it, talked for a moment. The anger died from his eyes and he said, "Bring him in." After that he turned to me.

"That checks pretty good for you. Two men in a radio car found a wounded man at the wheel of a black limousine. He's a Cicero hoodlum—and he'd taken a slug through the right jawbone from behind."

When two plainclothes men dragged the injured gorilla in, his head was pretty well bandaged. My slugs had ripped out a lot of teeth and had broken his jaw. He could do everything but talk.

"Joe Muehl, chief," one of the dicks

said. "His brother runs a scatter at Cicero and Joe's been under suspicion for driving getaway on some bank jobs. Whoever got him did the law a favor. He's got two priors at Joliet and a ref. record too."

McCurdy glared at him for a moment, saw that between hurt and cocaine he wasn't in shape to talk. "Slam him in holdover until morning," he rasped. "Everybody get out but Caswell and Sarg."

When they were gone he gestured for us to come closer. "You know who this woman was supposed to be," he charged. Hap grinned. "I didn't know, but I had a man-sized hunch. Between the three of us, that's where we were headed, Del and me—also why. Del hopes to dig up the Willinger loot and maybe climb back into his federal job again. Me, I want the story."

McCurdy smiled thinly at that.

"Sarg's got to take his chance. If we dig up the dough, we take the glory. It was tough enough on us for federals to knock Willinger off without an ex-fed coming in to snatch the rest of the gravy. We might as well be honest about it."

"Jake with me, chief," I told him. "Only let's not get in one another's way."

He saw I meant it, nodded. Then he told Hap: "Where'd you get wise, and is it on the level that you knew her once?"

Hap told him the story, how Billie Maxim had feared for her life. Then I had a funny idea. I said:

"Let's go riding, chief—you, Hap and me. What we find we'll split even."

"The girl's rooms?" he asked. "You figure a lead there?"

"There and the rooms above. Want to play?"

For answer he slipped on a civilian coat and pearl gray hat.

CHAPTER II

MOUTHPIECE

IT wasn't any trick at all for Chief McCurdy to get into the dead woman's quarters, or to have the building superintendent on the pan three minutes after we entered.

"I made the usual investigation of her references," he told us, "a couple of business men and a lawyer. When they said she was all right she took a two-year lease and paid three months in advance."

"Do you remember their names?" I asked.

"Only one—Moses Gutterson, in the Lawyers' Building."

That brought twin snorts from McCurdy and Hap. "Mogut!" They said it in unison.

It was the underworld's name for the slickest, the shrewdest mouthpiece in Chicago. "Call Moe Gutterson" was the first thing any big crook said after a pinch.

McCurdy ran the building super off after that, but kept his master key. We divided the place up into sections and each of us went about sounding walls, opening drawers, testing baseboards for secret panels, stripping backs from pictures and looking under rugs.

My part was the bedroom and adjoining bath. That gave me a chance to close the door and rifle through the girl's purse, which I'd managed to pick up as we ran to her body.

There were the usual feminine accessories, a roll of twelve twenty-dollar bills and a bank book from the Stockyards National showing another grand there on ice. That was all.

I rifled through the bank book looking for folded memorandums, was about to put it away when I noticed a penciled number next to the fold at the bottom of one of the pages. There were others on preceding pages; ahead of them two initials and a dash. They were "D-V" with the figures "5478."

That sounded like a parcel-stand check number, but when I examined the dash again through a glass I found it had a bar at each end.

That was something. Turning the dash half around made it into an "I"; made the memorandum read "DIV. 5478"—and everybody knows that Diversey is a perfectly good Chicago telephone exchange. Believe me, that bank book went into an inside pocket.

I was about to restore the other articles to the purse when instinct sent my

fingers questing about the inside of the lining. The hunch paid dividends. It was a large-sized purse of the clasp variety, opening on metal hinges set in the base of heavy gold framework.

What first caught my eye was the fact that these hinges, instead of being of the hole-and-pin variety, were tight little "U" hooks centering about a sturdy pin at each side. That meant, to anyone of a mechanical mind, that they were built to spring apart.

So I sprung them, promptly disclosing a secret compartment in the leather back. Within this was a paper, tightly folded, stained and crumpled with much handling.

I was prepared for anything, but when I read the words there before my eyes, I had trouble to suppress a surprised yell. *The document was the marriage certificate of Billie Maxim, spinster, and John Thomas Willinger, at St. Joseph, Michigan.*

The blowoff? The surprise of the century? You've said it. For now I knew that Billie Maxim not only was the finger girl in the Willinger kill, but that she was the widow of the Number One Public Enemy my ex-pals in the Department had blasted off on her say-so.

That accounted, naturally, for the ex-dancer's period of prosperity; for her presence there in one of the city's better residence districts.

Then the question of ethics came up. If I'd found the paper in my search, then I'd have been under obligation to share it with McCurdy. But I'd lifted the purse before police came on the scene, so it was mine—and, of course, Hap's.

So the certificate went into the inside pocket along with the bank book: the purse into an outside pocket where McCurdy would be sure to spot it. It took him thirty seconds to do just that when we gathered in the living room to report failure.

"Hi, Sarg!" he yelled. "That purse—"

"Oh, that—yeah," I told him innocently. "She was carrying it when they blasted her. I stuck it in my pocket and forgot it until just now. It got in my

way when I was looking under the lavatory."

He took it, went through it carefully. There was a mean gleam in his eyes when he looked up. "I'm tough on guys who double-cross me," he warned raspily. "If you're playing square—"

I told him, "Nerts, chief. We've got plenty to do without squabbling among ourselves. There's still the apartment upstairs, you know."

That's one of the nice things about trained coppers. They've got so much duty and routine in their skulls that you can distract 'em any time by a mere mention of the boggy.

TWO minutes later he was fitting the master key in the door above. Naturally, we went in cautiously—pushing guns ahead of us as we slipped inside. The place was empty except for mingled odors of cigarettes and gin. There was a book of paper matches marked "Hofbrau."

My first move was to the corner window with its upflung shade. I opened the sash, stationing Hap there with instructions to listen. Then I went to the telephone and called for a long ring on Apartment 611.

Instantly there came the burr of the bell downstairs—and a tiny tinkle on the instrument before me.

McCurdy nodded. "Yeah," he said. "Like we thought. They'd cut in on her line."

He took his turn on the line then, calling a precinct station and demanding instant dispatch of photographers and fingerprint men. They came in shrieking squad cars and did their stuff rapidly.

Freiling, one of the South Side experts, went from one powder splash to another with a strong glass, peering, frowning, making little clucking noises. Presently he said:

"There's positives from two similar sets all over the place—good ones. Then there are scattering ones which may be from callers or employees. I'll have pictures in an hour for you."

Then one of the younger men came running in, pointing to a well-defined thumb print on a whisky glass.

"I'm pretty sure I know this one," he told us. "See the broad scar across the ball and the unusually deep whorls it divides?"

"So what?" McCurdy snapped. "Whose is it?"

"Freddie Dale, the one they call 'Frisco'; the West Coast bank robber they identified as being with Willinger in the Indiana jobs. I'm sure of it."

McCurdy looked over at me and nodded. "That checks. Now, make sure of it and, if you can, identify this other hoodlum. I want to send out a general order for them within the hour."

When the others had gone, Hap asked: "Anything new for me, chief? I've got to get a new yarn to my paper for the final edition."

McCurdy studied over it for a long minute before he said, "It looks all right to me for you to go ahead and smash the yarn."

Hap's eyes lighted. "Just how far can I go about the plant here—everything?"

McCurdy told him: "Identify her as the Woman in Black; spread yourself on her fear about the 'We'll get her, pal' note; how she was trying to get protection from the D.A. You've got the eyewitness angle, Sarg's nice shooting, the arrest of the death car driver—which gives you a whopping big scoop and the inside track on the other boys when these other things break. Suit you?"

Hap let out a whoop of pure joy. "The good reporter always keeps something back for an extra or the first edition lead tomorrow," he replied. "Here I go. An I'll be seeing you guys."

That solved my other problem. I wanted to prowl about without Hap's inquisitive nose at my elbow. Now that he'd left me of his own volition, he couldn't blame me if things happened while he slept.

CHAPTER III

TOUGH BREAKS

THE apartment which housed Diversey 5478 was miles away from Drexel Boulevard. It was listed in the name of Bee Harrison, chief informa-

tion operator had informed me when I bluffed her with my old DJ number and code word.

Who was Bee Harrison? Something ticking away in my hunch department said: "Another hooper from Cincinnati probably. They stick together."

So I called Abe Schwartz at his black-and-tan belt cabaret. There was a day, back in the years, when I'd saved Abe from a framed Mann act charge.

"Hel-lo, Del!" He said it like a man welcoming his sweetie back from the seashore. "It's damn good to hear your voice, old-timer. What's on your mind?"

"Info!" I slammed it at him cold. He was the sort who wouldn't stool on the guy who'd killed his own brother.

"Keep on talking," he said. "But it don't sound good."

"But it is, Abe. I'm trying to pull somebody else out of a deep hole—like I did you once." That wasn't very generous, but I had to use him, and fast. I gave him a stage wait, then flung my question: "Bee Harrison. I think she's a hooper, entertainer, what have you. Give me the lowdown on her."

Even then he held out on me. "Is she hot, Del?"

"Colder than the ice pan in the morgue."

He heaved a sigh of relief, gulped hard. "I'm glad, Del. She's an old pal, a bit seedy now. I'd hate to see her—"

"She's in the clear," I assured him. "But she knows somebody—somebody who was taken pretty dead tonight."

"The Drexel Boulevard thing?" He asked it breathlessly.

"Yeah. You do get around, huh?"

He sniffed. "The echo of that reached clear to Oak Park. And you said Bee was cold." His voice was reproachful.

"She is. My word for it. Now, what's the answer? Are you with me or against me?" When he was slow in answering, I added: "I'm trying to help her, dumb-head."

"She's thirty-four. Came in here several years ago with a bunch of girls from Cincy. For a while she went big in Hammond and Cicero. Then she fell for a wop charmer from one of the orchestras.

"We'll skip the next year. Then they found the big hug-and-love guy dead out on the Hammond prairie. His hat was jammed down over the hole that'd let his brains out—if any.

"Pretty soon Bee showed back in the spots again, pretty tragic but still with the smoky voice and plenty of this-and-that. Later, about the time that the D.A.'s chief assistant got knocked out from between his ears, she went for a Capone lieutenant in a big way.

"They got hitched—secretly. Then one night the guy got bopped off on his own doorstep and Bee's kid was born dead. That was the last of her in the spots, but she's been doing strips at banquets and stags. That what you want?"

"Perfect," I told him. "Now I see why you say she's a right guy."

"I'd go broke to do her a favor," he told me, and sincerely.

I was thinking about that, Abe being a twenty-minute egg, when I rang Bee's doorbell. I'd slid past doorman and elevator boy and now there I was with just two inches of metal-covered door between us.

It was on a chain when she opened it. All I could see was one big, brown eye, pretty soundly mascaraed, a rouged cheek and the tip of an ear half covered with bobbed hair.

She said: "Yes?" inquiringly.

I told her, "Probably—" and waited.

What I'd hoped for, happened. She opened the door a little wider to give me a good gander, up, down and sideways. I'm 'way short on "It," but there's lots of me and lots of frails have mistaken me for a piano mover. But Bee Harrison had been given shoes at an early date; she'd been about.

"Wrong number," she snapped, and started to draw back.

"Black Abe told me it was the right one." I jerked the words out quickly, got a toe in the door without seeming to move.

"Abe?" she mumbled. "He sent you?"

"He sent me. Things are getting pretty hot. I'm here to help you, to keep you out of a jam—because Abe said to."

I may be big and homely, but I know

my dolls. Say, "friend," then "danger," then "rescuer," and Queen Victoria would hang an ear out for a little more listen. That's what romance is made of, curiosity and personal interest.

But even then Bee was prudent. She didn't rip the door open and say: "Enter, my hero!" Instead, she twinkled one side of a grin at me and said:

"Continue speaking, Big Boy, but I still think you're selling dictionaries."

But I broke her down. Clipping two fingers about the Maxim-Willinger marriage certificate, I spread it where she could read. And did it work!

A minute later I was in a big, sleepy-hollow chair in her living room, poking about a frosty cellaret for bourbon, pulverized sugar and mineral water.

BEE wasn't harmful to the eyes as she sat there opposite me with a healthy-sized straight rye in her hand. Of course, there were little wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, bigger ones about her mouth, but she had the "dese 'n dose 'n dem" where they belonged—the black lace boudoir gown she wore hid considerably less than it revealed.

As I fizzed the water into my drink, she said:

"You remember the one about the taxi-dance hostess answering the phone, don't you? A man's voice said, 'Marry me, kid, willya?' and she answered, 'Sure, Big Boy, but who th' hell are you?'"

I dug into a hidden slit in my vest edge and brought out my P.D. badge and card. "Just a shamas, Bee, but a friendly one. Black Abe told me to talk to you, but that the roll in his back pocket was on you."

"A roughie," she said softly. "But lots more of a gentleman than the sort they hatch over on the Gold Coast." Then, after she'd slopped the rye down her throat, she asked:

"But about Billie? Where'd you get the certificate? I thought that was private information."

Now a girl like that will sidetrack you every few feet if you try to string 'em along. Deal a pat hand, faces up, and she'll push in her whole pile of chips.

"They killed her tonight; gunned her out with a Tommy," I said. "I'm trying to fix a fry for the bums who did it. One of them lost a side out of his face from one of my slugs."

She bit her lip until the blood came, let the rest of her drink trickle to the floor unnoticed. I didn't watch her eyes, her hands—anything but the pulse in her throat. It hammered for awhile, hard. When it slowed a little, she said:

"Billie? Dead—gunned out?"

"And lousy, too. They'd swung about her, bugged her phone, fingered her to the killers as she left the place. I was across the street when it happened, but all I could do was throw lead after she'd taken more than her share. One of them was Frisco, a bird who'd struck up banks with Willinger in Indiana. Mean anything to you?"

SHE sat silent for several moments. Then she said: "Billie—the best kid who ever walked in shoes, gunned out over that louse! But—she knew it was coming." Then caution struck her. She straightened, stared at me suspiciously. "Where do you fit into this?"

I took the bank book from my pocket, showed her the trick numbers. She sniffled a bit over the care Billie had taken to protect her.

"Where'd she meet Willinger?" I asked quietly.

"Cicero—Dugan's Canary Cottage. He blew in with a big roll and Paddy sent Billie to get a chunk of it. There was a heavy-set man with him, big, chunky—with a scar on his lip—"

"Yeah," I told her. "Burke—he's doing it all up in Michigan now. A nice pair, sister."

She shuddered. "The world's worst. I've always said hell wouldn't have 'em; that there's no place mean enough in which to bury 'em."

Emotion had her now, sympathy. "The deal poor Billie got from Willinger—" Again she fell silent, afraid to talk.

"He hadn't a heart—a soul," I suggested. "Women meant nothing to him—"

That started her off again. "He wanted her to case banks for him, but she

wouldn't. When I found he was beating her, kicking her around, I talked her into walking out on him."

"You did?"

She nodded. "And I made him kick in with five hundred a month and rent on the Drexel apartment. She agreed to lay quiet and keep out of the hot spots."

"It's a wonder he didn't just knock her off—and you along with her."

Then I got a slant at the real Bee Harrison. There was a red glow in her eyes as she said:

"You're 'way behind, shamus. Before I messed into his affairs at all, I talked to two-three folks *who served notice on him that he was safe only so long as she stayed healthy.*"

I whistled softly. Anyone hard enough to give Willinger orders could be spread out thin and used for battleship armor.

"Who—just between us, Bee?"

"The Brains—the smart guys back of him who laid out his raids and made his fixes. You didn't think that even a Willinger could play as rough as he did without an organization, did you?"

That clicked another half open switch in my mind. "And who's the boss Brains guy?"

She shook her head with a tired grin. "Listen, shamus. I've leaked news like an old basket, but the leak is over. If you can't get all of the way round the bases with what I've told you, then you've been wasting our time."

We both were quiet for a moment. Then she got to her feet significantly. As I stopped at the door, she said:

"I'm going one more step—giving you another little tip. Suppose you had something valuable that you wanted to hide, just where would you stash it?"

"Bury it somewhere, or put in an out-of-town safe deposit box."

She shook her head. "If it was me, I'd put it in a safe deposit right around the corner. Then I'd go to the Central Postoffice, rent a box, pay a year in advance, and mail the key to myself—there. And I'd give the same advice to any friend—any dear friend." She said the last words slowly, significantly.

"Say, listen—" I began. But she shook her head.

"Even an entertainer has to sleep sometime," she replied. "Tell the sun good morning for me as you go out."

As the door closed after me, I looked at my watch. Five-fifteen! I stumbled out of the place, realizing suddenly that I was very hungry and nearly dead from fatigue.

An all-night café provided me with toasted rolls and milk, but as I ate, I had to grin to myself over the absolute safety and simplicity of the hide-away plan. It was new, safe as a church. All one had to do was to keep the box rent paid and the contents could lie there indefinitely. There's some sort of a rule against removing things from boxes.

CHAPTER IV

BEE'S TIPOFF

NINE o'clock found me facing Chief Postal Inspector Harry Webster in his private office. He was an old friend, a rock in the road. So I laid my cards on the table. First I showed him the marriage certificate, after pledging him to secrecy, then *The Times* with its scareheads about the girl's murder.

"You've got something, Del," he told me gravely. "Going to drag it out of its hole?"

"Out of one of your lock boxes," I told him.

That set him up straight. "You know what you're talking about? Don't you know by this time that we don't—"

"Practically never," I amended. "But in this case, with Uncle Sam interested in four hundred grand of stolen bank funds, I thought you'd loosen the lines a bit."

"How?" he snapped.

"I've got it straight that the girl has a safe deposit box in a South Side bank; that later she engaged a post office lock box and mailed the key to herself there. I want to find that box—and key."

He thought silently for a moment, then said: "There's a way. Get her keys from the police and bring them to me. If there's a post office key among them

I can work out the number of the box from the code number. If we get that far we'll go to Judge Wilmer and get a secret order to examine the contents."

"Fine," I told him. "Here I go for the keys."

Chief McCurdy hadn't been to bed yet. His eyes were red-rimmed and whiskers were sprouting all over his face.

"A hunch, Chief," I told him. "I want to do a daylight prow through the girl's place."

He favored me with a sour look. "Undercutting?"

"Not on your life. You get a fifty-fifty break on anything I find out there." I saved my conscience by accenting "out there."

He sighed wearily. "Go to it. Here's the keys. But I still think it's a damfool idea."

I raised a dust getting back to Webster's office. He took the leather container, pointed almost instantly to a key which looked like an ordinary house key. It was long unused. One could tell that by the dust in the side slots, the dulled appearance of the toothed edge.

I was leaning over his shoulder as he studied the number on the bow. It was 31507. Adding the first and last numerals gave him 10. He wrote down the 150 after it, struck out the final naught and pushed the memo out in front of him.

"It's box one-naught-one-five," he said, "and of all the slick hiding places I ever heard of, that's the best."

"But how do we know it's in this post-office?"

He chuckled. "We don't—yet. There's a way of finding out."

He took up his desk phone, said, "box clerk." In a moment he added, "Inspector Webster talking. I want your record on Lock Box 1015: references, date of contract and name of user. I'll hold the wire."

After a moment he said "Yes?" and started writing. First he put down, "References: Hall & Kampf, realtors; Edgar Healey, The Fair; Moses Gutterson, Lawyers' Building."

Below that he wrote, "Billie Maxim," then "July first."

He pointed with his pen at Moe Gutterson's name. "Mean anything to you?" he asked.

"Everything," I told him. "It shows how hot she was. But can't we skip the court order?"

He shook his head. "But we might go around there and look it over."

I followed him down inside the mail enclosure, past the belt conveyors and sorting racks, bringing up behind the openings which on the front were lock boxes. Ten-fifteen was high in the tier and its edge was dusty.

Webster reached in with two careful fingers, bringing out a No. 10 envelope addressed to "Miss Billie Jane Max." It was dated months before and the outer surface was dust-filmed. He held it between folds of his handkerchief, crinkling the surface.

Presently he held it up for me to see. There was a bulge in the center like folded paper, but running diagonally across it was the outline of something metallic—with a bow at one end.

HE was looking at me peculiarly, invitingly. Without a word I took the envelope and thrust it into my pocket. After that we went back to his office.

"I'm silly to let you do that, Del," he told me, "but you've done some bang-up work and I want you to get the benefit."

Grinning eagerly, he took up a silk sponge and a bottle of ether from his desk. Then, after wiping away surplus dust, he began sopping the penetrating fluid across the back of the sealed flap. In no time at all it came clear, absolutely undamaged.

Within was a safe-deposit key. It was carefully wrapped in a torn yellow envelope which bore on its face the legend: "—tt Menefee, D.D.S., 886 Eddmann Building, City."

"She overlooked a bet there," Webster said. "Menefee, dentist, eh? Let's see what the directory says.

It was there: "Dr. Henry Pruett Menefee, D.D.S."

But Webster wasn't through. He was turning the key about in his fingers as he said: "This is just a copy, Del, which

gives me an idea. I'll have the department locksmith make you another. Then we can return this to the box and nobody ever will be the wiser."

In twenty minutes I had a duplicate in my pocket and was buzzing crosstown to look up Henry Pruett Menefee.

He was a rabbit-faced little geek, but his equipment and furnishings were right up to the minute. Strangely enough, he didn't seem to have an office nurse.

"I've got a loose filling, doc," I told him. "Got time to give me a look-over?"

Instead of getting the chair ready for me, he nodded slowly. "Who sent you?" He asked it half fearfully.

That gave me an idea. "The girl friend," I told him with a knowing look. "Bee Harrison. She says you're a darb."

His face cleared instantly. "Oh, Bee!" he chuckled. "You remember those gold teeth she wore when she came to Chicago? Well, I replaced them with a removable bridge that only an expert could detect."

Then he sat me down in the chair and took to prodding about. I hadn't lied to him; there was a loose filling. And he didn't lie to me when he said that I could invest in a duplicate of Bee's bridgework without hurting my facial scenery any.

So we made a deal. I laid ten bucks on the line and told him to pick out what teeth he'd have to remove. He kept up a running fire of talk as he worked, asking me about Bee, where's she been keeping herself and where she was living.

Knowing most of the right answers, I got along all right. Finally I said casually: "Look, doc. Is Bee on the cuff with you for anything?"

He shrugged. "Maybe twenty dollars or so, but she keeps on sending customers to me. Some day I'll send her a receipted bill."

That one was up my alley. "Yeah, Bee's a good booster. It wasn't so long ago that she sent Billie Maxim to a plastic guy and she got a two-hundred-buck special job for herself as a commission—moles and things."

That brought him up with a jerk. Suspicion came flooding back into his eyes. He didn't know it, but I was watching

him in a mirror and he was having plenty trouble getting the stiffness out of his lips.

Finally he stammered: "Bub—Billie—Billie whom?"

"Maxim," I grunted. After that I stared at him and whistled. "Hell, doc! That was the name of the girl they killed last night."

He nodded, stared at me stupidly; ran his tongue over his dry lips. "The sus—same name," he yammered.

"Probably the same girl," I told him carelessly. "She and Bee were pals. Bee said you'd done work for both of them."

HE brightened again at that. "Yes—I fixed her up with a pretty good bridge job about a year ago. I haven't seen her since."

As soon as I could do it properly, I got away from him, agreeing to come back the next day. I found a pay station and called Bee in a hurry to stall off a check-up.

She wasn't in any too good a humor at being awakened, but she said okay when I told her to stay in and pitch if Menefee called. Then I tried a fast one.

"Where do I go next?" I asked.

She took a deep breath before she said in a half whisper: "Menefee's just a no-good little shrimp, but his brother is one of the best plastic surgeons in town. He knows me, and he might know something that'll interest you."

A bright light shone in my mind for a moment. "The brothers—they both have connections?"

She told me: "Maybe so, maybe not. But if they haven't, certain people are laying down big money just to be fooled."

There were a thousand questions I wanted to ask her, but she cut them down to nothing by hanging up the receiver.

I stopped in the lobby, called Dr. Jett, the deputy medical examiner, asking him to meet me at the morgue. "I've got an odd angle on the Maxim case that may bring you some good publicity," I explained.

He was a politician, so that idea sold him. When I dropped from a cab at the morgue, he was just entering the door.

We went on through to the cooling room, Jett slamming the door in a nosy attendant's face.

They'd fixed Billie Maxim up pretty well. Some kindly soul had taken the makeup off and her bobbed hair was orderly.

"There she is," Jett said. "What's the program?"

"Two things, Doc. First I want to know if she's had any plastic work done, and then I want to see her dental work."

He gave her a close inspection, eyes, corners of her mouth, along the hairline. "No plastic," he said definitely, "unless it's inside the lips." With that he hunted up a wooden spatula and gently opened her jaws. Presently he straightened and gave me a fishy look.

"Just what is this, Sarg?" he demanded. "There isn't a scar anywhere in her mouth—and she's never had a drill or a grinder on one of her teeth."

That was a facer, I got out my pen-flash, shot a white glow about over the teeth. Jett was right. Billie was dead, but she'd escaped any modern dentist-chair hell.

The wind was gone out of my sails, but I grinned at Jett. "Thanks," I told him, "it's working out. I'll have something to tell you in a day or two."

"All right," he grumbled. "But did you find what you wanted?"

"I found proof that somebody's a cock-eyed liar. Sit tight, Doc. You'll be hearing things."

CHAPTER V

A BLURRED PICTURE

I DISCOVERED that I'd cut in on fast company when I entered the reception room of Dr. Robert Menefee, dermatologist and plastic surgeon. There were clerks, specialist-examiners and Lord knows what for me to pass before I even got to his private secretary.

She was a classy brunette, built like Anna Held in her heyday, and smarter than Missis Gilhooley's pet pig. I'd sent in a card which read, "Delbert Sergeant," which was a lot more high sounding than my own name, and I could tell from the

steely gleam in her eye that she hadn't found me in the directory.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sergeant," she said coldly. "Dr. Robert is out of town; a conference at Mayo Brothers—" She let her voice trail off cunningly.

I gave her my best shrug. "Let's quit playing games, lady," I told her blandly. "The doc got back from that one two days ago. Get word to him somehow that I want to see him about Dr. Henry Pruett Menefee—who's in a jam, right."

It must have looked to her like a straight ball, waist high over the plate, for she hit at it *à la* Babe Ruth. "Wait in the outer office," she said briskly, and reached for a telephone. Almost before I'd found a chair she was at the door saying:

"It is time for your appointment, Mr. Sergeant. Come in."

I strutted in like a newly crowned champion, but my feathers went straight again when I encountered the hard blue eyes of the elder Menefee. He was smart, and he'd been places. He had me catalogued before I'd laid down my hat.

"What about my brother?" he asked it coldly, suspiciously.

"He's in a jam—and some of it may leak out on you," I snapped.

He looked at my card again, turned it over, found it blank on the back. "You are—" he began nervously.

"A private dick—with a head full of Billie Maxim, Johnny Willinger, Bee Harrison and others. Do those names mean anything to you?"

Some of the color was gone from his face, but he eyed me coldly. After a while he said, "No—nothing."

I took up my hat, started for the door. "Sorry," I said. "My error."

He bowed as though in dismissal, waited until my fingers were touching the doorknob before he said, blandly: "Er—one moment, Mr.—ah—Sergeant, perhaps we have something to discuss. Won't you be seated?"

He got up from behind his desk, selected a cigarette from a humidor, took his time touching fire to it. After that he

strolled to the window and back before he said:

"I know the girl, Bee Harrison. What has she to do with my brother?" There was a cynical grin on his lips as he added: "Blackmail?"

"Not a drop," I growled, "and I'm not that kind of a shamus. Are you denying that you know—knew—Billie Maxim and Johnny Willinger?"

He looked at the wall back of me, blew smoke rings, stabbed at one with the tip of his cigarette. "And if I did know them," he said at last, "what then?"

"You did know them. You worked on Willinger—and you're in the jam with your brother for shielding public enemies."

"I never knew Willinger—by name." He said it gravely, convincingly, but I saw that his fingers were trembling.

"You're a liar, Menefee," I snarled. "You knew—and your brother knew. Henry gave him a new mouth; you gave him a new face."

It was all guesswork, but I've found that a good bluff is the best offensive when you've got a suspect worried. Then, before he had a chance to reply, I went on:

"Just what did you do for Johnny—and when?"

He tried hard to stare me down, but his nerve was going. His face was pasty pale now and perspiration stood on his forehead. He was silent so long that I prodded him again with, "Get on with it."

He drew a long, sighing breath. "I—I worked on a man who was introduced to me as Harry Winslow—" he began.

"A man you recognized as John Willinger, Number One Public Enemy," I suggested.

He nodded weakly. "Yes—later on—but I assure you I did not—"

"Quit your damn stalling and lying," I snapped. "I know you and your brother fixed him up, now tell me just what you did."

"Fuf-face lift," he stammered hopelessly, "straightened his nose, took a dimple out of his chin, removed a mole and some other blemishes."

"And that made him unrecognizable?"

"Not entirely. The new mouth formation, straight nose, eyeglasses and the removal of identifying marks made it possible for him to go about without too great a risk. That was all I agreed to do."

And was *that* an admission!

HE saw it as quickly as I; knew that he was on the way to Leavenworth right then. I never saw such utter despair before. But he managed somehow to pull himself together, to look squarely into my eyes.

"Yes," he said calmly, "I knew it was Willinger; knew it when I laid out the operation. I was greedy for money and the twenty-five thousand he offered was too much to refuse."

"It's a lot of jack," I told him. "What'd Henry get?"

"Twenty-five hundred; a good price." He studied his fingertips for a moment, then asked: "What are you going to do about—about—me?"

"I'm going to give you a break, doc."

His head came up with a snap. "What?" He almost shouted it.

"Yeah," I said. "The bird I want is the fellow who knocked off Billie Maxim, who, if you don't already know it, was the finger woman in the Willinger kill. Technically, you're as guilty as hell. Henry, too. But with Willinger dead I don't see where convicting you would help much."

He was like a man saved from drowning, babbling his gratitude like a schoolboy. He ended with, "And some day maybe I can help you."

"That day is right now," I told him. "I want the case file on Willinger; want to see just what you did."

All of the joy went out of his face. I saw the pupils of his eyes contract with horror, but he got to his feet, saying, "I'll be glad to get it for you."

"The hell you will," I snapped back at him. "Just have your secretary bring it in."

He started to protest, surrendered when I said, "That—or a federal cell."

It took the classy brunette about one

minute to bring the file to the doc's desk. She was an eye-ful, that sister, and I can't be blamed for turning my head for another peek.

Luckily I made it short, for when I turned back the doc was hiding something under the blotter on his desk. That, of course, was the one thing I wanted to see, but outwardly I let him get away with it.

He opened the file jacket, started digging out papers, saying:

"Blood test—blood count—metabolism test—skin structure analysis—general findings."

"Let me see that," I demanded.

It was headed "Henry Winslow, 33" and it read along with medical terms interspersed with the sort of English I understand. One paragraph said:

"Patient slightly scrofulous. Extended massage indicated to break down and consolidate scar tissue." Another read: "Upper lip to be lengthened, lower tightened to turn lip out."

"Tell me the whys and wherefores of these two," I said, pointing to them.

Menefee cleared his throat professionally. "I had decided to reverse the usual process and put years on his face instead of removing them. A part of it was to give him an elderly man's flaccid upper lip with down turned mouth corners—which would indicate a protruding lower lip."

"Why?"

It was just one word, but it turned him cold, made him wince. "Why, I—er—thought it would—er—be a good disguise."

"What was the real reason, Menefee? You were shooting at something definite. What was it?"

"I—don't understand," he mumbled. "Put it into words."

I told him, "This!" Then I dived across the desk, thrust my fingers under the blotter. They came out with a sizable envelope. But before I could see inside of it, I had to pop the doc on the jaw. He'd clinched with me, tearing at my wrists with his nails—like a woman.

The solid smash I landed on his jaw dropped him back in his chair, gave me

time to get at the contents of the envelope. There was a photograph in it. The picture was a composite job with Willinger's face superimposed on a photograph of an old man. Both faces were plain in outline, yet the features were slightly blurred as they blended together.

I suppose I was careless for a moment, giving too much attention to the pictured faces. Anyway, I'll swear that I didn't hear the doc move until I felt a breeze on my cheek. Then I swung about.

He was perched on the sill of the open window, looking down, fingertips resting against the casement. I let out a yell, dived for him.

But he beat me to the play by the fraction of an inch. My fingertips brushed his shoulder, but already he'd dived outward, starting his one-way trip to hell.

My impetus carried me halfway across the sill, left me sprawling there, willy-nilly, watching him whiz earthward. He turned over twice in the fifteen-story fall. At the very last he was spraddled out on his stomach like a swimmer, arms and legs extended.

That's how he struck the pavement.

CHAPTER VI

NIGHT PATROL

IT took two hours and one heluva lot of talking to get away from the regular cops, and to keep the Willinger file hidden. Of course the cutie secretary had to blab about bringing that in, though she referred to it as the Winslow jacket. I told them he'd had it in his hands when he jumped; that the wind probably had carried it out into the lake by now.

Finally I got them to call Chief McCurdy from Central Bureau. Mac came, took my wink for face value, and eased me out with the remark that he wanted me at the detective bureau. But out in the hall, he said, "What the hell, Sarg, you toss that bird out onto his neck?"

"A fat chance. I needed him too badly. Now get this, brother, for we've got to work fast. The doc knocked himself off because I'd found out that he'd worked Willinger's face over for him. His

brother, a dentist, did the phony teeth to go with the new face. We've got to get him—now."

The Chief's big speed car jazzed us over to the Erdmann building in jig-time. But the Menefee door was locked. After rapping a few times, I laid an ear against the panels. Right afterward I backed off, rubbing my nose.

"What?" McCurdy snapped.

"Lousy," I told him. "Take an easy sniff at the crack of the door and tell me what you smell."

A moment later he backed away, cursing, and rushed into the next office bellowing for a telephone. We waited six-seven minutes, then heard sirens in the street outside. The bomb-and-gas squad, complete with masks, came rushing in.

McCurdy told the leader: "Hydrocyanic—or worse."

The lieutenant nodded, snatched a key from the building superintendent's fingers and went inside. After a moment he backed out, towing the limp body of Dentist Henry after him. He let it slump to the floor and slammed the door hard. When the mask was off, he said:

"Poured acid on c.p. cyanide and sniffed it. It's a death trap in there. I smashed the windows, but don't let anybody in for half an hour."

McCurdy turned to me, spread his hands. "Bad day for the Menefee family," he said. "What'd you want in there?"

I told him: "A dental chart—a removable bridge he made some months ago for one Harry Winslow. Have one of your boys dig it out for us later. In the meantime we can scam along."

He nodded. "But what'll it mean when we get it?"

"Probably a lead to the Billie Maxim killers. Anyway we'll make it tie in for us somewhere, you and me."

He swallowed it like candy drops.

That left me free to go my way, which was back to the vicinity of the South Side apartment house where Billie Maxim had lived—and died. I still had in mind Bee's statement that her advice to anyone with something to hide, would be to use the nearest vaults.

It didn't take much sleuthing to find it. Less than two blocks distant was the South Side branch of the Midland Bank & Trust company. In the windows was a neon sign picturing the vault in the basement with its huge circular door.

There still was a problem. Those big institutions don't go so strong for private shamuses, or for giving out dope on holders of boxes. A directory in the lobby told me that Wilmer Rex was president, that William Rex was first vice-president and manager.

I chose William.

HE kept me waiting ten minutes, but he turned out to be a red-blooded man of forty, an ex-service man with ideas, who'd landed as a major according to a snapshot I saw on the corner of his desk. That meant he was all wool and a yard wide, so I decided to put 'em down on the table.

"I'm Del Sarg, Major Rex," I told him, "ex-federal, working independently on the Willinger thing."

The "Major" pleased him, but he eyed me speculatively when I said "Willinger," suggesting, "But he's dead, Mr. Sarg."

"But he's left plenty of open ends behind him. To be frank with you, there may be a bad flareback here at your bank provided rumors turn into facts. I may be able to help you. That's why I'm here."

His lower jaw came out at that. "At a price?"

"Free-gratis-for-nothing," I answered. "I don't give one continental damn about your tin bank, or about the Rex family as a family, but if you and I can make a trade I'll go out of my way to keep a rap out of the papers."

He grinned at that. "Man-talk always interests me. I'm beginning to like you, Sarg. Suppose you tell me the rest of it."

I showed him my credentials, told him the federal end of my history. Then, my bona fides established, I showed him the key. "That," I said, "was among the possessions of the Woman in Black, who fingered Willinger to the coppers. I've every reason to believe that it fits one of your boxes. "Now, I'm not bluffing and I quite expect you'll tell me I can't have access

to it—but I do want to know if my hunch is straight."

He took the key, turned it over and over in his fingers. Finally he asked, "What name goes with it?"

"Billie Max—Billie Jane Max—or, if she went the whole route, Billie Maxim."

He stared at me appraisingly for a moment. Then he grinned. "I'm suspicious of private investigators," he told me. "All bankers are, but you're asking a question I can answer and I'm going to do it."

He touched the button of the intercommunicating box and when a voice answered, said:

"Send Waite in here with the deposit record book from the vaults."

Waite, another rabbit-face, carried a big book under his arm.

Rex showed him the key. "I want to identify this if it is one of ours. Turn to your 'M' list and look for the name Max—or Maxim. The first name is Billie."

The old man straightened, closed the book. "That box, 5463, was emptied yesterday by the co-holder. I handled the matter personally."

"And the co-holder?" Rex asked.

Rabbit-face fingered the leaves. "John Hampton, Bardstown."

"Describe him," I blurted.

Waite looked at the ceiling. "He's crippled, the right leg is shorter than the other; age, I'd say, about sixty. I saw him twice, the day he took the box, and yesterday when he claimed the contents."

Rex turned to me. "Anything else, Mr. Sarg?"

I shook my head with a wry grin. "Not unless you can connect me with the Other Side," I grumbled. "So far as I'm concerned, this is a washout. But thanks, anyway."

I wandered out to the street, realized that I was hungry again. I turned in at a quick-and-dirty and ordered a meal.

While I waited for it, I felt like cussing the day of my birth. Then suddenly it came to me that I'd scored after all. John Hampton, cripple, Bardstown, was the co-holder of the Billie Maxim box. I'd been so downed by the fact that it had

been stripped that I actually had overlooked the new clue.

Making quick work of the steak the waiter brought me, I rushed to the nearest pay station and put in a call for Hap Caswell. He was in, fortunately, and went in a big way for my suggestion that he meet at my apartment in an hour.

BARDSTOWN was like the word sounded: a little, tucked-away village off the beaten paths, with farming and fruit-raising as the principal activities.

I parked on the public square and started a slow prowl about the streets. That's one advantage of the small towns. Everybody has to get the inside dope on the stranger and, if he asks the right questions, he, in turn, gets the dope on the town.

And it worked. Hap and I learned that John Hampton was a mean old cuss, and kept pretty much to himself. We were told where his place was, too.

Eventually we got away, drove until we came to a set of bars which blocked the lane. Hap, lazy always, matched me for the get-out and won. Thank the good Lord that it worked out that way. *For there were copper contact points on the under side of the bars; wires leading underground beside the posts.*

It was an alarm gadget! The slightest shifting of one of the bars would ring a bell at the house. I backed the car to the side of the lane, took the keys and motioned for Hap to get out.

He said, "What?" suspiciously.

"Contact points for an alarm, Hap. How are you on the running broad jump?"

He was emphatic that his jumping was lousy, but he suggested brightly that he was one of our best crawlers-through, pointing to the wire fence at each side of the bars.

Between us, with me tugging at the wires, we got him through. I vaulted over and started off toward the house through the trees.

But I didn't get far. Something struck against my shin, almost upset me. It was a fine but tough wire, strung low on

screw-eyes. If Hermit Hampton couldn't catch his fish with bait, he was content to net 'em.

The fat was in the fire. I told Hap to stay where he was, then went back, let the bars down and drove inside.

"I'm just your driver," I told Hap after picking him up. "And you're a bright young fellow selling magazine subscriptions to get you through a post scholarship at Technology. You do the talking and I'll take what peeks are necessary."

THE house proved to be a huge, rambling place of the New England type. An L had been added at each end of the original center structure, but the whole place was nearly destitute of paint. Long grass and tall weeds cluttered the lawn and the windows of both L's were dirt-smeared. It was evident that the old hermit didn't use the end rooms except, possibly, for storage.

Hap, piling out, worked the old-fashioned knocker industriously. The place sounded hollow, like an abandoned barn. There was a long wait, with Hap clasping the knocker again and again.

I was the stolid driver registering disinterest, but suddenly my senses came alive with a rush. There was movement at a window in the right-hand L. A hand had pulled a curtain aside. Instead of turning my head, I rolled my eyes as far to the right as they'd go.

It was enough. That window had been used as a spy hole before. It was cleaner than the others and now a ray of the afternoon sun was striking against it.

That glow showed me a face, surmounted by a mane of iron gray hair. I got a better view a moment later as the nose touched the glass. The hidden watcher was peering angrily down at Hap. It was a strange face. There was a stringy, wispy mustache under a straight nose. Suddenly, his eyes shifted to me. I yawned, put my big fist over my mouth, slid down in the seat like a man prepared for a long wait.

Then the door opened and a woman, old, stooped, seemingly quite deaf, stood

framed there. One hand was cupped behind her ear.

Hap took off his hat, made his best bow. "I'm studying to become an engineer," he told her clearly. "And I'm paying my way through college by selling—"

"Hey? Speak louder. I'm a trifle deaf."

The old woman came a step nearer. Her voice had the strange flatness of the very deaf person.

"I'm — selling — magazine-subscriptions." Hap literally bellowed the words. The woman backed away, eying him reproachfully.

"You needn't yell, mister. And we want no magazines. They's jest me'n Cap'n Hampton, 'n neither of us strains our eyes with readin'."

The old gal didn't go in for the social amenities. One moment she stood there talking with Hap. The next she'd ducked back inside and the door had slammed in his face.

That was that. He got in beside me and we whizzed down to the gate. After he'd replaced the bars and we were hooting down the lane, he said:

"Del, there's something cuckoo about that place. When the old woman opened the door I distinctly saw two men. They were backed against the wall—and one had a sawed-off shotgun in his hand."

I gave him a sour look. "Well, they *said* they didn't want to buy any magazines."

That set him popping like a safety valve. "Quit holding out on me," he hooted. "I tagged out here like a stooge because you said there'd be an end of the Billie Maxim kill here for me. I don't mind running your damn errands, but I'm going to know why."

That was fair enough. I owed it to him. So I pulled up at the roadside and showed him the whole works. When I was done he whistled.

"And the old farm back there is the hole-up? It's the hideout for what's left of the Willinger gang?"

"Yes—what's left," I told him softly.

"Oh!" he barked. "I've got it now. It's headquarters—has been headquarters all

of the time, and probably Old Hampton is the brains back of the whole thing."

"We're going back tonight, Hap," I told him. "And when we come away, I hope we'll have most of the answers. Did you bring a gun with you?"

He chuckled, dug out a police special from inside his belt . . .

The night was blacker than a river of ink, but I managed to travel about three sides of a square and eventually bring up at a point opposite to the lane side, but at another gate on the west line of Hampton's property.

I had proof that I was right when I got down to examine the gate. It had been spiked shut with six-inch nails, and to make it doubly impassable, there was a length of chain at each end secured by a padlock.

We planted the car in high weeds off the road and locked it securely. I used my flash to guide us over the gate and until we got our feet on the rutted woods road. From there on, I walked on eggs while I felt ahead of me with a twig for another of the alarms.

I wasn't crazy. I found another in the middle of a stand of pig-weeds. And I'd defy Sherlock Holmes to find it if he wasn't watching as carefully as I had.

Presently we saw a light through the trees. It was dim, flickering as it struck through the branches. We stopped for a council of war.

"You're not planning a two-man mop-up, are you?" Hap demanded. When I pretended to think it over, he went on, "Because if you are, you're going to be short exactly half of your army."

It was time to quit clowning. "We called it reconnaissance patrol in the A.E.F.," I said. "It means crawling on our bellies, listening, peeking—and praying like hell that nobody lets go with one of those sawed-off shotguns."

"That's better," he conceded. "But don't fall over me, you big oaf."

"I won't—for the simple reason that I won't be with you. You take the right side. I'll do the left."

With that we moved deeper into the fringe of trees, feeling our way to avoid

trap-wires. Suddenly Hap caught at my arm.

"Over to the left," he whispered. "Something there reflected back the light from the window."

After a minute I saw it, too. It was some sort of polished surface, but it didn't move.

We got down on hands and knees and crawled toward it, going Injun in a big way. Finally we saw a ghost flame for a split second not six feet from us.

"Still," I breathed in Hap's ear, and began worming my way forward. It proved to be a reflector light, covered on three sides with boxwood, and with a seventy-five watt light screwed into the socket.

A couple of twists with my fingers put it out of business. Hap groaned.

"I knew it, Del. They're like roaches, where you find one there's apt to be a million. Now we've got to crawl all over the place putting them on the blink before we can do anything else."

"Leave 'em on," I suggested sarcastically. "Then you'll *know* that they'll blow the top off your head. This other way, you've got the percentage."

But it wasn't such a hard task. Each light bulb was cut in on main parallel wires. By following these we came, in turn, to nine more on the four sides of the place.

"That's the crop," I said. "Now we'll split and work toward the back—but keep your gun handy."

He grunted disgustedly, and moved off after whispering, "I'll be seeing you, Del—maybe."

It was a sweet task I'd picked out for us. I'll admit freely that if Hap had deserted, he'd have been given my benediction and my personal society as well.

CHAPTER VII

LUCK RUNS OUT

A SYRINGA bush, then a patch of sunflowers, gave me cover as I crossed the last of the comparatively open lawn. At a corner of the old house I waited, listened, then began working along the L toward the back.

A big woodbine covered the rear and side of the L, a regular old grandfather of a woodbine. I decided it would prove to be both a hideout and a getaway from above. Momentarily I paused and put my weight on the central stem. It held like a cable. Then, while I still was hanging by my hands, I heard a cough!

It seemed beside me, close, almost in my ear. I didn't dare to let go because of the noise, yet as long as I hung there I couldn't get at my gun. Tie that one, will you?

Following the cough there came the sound of a man clearing his throat. Then I got it. There was a watcher in the rear room of the L, but he was beside an open window facing on the rear.

I scuttled back to a tree-lined walkway leading to the kitchen. A trace of light shone through into the kitchen from a front room. In it I could see the old-fashioned range with its built-in hot water tank, a woodbox, a work table and a sink.

That didn't seem to offer much until the door swung wider and old Hampton limped into view. He wasn't anything like benevolent looking. The outthrust jaw, crazy mane of hair and the villainous, deep-set eyes combined to make him unlovely.

Added to that, he limped. The right leg, shorter than the other, caused him to progress at a hitching run, a constant fall and recovery, not nice to witness.

His face hypnotized me, drew me forward—against my better judgment. That rear window wasn't the sort of place to which you'd stroll nonchalantly.

Yet I went forward, willy-nilly. I saw his hand describe a circle, knew that he was cranking an out-dated telephone before I heard the faint tinkle.

I literally ran the rest of the way, plastering one big ear against the side of the house. It's surprising how much you can hear that way. Presently he said:

"Those two—what'd they do? . . . Oh, yeah? Drove off toward Chi, huh? Well, something ran against the wire *before* the bar alarm rang . . . Hell, no,

there's no dogs or pigs on the place Yeah, Harry and Spud trailed them. They were trying to sell magazine subs all the way into town Have Moe and Bill left yet? Okay, but keep a sharp lookout."

I chuckled at the reference to our trying to sell magazine stubs. I had made Hap get out at every farmhouse, as I had figured that Hampton had been watching us. So I started backing into the shadows to find Hap and warn him about the coming of Moe and Bill—but a single loud, "Bong!" came from a bell within. Then I knew I was too late.

Before the echo of the bell had died away, Old Hampton was shouting: "Lights! Moe and Bill just came through the gate." He waited a second, began cursing like a sailor. "I said I wanted lights!" he roared. "Everybody gone nuts around here?"

"Something's wrong with 'em; they won't light," a voice answered.

"Then light the middle one on the roof," the old man yelled. "Suppose it's not them after all. Get your guns and be ready." Almost as he spoke, a hell-tooting big reflector light sprang into life on the roof, casting its beams toward the gate.

It was right then that I had to stop worrying about Hap and begin giving thought to Del Sarg. Feet scuffled in the gravel off to my right. A door opened at my left and another man came out. I had a glimpse of him for a moment. He was fitting a pan of slugs into a Tommy-gun. But the hot part of it was that both men were walking toward me.

I fell flat on my face, wriggling along close to the foundation; hoping for some last minute miracle. And it came, in the form of a swinging window in the foundation. It was hinged on the upper side, seemingly a dump window for late fall vegetables from the fields.

BELIEVE me, I went through that narrow opening like a scared cat, hanging from the sill by my fingers while I felt about for a place to light. There wasn't any—and the approaching footsteps were almost beside me.

With nothing else to do, I turned loose all holds and dropped. My feet landed in soft dirt, twisting to let me down on hands and knees. I felt about, discovered I was in a sand pile. Next I came to a humpy brick floor—with the sound of voices somewhere close at hand. Tiny points of light shone downward from above and as I moved toward them I began to make out words. Two men were arguing angrily.

One, Old Hampton, snarled: "I'll do as I damn please, Elliott, and if you're in my way, you'll get what Missis Willinger got the other night. Mogut's already had more than a hundred grand out of me—and that's all he gets. See?"

"Mogut!" The name sung through my mind like a prairie fire. "Moe and Bill" were coming from town! Moe, Elliott had said, was the Brains and had planned the Willinger raids! And Moses Gutterson, smartie lawyer who'd kept bobbing up in the Billie Maxim kill, was the one whom the crooks called "Mogut"!

What a tieup!

But there wasn't much more time for piecing the story together. An automobile roared up to the door and the knocker clanged once. A gruff male voice said,

"Hullo, you guys. Come in and put it in a chair. The boss'll be here in a minute."

Feet scraped along the bare boards and turned into a room at the right. I followed over the bumpy bricks, listening intently.

An oily, suave voice, which I recognized for Gutterson's, said: "Do we get a drink, or should we have brought our own bottle?"

I never knew if they got the drink. For suddenly there was a shout outside, a call for someone to halt. A gun barked once, then twice more rapidly.

Time seemed to stand still, but it probably wasn't more than half a second before two Tommy-guns were being fired in bursts, the heavy slugs lashing and snarling at some poor devil out there in the dark.

And I knew that the target was Hap; his luck was out at last!

A ROTTEN break for a game guy—and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it, then. Whatever was happening, was finished. The guns were silent now and there was no return fire.

Feet—it seemed like scores of them—were scurrying toward the rear. There was a confused shouting but over all other sounds there came the snarling yelps of Old Hampton. He wasn't cursing now. Each shout was a question and called for an answer. One came at last.

"Some guy was prowlin' out behind. When we tried to stop 'm he cut loose with three slugs. Me'n the Polack let 'm have about thirty apiece—an' now we're goin' out 'n pick him up on a shovel."

Old Hampton bellowed: "Roof lights, you guys! There may be others around."

As I'd suspected, the reflectors on the roof covered the place pretty thoroughly. Standing as I did in the center of the cellar, I could see the glow on the trees through every opening. Presently there came a triumphant shout:

"Got him, chief!" Then, a second later: "Hell! It's that wise guy 'at was out here safternoon!"

That brought an instant hush, broken when Hampton snarled:

"Get him in here. He'll talk to me—alive or dead."

I climbed on a box near the center of the cellar, which brought my head above ground level. And standing there, I watched while they lugged the limp form of Hap Caswell into the house.

Tough? Figure it for yourself. I'd got him into this jackpot—and now he was knocked off while I was safe as a bug in a woodpile. I wasn't caring very much for myself just at that moment.

They lugged him into the hallway, let his body thud heavily on the boards. But a moment later there was a surprised shout:

"Hell, chief! He ain't dead. This guy's just been creased over the top of the noodle with a slug. They ain't another scratch on him."

A babble of talk followed, interspersed with some insulting things about certain Tommy experts. But Old Hampton broke that up with an order.

"Slop some water on his face," he snapped. "He's got a lot of talking to do before he dies."

I heard a dipper clank against a metal pail, but before there was further movement another shout went up, this time in the voice of Moe Gutterson.

"Cripes!" he bellowed. "That's Hap Caswell of *The Times!*"

If he'd said "President Roosevelt" he couldn't have caused a more complete silence. It seemed a full minute before Old Hampton said softly:

"Caswell—*Times!* He was here this afternoon with another snoop! Out, you birds, all of you. Somebody's put the yard lights on the fritz. Rake the place to hell. *but bring me that other guy!*"

They moved at his order, moved fast. I dropped from my box, sent a quick shot of my flash about the place. It was twenty feet long, at least fourteen wide, and there wasn't a single hiding place except under the box on which I'd been standing.

It moved easily. I tipped it up, slid underneath, let it down squarely into the marks where it had stood for years. It was hot inside there, dusty. The dry particles, working into my nose and throat, burned like fire. I had a vision of a healthy sneeze at the wrong time, to be followed by plenty slugs.

The time to control that sneeze came sooner than I had expected.

The searchers were rushing about outside, their voices seeping through to me dimly. Then, so suddenly as to be a complete surprise, the cellar door opened and two men came tramping down the stairs.

Each carried a flashlight and the combined beams made the cellar as light as day.

"Nothin' down here," a voice said almost over me. "There's no place to hide—only this old box—and that's stood here for years. See, it's all rotten and look at the way the dirt's piled against it."

With the words he kicked heavily against the side, splintering the rotten board. The free end drove inward and raked a furrow across my cheek. But

worse was to come. The kick had dislodged a rain of dust, sent it cascading down into my eyes, nose and mouth.

It choked me, scalded the air passages, made the feared sneeze now the most-to-be-desired thing in the world. It was touch and go for a long moment while my diaphragm twitched and lungs fought for an ounce of breathable air. The sneeze was half-born when one of the men said:

"Let's get back upstairs. They's nothin' down here unless it's dead folks buried under them bricks."

There was a grisly chuckle. Then the feet receded, clattered up the stairs.

CHAPTER VIII

A RED FACE

IT took agility and balance to work my body through that narrow cellar window, but somehow I managed it, lying there, balanced on the sill endlessly while I listened for footsteps. At last, when it seemed safe, I wriggled through and lay there on my face in the grass.

What a relief! Fresh air poured into my lungs, a cool breeze dried some of the perspiration from my streaming face. While I rested I gave thought to Hap. To barge in there, shooting, would mean merely a quick exit to hell without having achieved anything but death.

The solution came to me like a flash. There'd be no electrical switchboard in a place like that. The lead-in wires would come to a knife switch set under two heavy resistance fuses. If I could blow one of those, the whole system would go dark.

I slipped along the rear walkway, across to where I remembered disconnecting one of the hidden lights. I found it without difficulty. It was a gamble now. Whoever had tried to switch on the lights undoubtedly had thrown the switch on and off several times. Had he left it on? I took off my soft hat, flattened it about the globe, made the two turns which made contact with the brass lip within the socket.

It worked! There was a quick flame within the shielding hat, which I killed

instantly with a turn of my wrist. Luck was with me.

First I assembled a three-part, tough steel pocket jimmy and sunk the bent end in the ground. Then I removed the globe, put my handkerchief about the socket and moved it toward the upreared end of the hard steel.

In a moment the collar grated across the end of the jimmy. I waited a brief moment, hunched forward to shield the flash from prying eyes, then jammed socket and steel together with an audible click.

Instantly there was crackling sound, a blue flash, the odor of burned metal. And in the same split second the big searchlight on the roof and every light within blanked out.

Momentarily I was blinded by the arc flash. But instinct had laid me down with my feet toward the house and, arising the same way, I knew I was headed right. I ran on my toes, balancing with fingers spread, elbows extended to warn against dangerous contacts. Presently my feet touched gravel and I knew that I was at the end of the kitchen pathway.

Within I could hear men threshing about, shouting curses. Over them all came the cutting, rasping tones of Old Hampton, demanding that some one get a fuse and cut the lights in again.

"And be damn sure you pull the switch first!" he screamed. "Or you'll blow the whole thing to hell again."

It was only a matter of at the most two minutes now: one hundred and twenty brief seconds. Half of them to get a fuse, the remaining time to get to the fuse box and replace the burned out plug.

IT was then that I dropped all caution. Under my feet was lush grass, weeds. I remembered that the space directly in front of the house was clear of shrubs and flowers.

I rounded the west L, running. Then I was on the small lawn directly before the front door. I slowed to a walk, tip-toed across the gravel, ran again until I felt the other L beside me.

Hap, I knew, had been carried into the

room next to the L at the left. Fingers touching the woodwork, I slipped along until I came to the third window of the main house.

The opening was high, extending from just above the floor to a point much higher than the average modern window. Old-fashioned shutters covered it and I knew the inner casing would be spiked.

I'd uprooted the jimmy after burning out the fuse. A quick thrust now set the lip under the shutter and a single jerk ripped it free. Pushing it aside, I thrust out exploring fingers for the crack beneath the inner sash.

But there wasn't any. The window was open several inches and even as I touched it, it moved upward again.

"Hap?" I whispered the word frantically. The seconds were flying and I had to identify the man within as friend or enemy. No gun-shot answered me, no hand came pawing through to settle about my throat.

But somewhere, but inches away, a human voice said: "Grr-m-m-h!"

It wasn't much of a word but to me it meant that Hap, gagged, was doing his best.

I took a chance, threw the window wide, reached within. Something round, dank, moist came through the opening. On it was hair, ears, and what seemed to be a bandage.

My questing fingers found a gag, a roll of cloth held in place by a necktie knotted about Hap's neck. I jerked it loose, heard him take a long, whistling breath. Then he mumbled:

"Out — God's sake — you — don't —" Then he slumped across the sill.

It was then that I thanked the good Lord silently for an excess of beef. I took Hap over my shoulder and dashed with him into the screening trees.

The lights came on just as we reached their shelter. Fortunately for us, the second and third roof lights still were dark and we were able to make it to the car out beyond the fence before they came on.

Hap, who had been growing stronger with the passing of each minute, got so

he could mumble coherently as I got the car rolling.

"Del!" he said, his lips close to my ear. "I'm sure all of the Willinger loot is hidden there."

"I know," I rasped back at him. "All sewed up in Aunt Emma's crazy quilt."

He coughed, cleared his throat, gave me a dirty look. "Like hell," he confided. "It's down in the cellar, hidden under a pile of dirt."

Was my face red?

Before I had a chance to say anything, a grim, white light sprang up behind us, passed like a streak and illuminated the road ahead.

We were making a neat sixty, which meant that the chap behind us was doing at least eighty. And it didn't take many guesses to decide that we hadn't a friend among 'em.

I've a heavy foot and now I used it on the foot throttle. The speedometer went to seventy-nine and stopped there. That was the speed crop so far as we were concerned.

As we rounded curves I watched the following lights straighten out. Each time they were closer, shining farther down the road ahead of us. Before us I could see the lights of Bardstown less than three miles away. Yet miles are miles in any man's country. We didn't have a Chinaman's chance.

It was then that we swung onto the first turn of an S curve we'd traversed that afternoon. There the road swung about a dwarfed foot-hill and the farm folks had followed the old path instead of making a cut.

I remembered that at the town end was a dirt road leading off to farms at the left—which might prove to be just what we needed. Swinging out of the second turn, I swung into it on two wheels, cut my lights and engine and drifted until we were screened from the road by low bushes. Then I put on the brakes.

The pursuers also knew the territory; knew the grades and the banks as well. They screamed around the last turn, then continued on toward town with their motor roaring in crescendo.

Hap, strong for melodrama, was **sore**.

"Smart?" he grumbled. "You big moron, now we're blocked off from town. All they've got to do is telephone for another load of thugs, and we'll be angled out within the hour. A heluva smart guy you turned out to be."

For answer I started the motor and speeded straight ahead.

CHAPTER IX

THE DEAD DIE!

I KNEW that out there in the farm districts all sides of sections of land were covered by dirt roads. In other words, if you drove long enough, made enough turns in the same direction, you couldn't help coming back to your starting point.

I'd made a couple of turns when Hap demanded: "What is this anyhow, Del—a petting party?"

"God forbid," I told him piously. "We're on our way to Leeper. Leeper's only twelve miles from Bardstown, and they have telephones and things there, too."

I wasn't so far wrong. The town was a small edition of Bardstown, but it had an all-night telephone operator who lost no time in connecting me with Chief McCurdy, Postal Inspector Webster, and last but not least, Nannery, the Chicago Department of Justice head. I told him a lot of things I wanted done and asked for speed.

McCurdy didn't ask any questions. "I'll meet you at the Leeper drug store," he shouted and jammed the receiver back on the hook.

Webster was at a theatre, but they located him by the seat numbers.

"Hell, I'm in evening clothes," he wailed.

"That's all right," I told him. "Come as a nudist if you want to. The party's liable to turn into a masquerade. I wouldn't fool you."

But Hap had a bombshell waiting for me when I went back to the car.

Quite casually, just as the chauffeur says, "I've got another flat," he said:

"I picked up another thing out there, Del, Willinger's buried on the Hampton farm. After the funeral the father be-

came fearful the body would be dug up—so he let Old Hampton sneak it out here and bury it in the family plot. Can you beat that?"

I looked at him pityingly. "Beat it?" I repeated. "Hell, you poor saturated pillar of alcoholic flame, I couldn't even tie it."

That satisfied him apparently, for he lay back in the seat and started to nap. Which wasn't a bad idea at all, for I had things to think over. . . .

McCurdy with his hundred-mile-an-hour car was first on the scene, with Nannery, the DJ man but seconds behind him. They threw plenty of gravel when they braked to a stop beside us. Nannery brought one man with him; McCurdy three and every one looked like a scrapper. One had a Tommy-gun, panned, ready for use. Another had a tear gas gun and a package of spare shells.

Hap was snoozing, so I led them off in the dark. We talked in whispers, made plans, discarded them; thought up better ones and agreed. Nannery went over to the telephone office for some last-minute arrangements while Webster went in search of a cup of coffee.

McCurdy stuck with me and to him I whispered things I hadn't told the others. He swore at me, called me a cockeyed, crazy liar, then fell silent. A few minutes later he said:

"I'll stick, Del Sarg, if you believe what you've told me. Right or wrong, hell or double, I'll stick."

I was mindful of another thing. "Doc Jett, medical examiner, has helped. You've got to cut him in on the credit with you."

The time was near at hand when Chief McCurdy and Del Sarg would get a lot of favorable mention. I hoped we'd be alive to enjoy it.

Nannery was back soon, grinning. Just to be on the safe side he'd ordered four of his men to Bardstown in a car; four more to Leeper. Just in case we need 'em, he explained.

We took a roundabout course when we pulled out an hour later. Meanwhile a lot of things had happened. A federal district judge had issued a most impor-

tant mandatory paper and his secretary would leave soon with it for Bardstown.

WE drove the last miles over back roads with only the cowl lights burning, parking the cars finally where Hap and I had stopped on the second trip.

McCurdy, Nannery and I went ahead. I carried the usual limber twig with which to find the alarm wire. Knowing pretty well where it was hidden, I came to it quickly, indicating its position while the others stepped over it.

When we finally broke through the last fringe of trees, we divided into four sections, each responsible for one corner of the place. McCurdy and his three men took care of the front corners. Nannery and his man took the east rear, and Hap, Webster and I, mobile shock troops, took care of the rest. I left the other two together in the shadows of the rear walk and stole forward.

Lights were on in the house again and there was a low hum of voices. For a moment I squatted under the kitchen window, back against the foundation, trying to puzzle out the odds on a rear attack through the kitchen. Then the telephone rang.

There was the grate of chair legs, then the uneven thump of Old Hampton's game leg as he hurried to answer.

"Find 'em?" he demanded brusquely. "Oh, you didn't! They slipped you, huh? You went back and checked the side roads and they weren't there, says you." At that he began cussing viciously, insanely.

Presently his voice dropped and he listened again. His voice sounded frightened when he said: "Hell, you fool! Don't come here. Beat it to the other place. We'll be scrambling, too. This joint's too hot with that *Times* man loose. I'll bet he's squawking his head off right now to the feds."

He hung up, said without moving from the instrument: "Those damn' finks missed him; but the other guy didn't. They got away clean. I told the boys to beat it to the other joint; that we'd meet 'em there."

After that the hall door opened and Moe Gutterson said: "You're crazy to run: this is the safest—"

"Shut up!" Hampton roared. "I'm running this. I say scram and it goes. Come here, Elliott."

I rolled into the clear, found new shadows where I could see inside.

Old Hampton was backed against the wall, one hand under his coat. Mogut, his face white with strain, stood in the doorway. As I watched, he moved aside and a tall, good-looking man came into view. He was a new one on me. His clothes were in good taste, his features regular.

This, I knew, must be Elliott. I crawled ahead and put my ear to the clapboards.

"Moe, you and I'll go last," Old Hampton was telling Elliott. "The rest of you birds take the big car and beat it to the other joint. Don't be afraid to shoot your way out if anyone interferes. The roads'll be lousy with cops and feds in another hour."

And was that advance information? I rolled clear again, told Webster it was his job to take some of the other men and take care of the hoodlums as they tried for their getaway, and that it'd have to be silent.

AFTER that, relenting a bit, I sent Hap for McCurdy. I wanted the big dick in at the death, and there was a lot more to it than just the small fry being captured.

The moments passed rapidly; almost too rapidly. Suddenly the kitchen door opened and several dark forms slithered past the place where we crouched.

I was flat on the ground which brought their forms between me and the star-glow in the sky. I counted them. They were five and two carried machine guns as they stole along toward the old carriage house where the cars were kept.

The next sound to reach our ears was the grind of a starter. Whatever happened now was on the lap of the gods. Hap, McCurdy, Nannery and I were needed to take care of the hard ones in the house. Webster and the others would have to handle the five fugitives as best they could.

The starter screamed a second, third, fourth time, but the spark did not catch. Nannery whispered in my ear:

"Seven bucks to a thin dime that one of my boys pulled the distributor head."

After that the starter roared almost interminably, but without effect. Then a flashing flared on and off. Pink and variegated hell turned loose right afterward.

Some one started a shout, but it was cut off a-borning. I could hear blows, grunts, stifled oaths, the whip of flesh against the metal body of the car. It was the sort of battle that patrols used to wage out in No Man's Land, neither side caring to bring on an inaccurate mid-night barrage.

Then, as suddenly as it had started it ended. One long, shuddering moan was the climax. Nannery was becoming uneasy. "Hell," he whispered. "Why don't they beat it with those birds—if *they've won?*"

But the slap of the hood, purr of the high speed engine silenced him. There was a bit more of delay, grunts as heavy bodies were tossed into the tonneau. Finally, the gears clashed home and the big heap rushed off down the rutted drive at a hard pace.

McCurdy, his hand on my shoulder, whispered: "Now what?"

"It's their move. Watch for a light in the cellar. I figure Hampton, Moe and Elliott'll dig up the loot and beat it, leaving the rest of the mob in the lurch."

But I was wrong. As I talked, the light came on again in the kitchen and the back door opened. Hampton stood for a moment, framed in the doorway. He was carrying a shovel. Moe and Elliott, also bearing "grave guns," followed. They passed within ten feet of our hiding place, Elliott puffing contentedly at a cigarette.

Suddenly Hampton spoke. And this time his voice was bland. "We'd be fools to cut it up now, Moe," he said. "We've got to get out of the woods first—and who'd look for it in a grave? Don't belly-ache any more about needing dough. You've cut out better than a hundred grand already."

THAT hit me hard. I touched McCurdy's shoulder, said: "Jean Lafitte probably told his excavating crew the same story."

Their course took them across a corner of the yard toward a clump of gnarled trees which seemed, somehow, to have been set off for a purpose.

Hap's mind was clicking now. "They're going to bury the loot in Willinger's grave," he whispered excitedly. "A cinch—for us."

I put out my hands, stopped them—flat. "A lot more than surplus cash will be buried there," I told them warningly. "I heard Old Hampton tell Elliott he was going to burn Moe down for his share. What would be sweeter than to make it one-way by knocking Elliott off, too?"

Nannery's breath left his lips in a surprised grunt. "You mean—now?"

"Could you figure a better time?" I snapped, urging them forward as I realized that the others were well ahead of us. We inched across the open spots, ducking from bush to bush for cover.

Suddenly, ahead of us, a brilliant light sprang into being. It was directed at the ground from two sides, but in the reflection I could see the three gathered about a mound. Hampton was pointing, seemingly directing the others how to proceed.

Then he backed off a few steps. Elliott and Moe removed their coats and started digging. The ground was soft and in a few moments they had thrown up a comparatively high bank of it to their right.

"Fine billiards!" I told the others. "We'll get around back of that and they'll never see us until the fireworks start."

The clang and scrape of the shovels drowned whatever minor noises we made as we circled the grave. There we found another favoring factor; the ground sloped down there, giving us almost a trench in which to approach the growing mound of dirt.

And there was another item. The light, reflected from the fresh earth, eventually would shorten the vision of the three to the actual distance from their working points to its surface. I knew this from

actual experience. The eye sharps call it "glare paralysis."

We crawled ahead, inch by inch, clearing dried twigs and leaves from our path, huddling down safely at last not six feet from the earth mound. We were so close that occasional clods rolled down against our bodies.

Finally, after what seemed an hour of waiting, a shovel struck against something which gave forth a hollow sound. McCurdy whispered: "The rough box." A few more seconds passed and then we heard the steady scrape of shovels on wood.

Right then Old Hampton's voice cut through the other noises. There was a new note in it now, something acrid, menacing. "Open it up," he snarled, "unless you're afraid of dead folks."

Moe Gutterson said, with a grunt: "How in hell can we? We're standing on the lid."

"Then skip it," Hampton snarled viciously. "Let it go, sap."

I could hear his crippled leg dragging as he slithered ahead through the dead leaves. He was muttering curses, but suddenly his voice rose to a shrill scream. "I said let it go, you damned crumbs. Do it, and *stick your hands high*." The insane rage in his tones sent a shiver down my spine.

But in another instant all other sound was blotted out by two heavy explosions as his automatic blasted the life from Elliott and struck Moe Gutterson down like a pole-axed beef.

It was like that. Insane mouthings, then two shots. The work of a maniacal killer. No man—no army—could have prevented it.

We came erect like four mannikins actuated by a single spring. I'm faster than most with a gun. It's my trade. Probably that's why I had Hampton covered before McCurdy called:

"Up with 'em: you're covered—front and back."

But it was as effective as though he'd called on Niagara Falls to stand still. Hampton's gun flicked toward us, and began lancing a stream of steel. It was

gun work supreme; instinctive shooting—which is the most deadly kind.

Nannery groaned. He fell forward, clutching at his shoulder.

And what was I doing in those split-seconds? Shooting! Faster and more accurately than I ever had shot before. My first slug went into the killer's chest and staggered him. The second and third missed clean, because he was dropping to his knees. But the fourth, fifth and sixth went home.

One raised dust from just below the V of his vest. The next, two inches to the left, went through the top of his heart.

The last made his head jerk. A black spot sprang into being in the middle of his forehead, became a jetting, crimson fountain. He went over on his back where the ray of the big flashlight illuminated every line in his face.

Telling Hap to look after Nannery, McCurdy and I leaped across the grave.

ELLIOTT, with a bullet hole through his head under the right eye, was as dead as Pontius Pilate. Moe Gutterson had been shot through the left breast, but even as I looked down at him he stirred, opened his eyes.

"Heads up, Moe," I told him. "We'll have you out in a minute."

I dropped down onto the rough box, lifted him enough so that McCurdy could drag him out onto the grass. Then we got his clothes open, plugging the wound just above his heart with folded handkerchiefs. McCurdy produced a flask, let a few drops trickle down Moe's throat.

He choked. When he tried to draw a deep breath, pain wrenched his features. Presently he looked up at us, whispered: "Who—you?"

"Department of Justice, Chicago police department, postal inspectors and private," I told him briskly. "Enough to do whatever you want done to square things for the deal you've been given."

He said; "Uh-huh?" slowly. McCurdy gave him more liquor.

"You—got him?" he mumbled eagerly. "Hampton? Yeah, we got him—plenty," McCurdy said.

"Hampton, hell!" I snapped. "We got

Willinger, Moe. That was what you wanted to tell us! That Hampton was Willinger? That the fellow they killed in Chicago was a fake?"

"Sneak—thief—Henny Ash. It was his—bad luck to look—like Willinger. . . . Operation—did—rest."

"I know—Menefee," I told him. "He worked Willinger over into Hampton, too."

McCurdy broke in with a question. "Did Willinger kill the uncle?"

Moe whispered: "Yes—he's—second body—in—that grave."

"It was a smart trick," McCurdy said.

Moe rolled his head weakly from side to side. "Nothing's—smart in—this game," he whispered. "I'm—biggest sap—of all."

I nodded to McCurdy for more stimulant and asked: "Why'd he kill Billie Maxim?"

"She knew—too much; reward was—growing."

He shivered, said: "I'm going out—cold now."

"Hold it, Moe!" I barked the words at him as his eyes started to close. "One more thing—where's the money?"

Seconds ticked away.

"Cellar—I think; or else—Kelleher's—Ham—" he muttered.

This time his breathing stopped.

"Billy Kelleher's poolroom in Hammond," a voice said behind me. It was Nannery, his right hand holding a pad over a shoulder wound that had turned him white as a ghost. Hap had him by the arm, eyes popping out like a hoot-owl's.

McCurdy nudged me, pointed to a steel box where Willinger had been standing. It was heavy and I had visions of tiers of bills within. But when one of Willinger's keys turned the lock we found only iron filings padded with tissue paper. There wasn't even a thin dime.

Hap, squatting beside the body, pointed at the face. "It's on the level, Del?" he demanded. "You know—Hampton's Willinger made over? The feds didn't kill him? You're sure, guy?" His voice was plaintive now as he added, "This isn't just a story, Del, it's an

opera—and a poem—and the Johnstown flood all rolled into one. If I just can write it, down to the last paragraph, I'll be willing to call it a lifetime."

For just a second the pink spotted handkerchief I had seen in the cab flared before my eyes.

"Go ahead and write it, then," I told him. "You've seen it all. You know about the Menefeese, why Billie Maxim was killed—and here's her marriage certificate, by the way. Moe Gutterson was the brains and Elliott was the smooth guy who did the outside fixing."

He stared at me open-mouthed. "How about—" he began, but I stopped him. "Use your imagination, Hap. There's nobody left alive to contradict anything you write, only—"

He gave me a hard look, "Only what?"

"This must be, Hap. I want enough credit so the department'll offer my badge back to me. I'll have one heluva lot of pleasure refusing it. McCurdy gets an equal break, with Nannery and you also-rans. And say a word in there somewhere that Doc Jett, the medical examiner's assistant, found that the phony Willinger was half an inch shorter than the real guy."

Hap eyed me biliously. "Maybe you'd like to dictate the story, too," he suggested acidly. "By the way, what *are* you going to do?"

"Dig up about four hundred grand of loot in the cellar while you're yammering to a rewrite man over Willinger's telephone," I told him, "and be damn sure you reverse the charges. I don't want a dead man stuck for the tolls."

I don't want to pose as a seer, too, but I was only sixty grand off in my estimate of what I'd find under the dirt pile in the cellar. Not bad for an amateur fortune teller, I'd say.

And the badge from the department? It came in a box, by special messenger. You want to see it?

Brother, that's another story. I've still got a Chicago phone number, and it's in a tall building in the Loop. There's dough in the bank, too, and Hap, out in Arizona, is writing a book entitled, "I Saw a Ghost Killed."

The Judgment Ray

G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

Author of "One Big Slip," "An Elephant Remembers," etc.

A MAN who laughs when he is alone, Norwell had heard, is either a saint or a devil. As he passed the mirror in the hall of his Uncle Peasley's house, he caught a glimpse of his own face. It might have been the face of an elderly cherub had it not been for the sensuous mouth, wide with silent laughter. But there was no halo about his head. Norwell laughed because he was so clever.

Norwell's lonely old Uncle Peasley was a sun-worshiper with money enough to follow his god with the change of seasons. Though his house had many rooms, Peasley Smith spent most of his hours in his sun room. There flowers and ferns created a veritable jungle with stuffed owls and birds and cranes peeping out at you from unexpected crannies. There were glass tanks in which colorful tropical fishes swam. There was a rack of ancient and modern weapons.

Uncle Peasley Smith, had he not been so busy amassing a fortune, would have liked to have been a big-game hunter. Now that he was too old to hunt, he made his jungle in his sun room where he read, slept—when his books made him forget his bed—and ate carefully, for he suffered from diabetes.

The racked weapons were to be used in the assassination of Uncle Peasley, Norwell had decided. The sun, the tropical fish, the diabetes, and a fast motor car were to furnish Norwell with an impregnable alibi. And after the deed, Norwell would find himself heir to millions!

Though it was near midnight, Uncle Peasley was still in his sun room. He had stretched his withered length upon a chaise longue and had drawn his gray

steamer rug up over his legs. His gold-rimmed spectacles, he had pushed up on his forehead. His book was closed on his chest. He was asleep, as Norwell had fervently hoped he would be.

Norwell had planned every move of his murder. He stepped softly to the gun-rack, took down an old percussion-cap fowling piece, and examined its loading—an unnecessary precaution, for Uncle Peasley kept his guns well primed for the action he had never met.

Norwell heard a yawn. He turned around, the fowling piece swinging like the turret gun on a battleship.

"Thought you were in the city, nephew," breathed Uncle Peasley. He was well acquainted with his nephew's unstable character and showed no sign of surprise at his sudden return.

Norwell couldn't talk. He wanted to say: "Oh yeah! That's what everyone else thinks!" What he actually did was to sight the fowling piece on his uncle, balance it in the curve of his right arm, produce a cigarette with his left hand and light it. He took a couple of puffs, calmly regarding his victim through the haze of blue smoke.

"How many times must I tell you those guns are loaded!" Uncle Peasley crabbed. "Don't point that thing my way! It might go off!"

Norwell just smiled. Instead of pulling the trigger, he lowered the cigarette and pushed its glowing end against the percussion cap. He wondered if Uncle Peasley knew how close he was to eternity.

The cigarette ignited the cap. The gun roared, fairly kicking out of Norwell's grasp. Uncle Peasley gave a sort of gasp before the ripping shot crashed through his breast. Then he lay still.

Norwell laughed again. He dropped the gun back on the rack, and was satisfied to note that the muzzle of the old gun was at a height of Uncle Peasly's chest, if not in direct line. Then he walked over to the chaise longue and pushed it over until it was lined up with the gun-rack.

A round fish globe mounted on an iron Venetian stand was the next object of his attention. He had carefully measured its height before, and knew it was exactly right for his purposes. He dropped to his knees and apparently sniffed the matting rug until he came upon an almost imperceptible "X" marked in black pencil. This point he had carefully calculated long before the actual murder. Then he moved the Venetian stand with its glass bowl directly over the pencil mark.

That was just about all there was to it. As a physicist well acquainted with the laws of light, he had figured that the morning sun, passing through the globe of water, would fall directly upon the percussion cap of the fowling piece in a single burning ray. He would have killed the old man that way in the first place—let the sun do it. But while he could calculate the position of the sun to an exact degree, he couldn't be sure of the position of Uncle Peasly at the same time.

He was about to leave the room when he noticed a splashing sound from the Venetian fish bowl. He cursed. The damned fish had come near upsetting his alibi. The water in the bowl couldn't concentrate the sunlight upon the fowling piece if the fish disturbed the water. He walked back to the bowl, thrust his hand into the water, and caught the orange and black fish in his fingers. He brought the fish out into the air, held it, wriggling; watched it die.

When he was certain that the fish was beyond all possible resuscitation, he dropped it back into the water. For all the dumb sheriff would ever know, the fish had died of old age!

Norwell cleaned the fowling piece to remove fingerprints and left the house.

His roadster was standing under the porte-cochère. He jumped in and gave it the gun. He would do eighty miles an

hour back to the city. Then to the hotel where he had been registered for the past week.

ABOUT an hour later, he braked to a stop at the hotel garage. He had washed his mouth with whiskey and felt certain that he could simulate drunkenness. He stumbled from the car into the arms of the attendant. He laughed idiotically. "My ol' pal, Sharley!" he hic-coughed. "One shwell night I had in thish town. Seen all the shights."

And he staggered off to bed, confident that the garage man would swear that Norwell was too far gone in liquor to have accomplished murder cleverly. In such a state of inebriation, Norwell could not have driven eighty miles to his uncle's house that night and got back in anything short of an ambulance!

It was nine o'clock the next morning that Norwell returned to his uncle's house. This time, he was very careful that several people he knew should see him arrive. He knew that he would find the house just as he had left it. Uncle Peasly's only servant, a housekeeper, came in about eleven to tidy up and get dinner. Norwell didn't even bother to go into the sun room. His uncle would still be there.

He went immediately to the phone, called the county seat, and reported the tragic death to the sheriff "I—I'm not sure, of course," he whispered, "but I'm afraid it's murder!" He hung up.

For a time he alternately chewed an unlighted cigar and his finger nails. He mustn't go to pieces. He was going to be put under the microscope of the law.

But it wasn't until he saw the coroner's car puffing up the drive that he actually began to relax. His plan was fool-proof. Why, a dozen people had seen him arrive from the city. He hadn't been to his uncle's house for a week as far as anybody knew.

Suddenly, a suspicion of a doubt crossed his mind, brushing a chill along his spine. He ran from the door to the sun room.

"Damn!" His biting teeth brought blood to his lips. The shades of the east-

ern windows were closed. If they were closed when the sheriff entered, Norwell's alibi was shattered. The sun couldn't be the cause of Uncle Peasly's death, if it couldn't get through the windows.

With shaking hands, Norwell got the shades up as the sheriff rang the bell.

The coroner was named Wilson; the sheriff Campbell. Norwell thought that each might have been called Doubting Thomas.

"What's this, Mr. Norwell?" asked the sheriff. He was pointing to a little bottle on Uncle Peasly's table.

"Medicine," declared Norwell. "Uncle Peasly had diabetes."

"Yump," grunted the coroner. "He was taking insulin, I suppose. And that puts us in a kettle of fish to start with. It's tough to figure the time of death. Rigor mortis is tricky, anyway, but with diabetes"—he shook his head dismally.

"Why so, doc?" asked the sheriff.

The coroner glared. "Why any person over forty is so affected by the excess saccharine condition of the blood that the body stiffens about ten minutes after death. That makes this hell. The old man's been dead ten minutes and maybe ten hours. If he hasn't had his breakfast, we can't tell from the digestive tract—" He stopped suddenly, pointing his finger at Norwell. "What you doing?"

Norwell had been standing first in one part of the room and then in another, squinting over the top of his pencil, measuring angles. He smiled sadly at the coroner. "I am a very much relieved man," he husked. "I just couldn't think of Uncle Peasly as being murdered. He was so good to every one."

Coroner and sheriff looked at each other and back at Norwell.

Norwell jumped to the gun-rack. "See," he explained excitedly, "this old fowling piece was lined up with uncle. It was the gun that killed him. I've figured that the rising sun passing through the east windows could just about strike that goldfish bowl. The ray of sunlight through that water would act just like a burning glass. Suppose the ray focused on the cap of the fowling piece—"

He didn't have to go further. "By heaven," shouted Campbell, "you're right, Mr. Norwell! And that fish being dead allowed the beam to focus steady. I've heard of them goldfish bowls burning holes in rugs. And the time of your uncle's death would be about sunrise."

"Uncle always was an early riser."

"Yeah," replied the sheriff, "I got it okay. And we can't pinch old Sol. Clear out, Mr. Norwell. We'll get through here as soon as we can."

But Norwell wasn't out of the room ten minutes before Campbell called him back.

"Used to hear it said," declared Campbell, "that if a man never forsook his god, his god never forsook him. The sun was a god to old Peasly Smith. He hasn't failed Peasly even now. You know, Mr. Norwell, you seemed to figure out that sun-bowl-gun business pretty quickly. Sounded swell, too."

Norwell could feel himself getting pale.

"But the one fly in your coffee, Norwell, is the flowers along the sides of the room. Flowers and the like are always looking for light. Notice how they're all turned definitely toward the *west* window instead of the east? If those east shades had been up at sunrise—as they'd have to be to make your story stick—those flowers would have started to turn back towards the east. Looks like a put-up job to make this murder look like an accident."

Norwell made a dive for the gun-rack. He had two heavy Colt automatics in his hands before sheriff and coroner knew what it was all about. "You blundering idiots!" he laughed. "Get back before I blow you down!"

Sheriff Campbell leaped straight for Norwell. He seized both of Norwell's wrists and twisted the guns to the floor. Then he lead a fast right to Norwell's jaw. Norwell staggered, battled with oblivion—and lost.

Coroner Wilson shook his head. "Man, that took nerve! Jumping a killer with two guns in his hand!"

"Not a helluva lot," replied the sheriff modestly. "I went and unloaded every gun in this room before I called Norwell back in here."

Life was just a gag for little Algie. He was always happy. And that was why a racketeer's doll singled him out to take her to a party. That—and the reason that she had plans for Algie and herself. But on that party, Algie learned that life is often crossed by a—

Death Gag

By J. LANE LINKLATER

Author of "Stir Shadow."

THE way Algie was swinging down the street, no one would have taken him for forty years of age. That was probably because he didn't take life seriously. "Life," he often said, "is just a gag, boys. Just a gag." Forty years before, his parents had named him Algernon—which was where the Algie came from—but when people kidded him about it, he only laughed and said the old folks had just been having a little joke. "It was just a gag, boys," he said. "Just a gag."

So now he was slim and limber—he was quite short, too—and his face was smooth and his blue eyes twinkled.

He was on his way home, well after midnight, when he ran into Sophie on the street.

"Hello, Algie," said Sophie.

Algie stopped. Sophie was bright eyed and red lipped, and she had a shape that would have justified anybody in stopping.

"Hello, Sophie," said Algie. "Ain't it kind of late for you to be out alone?"

"I know my way around," said Sophie.

Algie knew that; he hadn't intended the question seriously. Sophie was, he knew, very well informed. She was quick with a wisecrack and quicker with a gun.

"Well," said Algie, "I'll be running along."

"What for?" said Sophie. "I like you. Come along with me."

"No, no," Algie laughed. "Me—I'm nobody. Just a pool-room ball collector. *Me* go with *you!* What is this—a gag?"

Sophie put a dainty hand on his shoulder. "Come on, big boy!" Really Algie

was no larger than Sophie herself. "You needn't be afraid of Parsons. He'll be there. In fact, he'd *like* you to come along. Said so himself! We're just going to pull a little party."

"Parsons said that!" Algie whistled. Parsons was the gentleman who claimed Sophie as his own, and, in his own special line of business—which wasn't at all legal—he was regarded as of considerable importance. "Parsons said that I— Say, I don't believe that."

"I'm telling you," said Sophie, smiling very pleasantly.

She took his arm and there seemed nothing for him to do but go along. It was rather nice, having a dame like Sophie clutching his arm. Still, he would rather it had been a different kind of girl. Algie was sentimental about girls. In a few minutes they were in an apartment—Parsons' apartment.

Parsons himself was there, a large man with a strangely small nose set in the middle of a wide face, and eyes that never flickered. And Parsons was not alone; there was a man named Frank and another named Armand. These two men were not so large, but they needed steel, not muscles, in their work.

"Hello, Algie," Parsons said, grinning. "So Sophie brung you up, huh?"

"Sure." Algie grinned, too, but he was a little nervous. "She—she said there was going to be a little party."

"So there is," said Parsons heartily. "So there is."

"But the rest of the bunch ain't showed up yet, huh?" Algie queried anxiously.



"Out to the car!" Algie urged Felice.

"Not yet. It's a kind of surprise party. see?" said Parsons. "Ain't it, boys?" he asked the two gunmen.

They both said sure, it was a surprise party. But they didn't bother to grin. And Algie wondered what the surprise was going to be, and who was going to be surprised, but he felt that it might be impolite to ask.

"It's going to be fun, with Algie in it, ain't it?" put in Sophie.

"Sure," said Parsons. "Glad you brung him up Sophie. We'll have a nice dame for him, too." He stared at Algie, and then grinned again. "Tell you what you do, Algie. You just go in that next room there and wait a little while. see?"

"In the next room." Algie grinned back, but he didn't feel just right about it. "But why—"

"Right in there," said Parsons.

He took him by the arm and pushed him gently but very firmly through the open door, and then closed the door.

Algie turned and stared at the door. Then he twisted about and looked over the room. It was a bedroom. There was just one light, a small, dim one over in the corner. At first Algie didn't see anything very clearly.

But something about the bed struck him as strange. There was something on it. He walked over to the bed and looked, and at once began to wish that it hadn't been so easy for Sophie to bring him along.

On the bed was a young lady!

She was small, with golden-brown hair. He couldn't tell the color of her eyes, because they were closed. Her face was very pale, and there was something vaguely familiar about it. Her hands were tied behind her back. There was also a rope fastened about her ankles.

She appeared to be asleep. But somehow Algie knew that she was doped.

There was a chair by the bed. Algie sat down in it. He felt very weak, because he was sorry; he was sorry for himself, and sorry for the young lady. It seemed to him that they were both in a bad situation.

He glanced about. There was only one door to the room, the one through which he had just entered. The window was five stories above the sidewalk.

The door opened suddenly. Parsons came in. Frank and Armand followed, and they closed the door again. Parsons seemed quite cheerful. Algie looked up at him, motioned feebly toward the bed.

"What—what is this?" he stammered.

Parsons grinned broadly.

"Just a gag, my boy," he said. "Just a gag."

ALGIE put a hand on the bed and pushed downwards, so that he might get to his feet.

"I—I guess I'll be getting home," he said. "I had a kind of hard day—"

"Oh, I wouldn't go yet, Algie," Parsons protested genially. "The party ain't started yet."

"Sure. Thanks. But I better be going."

He weaved toward the door. But the forms of both Frank and Armand were in the way, and they showed no disposition to move. Indeed, they were looking at him with wooden-faced solemnity, as if they might take it as almost an insult if he tried to push past them.

"Better sit down, Algie," Parsons advised.

Algie went back to his chair. "What—what's the matter with the little dame?" he inquired.

"Oh, she's just waiting," said Parsons. "Sophie thought maybe you would like her for a partner, see? A kind of traveling companion."

"She—she's a swell looker," Algie said. "But I don't even know her."

"I'll make you acquainted," Parsons offered. "Algie, meet Miss Felice Fancone."

Algie was almost as pale as the young lady. "Felice Fancone! My God!"

Now he knew why the face had struck him as familiar. Felice Fancone! Headliner at the Tivoli! The best-known girl in the city—if not in the country!

Then Algie laughed. "She's way out of my class, Parsons! Why, I ain't nothing but a—"

"Class, hell!" Parsons giped him good-naturedly. "You're here, ain't you? And she's here, ain't she? That makes you even." He paused. "At that, I don't think you'd better stay here."

Algie smiled hopefully. "Okay," he said. "I'll be going—"

"With Felice!" said Parsons.

"With Felice? I—I don't get you."

"She's your partner, so you better take her along."

"But I—I—well, she's dead to the world. And, anyhow, I don't think she'd want to travel with me. I'm nothing but a cheap working stiff, and she—"

"I want her to travel with you," Parsons said softly. "I'll go with you, just to see nothing goes wrong. And we better get started. She'll be waking up before long."

"But geez, I—I don't see why you want me—"

But Parsons wasn't paying any more

attention to him. Neither were the others. One of them had pulled a large trunk out from behind the bed. It was empty. They lifted Felice Fancone off the bed and laid her in the trunk, then closed it.

"She'll be okay," Parsons said comfortably. "Couple of air holes in the head end."

Parsons and Armand carried the trunk into the adjoining room and set it down. Algie noticed that Frank stayed close to him, just behind him.

"We're all gonna take a little trip out into the country, Algie. You're going along, see?" Parsons said, calmly. "All you got to do is what you're told. Frank will kind of see that you don't do nothing that might hurt my feelings."

"Sure. Anything you say, Parsons," Algie said. "But I—I ought to go home."

"And quit the party! Say, Felice would be disappointed. Okay, boys."

They left the apartment, and went down the freight elevator, taking the trunk. There didn't seem to be any trouble about it. Armand and Parsons carried the trunk out of the rear door to the parking space at the back of the building. One of Parsons' very large cars was there. The trunk was put in the tonneau, and Parsons himself and Sophie got in with it.

Armand took the wheel. Frank sat in the front seat, on the outside. Algie sat between them.

"Better be quiet, Algie," Parsons cautioned, in his jovial way. "Better be quiet until we get way out in the country, see? No wisecracks."

"No wisecracks," Algie agreed.

The fact was that, for the first time in his life, he couldn't have produced wisecracks at a thousand dollars apiece. He couldn't think of anything to say at all. He was trying to figure out just what sort of a set-up he was in, and getting no answer.

They rode out into the country for at least two hours, took a number of side roads into the foothills, and finally stopped at a small house, old and deserted, concealed by woods. Algie found he had no idea of the direction they had taken, nor where they were.

Inside, some one lit a lamp. Algie looked about. The house was furnished in a dilapidated fashion. There were three rooms; kitchen, living room, and bedroom. They were in the living room.

"Better open the trunk, boys," said Parsons.

FRANK opened the trunk. Algie stood back while the others peered in.

"She's coming to," Parsons said. "Give her a little cold water."

Armand went to the kitchen and returned with a glass of water, which he dashed in the girl's face.

There came a moan from the trunk. In a little while, the girl lifted her head, stared wildly at the others.

"Geez!" muttered Algie. "What a beaut!"

Felice Fancone was, indeed, a beauty; a frail, delicate beauty. But there was nothing fearful about her. She gazed at them in amazement.

"What's the meaning of this?" she demanded, in a steady voice. "Where am I? Who are you?"

"Just a little party for you!" said Parsons.

She glared at him scornfully. "Am I—kidnaped?" she said.

Parsons' laugh was a roar. "Call it that if you want to," he said. "We're just taking you out of circulation for a couple of days, until we can collect some dough."

"Very well," she said quite calmly. "But you'll die for it!"

Parsons grinned broadly. "Okay, baby. But we'll die in the money." He took Algie by the arm, led him into the kitchen. "I'm gonna leave you here with the two dames, Algie," he said. "Lucky guy, ain't you? Two dames."

"Me!" gasped Algie.

"Sure. Me and the boys got business to take care of, so we got to go, see? We're leaving you with Sophie and Felice—a brunette and a goldie! I'll be back later, maybe toward night. There's grub here."

"Leave me here with them." Algie couldn't get over it. "But I—I ain't never been mixed up with this kind of racket.

If I was you, Parsons, I wouldn't trust me—"

"That's why I took you in the deal," Parsons explained. "Because I *can* trust you."

"I—I don't get you." Algie wagged his head sadly. "Why, I ain't in on any deal."

"You're in on this one," Parsons told him. "Suppose you was to go to the cops right now and claim you was forced into this. They just wouldn't believe you, see? They'd figure you was just trying to alibi." He chuckled. "You was seen coming up to my place with Sophie, see?"

"But I—geez, I ain't never—"

"Another thing," Parsons added, "there's some stuff planted back in town now which ties you up with us, see?"

"Well, it ain't right," mumbled Algie. "It just ain't right!"

"And the way it works out," Parsons went on, "I got to leave Sophie here with the dame. I ain't got no one else to handle that end. But I need some one with Sophie, and I had to get some one I could trust. Some one," he added, his eyes narrowing, "that I could trust—*with Sophie!*"

"Sure you can trust me with Sophie," Algie asserted. "She's yours. I don't want her."

"That's all," snapped Parsons.

He walked out to the living room. Algie followed. It all seemed to be very simple. Felice Fancone had already been placed in the bedroom. The windows of the bedroom boarded and the door locked.

Algie observed that the door was substantial. Felice was going to be easy to handle, imprisoned like that.

Algie looked at Sophie, who was saying good-by, very affectionately, to Parsons. Sophie would be the boss now, and it would be simple for her. She was wearing a sort of suit, with a jacket. And Algie knew that under the jacket was a holster, and in the holster was an automatic.

"Okay," Parsons said breezily, as he got ready to leave with Frank and Armand. He grinned at Algie. "You don't look happy, like you usually do," he chided him. "Cheer up."

"Sure," said Algie. "Sure." He tried to smile. "It—it's a great gag."

WHEN Algie was left alone with Sophie, he sat down in a chair at one end of the room. Sophie sat down at the other. Algie was looking at the ceiling. Sophie was looking at Algie.

Presently Sophie got up and took a chair over close by Algie. She laughed. "What are you laughing at?" said Algie gloomily.

"Parsons," said Sophie, and laughed again.

"I don't get you," said Algie. "Why—"

"Because he's a sap," said Sophie. Suddenly there was a more serious expression on her face. "Geez, you're a nice-looking guy, Algie! Did anybody ever tell you about that?"

Algie shot a startled look at her. "Well, I—I don't remember—"

"You know why Parsons glommed you to stay with me—you, instead of some other guy? Because, Algie, he figured you as a punk, see? He figured he could trust you with me!" Sophie's laugh rang out merrily. "He didn't know that I think you're a swell guy, Algie."

"That's nice of you," Algie said un- easily. "But I—well, you—you're Parsons' girl. And Parsons is one of the big boys. He's got dough, and he—"

"He's a monkey!" snapped Sophie. "I hate him!"

Algie flashed a quick glance at her and he was startled again. She was a pretty little thing, and he had never dreamed she could look so savage.

"Now, listen, Sophie," he said. "Parsons is a big guy, and I'm only a—"

"Parsons is about through." Sophie put a hand on Algie's, and stroked it. "Listen, Algie. You know what he's doing? Well, he figures he's through. The boys ain't so strong for him any more. So he figures he'll pull his biggest job and slide out. This snatch is big business. Felice Fancone is engaged to the big multimillionaire, Bert Funston. You know what Parsons wants for her?"

"I wouldn't know," said Algie.

"Two hundred and fifty grand! A quarter million! And he'll get it, too."

Most of the ground work was done before he snatched the girl. Why, Bert Funston would scratch up ten times as much for little baby Felice."

"So would I," said Algie, "if I had it!"

Sophie looked disappointed. She moved her chair very close to his. "Algie," she said softly, "this is our big chance."

"For what? Getting bumped off?"

"For glomming a big bunch of dough and going away together—you and me," Sophie said briskly. "I got it all worked out."

"I don't think I want to hear about it."

Sophie smiled. She seemed confident of her ability to make Algie see things her way. "We got lots of time," she said. "Parsons won't be back for quite a while. You can be thinking it over. You got to go in and feed baby Felice in the other room now. That's part of your job."

"Sure," said Algie. "What—"

"But kiss me first," said Sophie.

"Well, I—all right."

He kissed her.

"Not that way," complained Sophie. "I'll show you."

She showed him. They went into the kitchen together, put some sandwiches up, and returned to the living room. Sophie, although obviously intent upon forming a partnership with Algie, was taking no chances in the meantime. She followed along after him, watchfully.

Sophie carefully unlocked the bedroom door, opened it. Algie stepped in with the sandwiches. Felice Fancone was lying on the bed, still bound up. She was evidently exhausted, and had closed her eyes. Algie stood there for a moment, looking at her. It seemed to him that he had never seen anything so sweet in his life.

"I—I got some grub for you," he said apologetically.

She opened her eyes, gazed at him thoughtfully. "You don't look so bad," she said quietly.

"Well, I guess I'm all right."

"Feed the baby!" Sophie's voice crackled from the doorway. "Just feed her the food and save the candy for me."

Algie smiled at Felice a little sheepishly.

"Sophie's the boss," he said. "She's got the gun."

He put the sandwiches on the bed and went out. Sophie locked the door again.

"I hate that dame," she spat at him.

"I could love her," said Algie, "easy. But I'm only a—"

SOPHIE slapped his face sharply. He stared at her. Then she softened. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I just got sore, because I'm bugs about you."

Algie looked serious. He was so little accustomed to it that his face muscles ached.

"Say," he said firmly, "I ain't your sweetheart. I don't want you, see? You're Parsons' girl, and he can have you."

"Geez, you look swell when you talk like that," Sophie said admiringly. "But you just don't understand. You see, you just got to play with me—or else."

"How do you mean—or else?"

"Don't be dumb. You don't think Parsons figures on letting you and the baby there get away from him, do you?"

Algie stared at her silently for some time. His voice lowered to a whisper. "You—you mean—"

"I mean," said Sophie, "that this is the biggest thing Parsons ever pulled. It is also the hottest. And he wants to make it the last. So he ain't taking no chances on you or Felice telling anybody about it. That's all."

"But cripes, Sophie, you—you wouldn't stick to a play like that, would you? I mean, we could all make a get-away right now! Geez, you wouldn't—"

Sophie laughed. Algie gazed at her in stupefied amazement; it didn't seem possible that anyone so small and pretty could be so vicious.

"In the first place," Sophie said, "I don't want that gorilla! I want you! For once I'm going to get the kind of a guy I want! And if I can't have you—nobody can."

"But—"

"And in the second place, I want the dough. I want you—but you wouldn't be much good to me without the dough."

Algie sat down and thought it over.

"Beautiful!" he murmured. "Beautiful!"

He was thinking of Felice. But Sophie thought he was talking about her, and she smiled. She sat down again, very close to him.

"I'll tell you what we can do, and how to do it. If Parsons gets the dough—which he will—he'll be back here soon after dark again. He figures on croaking both you and baby Felice then. So we got to get the jump on him."

"Tell me," said Algie.

Sophie didn't need any encouragement. "That's what I'm doing. It's this way. Parsons picked you for this job for two reasons, because he figured he could trust you with me, and because he figured you would be scared to do anything except what you're told."

"Sure. but—"

"Okay, Now, we got to be careful, because, if that monkey was to suspect anything—why, he might plug *me*!"

"That," said Algie, "would be tough."

"Parsons has a secret compartment in the back of his car where he'll have the dough—two hundred and fifty grand! He'll drive back here with those two mugs of his, Frank and Armand. One of them will stay in the car, probably Frank, Parsons and Armand will come in here. They'll first go in to take care of Felice—"

"Take care of her?" queried Algie.

"Sure—with a flock of lead. That'll leave you and me out here in this room. I'll scream and pretend you knocked me down. You can grab the key from me and lock them in the bedroom. Then you can take my rod and go after Frank. You plug Frank and I'll beat it out and join you. Then we can hop in the car, and—on our way!"

Algie considered for some time. "But suppose Frank gets *me* instead of me getting him?"

Sophie smiled sweetly. "That would be too bad—for you. But I had to figure it out so that I'd be in the clear whatever happened. She leaned over and kissed him lingeringly. "You ought to be willing to take *some* chances to get me, hadn't you? Me—and the dough."

"I guess so," said Algie.

Sophie pouted. "You don't seem very happy about it," she complained. "And that's one reason I fell for you, because you're always so happy!"

Algie grinned feebly. When he spoke, his voice was barely audible: "Sure," he said. "It's a great gag!"

A FEW hours later, Sophie had Algie feed Felice again. It astonished him that such a frail young lady had shown no signs of hysteria. She said very little to him; merely looked at him out of her gentle eyes, a little reproachfully.

"Geez, she's sweet!" he told himself. "I could fall for her in a minute. I—I guess I'm crazy about her right now! But, hell, I'm only a—"

"What are you groaning about?" Sophie asked him.

"You!" lied Algie. "Ain't you getting sleepy?"

Sophie smiled, and somehow managed to get both affection and cunning into the smile. "I'm crazy about you, Algie," she said. "But I don't trust you—yet. I ain't sleeping until you and me are far, far away. You go ahead and sleep if you want to. It's only morning, and Parsons won't be back until evening."

So Algie lay down and slept fitfully. In his sleep he dreamed about Felice. And in the dream he rescued her from a band of ugly gorillas, led by Parsons, and at the end, with blood streaming down his face, he told her that he loved her, and she kissed him.

Then he woke up and found that it was Sophie who was kissing him. "Geez, Sophie, don't—"

He was interrupted by the sound of a car grinding to a stop outside. Sophie moved away from him very quickly and Algie sat up.

The door opened. Parsons came in with Armand. Sophie ran and kissed him. "Did you get it, big boy?" she asked.

"Did I get it!" Parsons grinned. Algie could see that he was keyed up to a high pitch. His eyes were points of glittering light. "Did I get it!"

"Swell," said Sophie.

She glanced quickly at Algie, from around Parsons' arm.

"How's baby Felice?" said Parsons.

"Sick," said Sophie. "Better take a look at her."

Parsons leered and wagged his head at Armand. They walked toward the bedroom. Sophie took out her key, unlocked the door. Parsons and Armand walked in, leaving Sophie and Algie in the living room.

Sophie darted a look at Algie. He knew what it meant. It meant: "Now's the time. They're going to croak Felice now! You shut the door, slap me, and take my key and gun away from me, lock the door, run out, and get Frank—if you can!"

Sophie had the key in her hand.

Suddenly Algie snatched at the key, kicked the door shut, locked it. Sophie smiled encouragingly. She screamed as he slapped her face and took her automatic.

"He's got my rod!" she yelled at Parsons through the door.

Parsons was rattling the doorknob inside.

"Sure I've got it!" Algie shouted. "And I'm gonna use it, too!"

He stuck it against Sophie's side. Sophie didn't understand. Her eyes told him to hurry out to Frank. But she had never seen Algie's face so unsmiling.

"If you think I'm gonna let 'em croak Felice," he said savagely, "you're nuts! Get out! Walk ahead of me!"

She walked in front of him to the door. He told her to open it, and she did. The car was down by the corner of the house. Frank, whose orders would be to stay with the car, had left the seat and was standing by the running board, peering through the darkness.

"Walk toward him!" Algie ordered Sophie.

He was grasping her shoulder from behind with one hand, directing the gun at Frank with the other. They were within a few feet of Frank before the gunman realized that something was really wrong.

"Throw your gun on the ground," Algie told Frank.

Frank grinned slowly. His hand went to his coat pocket, came out with the gun. But he did not let loose of it; instead, he swung it around toward Algie.

"Don't shoot! Frank, please don't shoot!" cried Sophie.

"He won't!" said Algie, and fired.

SOMETHING plopped against Frank's windpipe. He dropped his gun to the ground, and followed it himself. Algie, keeping Sophie covered, stooped and picked up the gun.

Frank was quite motionless.

"Geez!" murmured Sophie. "Swell shot, Algie. Everything's clear now. Let's go!"

"We'll go," said Algie, grimly, "back to the house."

The gun was again pressed against Sophie's side. Sophie hesitated only a moment.

"I never thought you'd be like that," she complained bitterly.

They returned to the living room. Parsons was crashing against the door.

"Listen, you mug!" Algie yelled. "Frank is croaked! And I got Sophie covered! I could easy beat it right now—with the dough!"

The crashing on the bedroom side of the door stopped.

"Okay," grumbled Parsons. "What's the answer?"

"You get the ropes off Felice," Algie ordered. "Let her come out through the door. I'll unlock the door and—"

"And you beat it, anyhow!" snarled Parsons.

"When I unlock the door," Algie pointed out, "you can come out, too!"

Parsons seemed to be considering for a moment. "Okay," he said.

There was a rustling in the room for a little while. Sophie was glaring at Algie in a rage. But Algie kept a cool eye on her.

"She's free!" Parsons called presently.

"Yeah?" said Algie. "Is that right, Felice?"

It thrilled him to be calling her Felice.

"Yes," said the girl. "I'm right here by the door."

"All right," said Algie. "I'm going to

unlock the door, and open it a little for you to come out. When you come through—come fast!"

"All right," Felice said.

Algie looked at Sophie. "You are going to unlock that door," he told her.

"Me? Why—"

"I'm giving you the key, see? And I'm backing away to the front door there. But I'm keeping you covered, and when I say the word, you unlock the door."

"I—I could kill you!" Sophie gasped.

"Not now," said Algie. I've got two guns now—Frank's and yours! And I'm using 'em both. Another thing—when Felice steps through the door, you step right into it, so that you keep Parsons and Armand from coming through too quick!"

"And suppose I don't?"

"I'll plug you," said Algie, "sure as hell!"

He cautiously retreated toward the front door, until he could feel his back against the door jamb. The door was open and a cold night breeze chilled him.

Sophie was watching him intently.

"Okay!" he said.

She turned the key, pulled the door open a little. Felice Fancone appeared through the doorway, moving as gracefully as if she was moving on to the stage, and fearlessly.

"Run!" shouted Algie.

She sprinted toward him.

Almost at once, Parsons and Armand started to push after her. Frantically Sophie billowed forward, trying to hold them back.

"Out to the car!" Algie urged Felice, as she reached him.

He stood his ground while she ran past. Sophie was hurled backwards. Parsons and Armand broke into the room, guns out. Parsons' face was livid. He didn't stop for questions. His gun spat flame at once. The woodwork just above Algie's head was splintered.

Algie fired—missed.

SOPHIE was down on her knees, clinging to Parsons' legs. "I don't want to die!" she screamed.

Parsons cursed and kicked her aside. He fired again. Pain shot through Algie's left shoulder, and he was swung half about. He steadied himself, took aim, fired.

He missed Parsons, but the shot did something to Armand. The gunman, just getting ready to shoot, looked surprised for a moment, then, without a word, sank down at Parsons' feet.

Algie felt as if he, too, were going to sink. But he knew Felice would be waiting for him, out there in the car. And somehow he had to get Felice home. He steadied his arm again, just as Parsons snapped the trigger twice, in quick succession. Algie knew that he had been hit, but he couldn't tell where, because nothing seemed to make much of an impression on him any more.

It appeared to him that he was almost blind. Parsons' big figure, there across the room, was just a blur. But he took aim at that blur deliberately.

He heard Sophie screaming again, screaming at the top of her voice. But the scream was smothered very soon.

It was smothered because the blur which had been Parsons had pitched over on top of her.

Algie knew, then, that he could go. But it seemed to be difficult. His head was weaving about in the air like the top of a mast out on a rough sea. His legs seemed to have no connection with the rest of him.

"Come," said a gentle voice, very close to him.

He knew it was Felice, although he couldn't see her. He had told her to go out to the car, but evidently she hadn't. They were out in the night air now, and she was walking with him, her arm about him, and it was very sweet.

"Geez," he said, "you're beautiful! Beautiful!"

She was talking to him: "I'll drive—"

"No," he said, "I'll drive. I got to drive you—home!"

He felt his hand on the cold wheel. And then he started to dream. The dream was very much like the one he had had

before. He had just rescued Felice from Parsons and a lot of gorillas. Blood was streaming down his face. Felice was bending over him, and he was telling her very boldly that he loved her.

And then he woke up. Some one *had* kissed him. It was Felice!

He was lying in a bed. Felice was bending over him. He was awake and he knew that it was true. She smiled at him.

"Why did you do this—for me?" she asked softly.

It was hard work, but Algie smiled. Now was the time. Now was the time

for telling her about how much he loved her.

Then he noticed that there was a young man with her—a tall young man with a grave, sympathetic face. He was standing very close to Felice, holding her hand.

"Why," she said again, "did you do this—for me?"

Algie's arm was weak, but he waved it with a brave care-free motion. His voice was weak, too, but the words came out of his mouth through smiling lips:

"It was just a gag, lady. Just—a—gag!"

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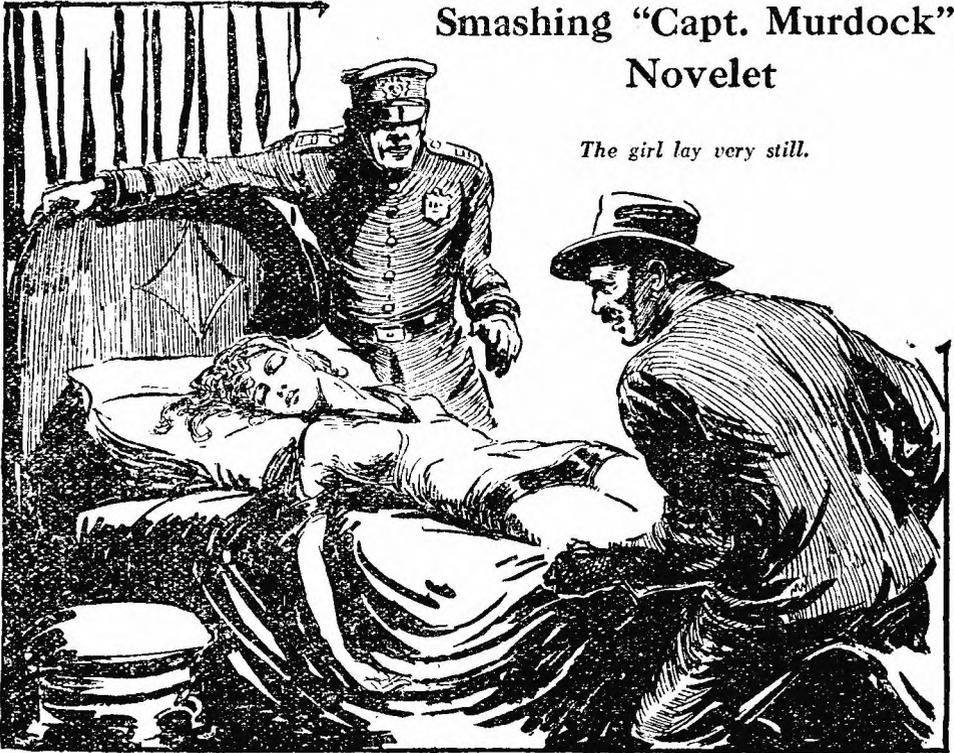
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The man from Scotland Yard interested Captain John Murdock. Hard-boiled Murdock had his own way of doing things. He didn't care whose toes he stepped on. Murder was murder. And noble toes were the same as any other to Murdock. But Murdock didn't figure on the clues that led to—

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Smashing "Capt. Murdock" Novelet

The girl lay very still.



By **CARL McK. SAUNDERS**

Author of "Terror Tavern," "Hell's Holiday," etc.

CHAPTER I

THE MAN FROM SCOTLAND YARD

HE was tall and slender and looked about forty years old. His face was thin. He crossed the room to Captain John Murdock, put out his hand, and said: "My name's Irving Cutter."

The chief of detectives nodded and shook his hand. "Sit down, Mr. Cutter," he invited.

Mr. Cutter took a chair and crossed his legs carefully so as not to disarrange the knifelike crease in his trousers. He reached into his pocket and took out a folder, which he passed over to Murdock.

"You might like to look at this," he suggested. "Of course, I hope you'll keep it confidential."

John Murdock glanced at the papers in the folder and passed it back. "Scotland Yard, huh?"

The man smiled slightly. "Yes, Inspector Cutter of Scotland Yard. I am here on a vacation. I had hoped to be able to spend a few weeks just having a good time, forgetting all about my work, but something has happened to worry me and so I have come to you."

Murdock grinned. "Vacations have a way of going back on you. What's wrong?"

"Perhaps nothing. Perhaps a great deal. I arrived in Central City last night and stopped off here because an old friend of mine is visiting here. I'm sure you've heard of him—Sir Basil Thornsby."

"Yeah. He's at the President Hotel."

"I knew that and, of course, I went there and gave him a ring. He wasn't in so I had dinner and then went out to take a walk. During the course of that walk I saw some one else I knew. A man whose correct name is Arthur Tomlinson but who is better known to us as 'Soho Charlie.' Does that mean anything to you?"

Murdock shook his head, frowning.

"Soho Charlie," Cutter went on, "isn't just like he sounds. That is, he isn't just an ordinary thug. He's a rather polished gentleman, clever, educated, accomplished. In fact, he's so clever that we have never been able to apprehend him, although we believe him guilty of many crimes, some of them quite terrible. In fact, he's more or less a myth so far as the Yard is concerned. We have no accurate description of him.

"That may sound like a contradiction when I have told you that I saw him and recognized him last night. It is. The man I am sure is Soho Charlie has never been positively identified as that man. The only accurate information we have is his fingerprints.

"What does he look like?"

"He's of about average size, weight about twelve stone, has light brown hair, brown eyes, dresses well and lives well. That is, he always stops at the best hotels and moves in the best circles."

"Not a very easy person to find. Your description would fit a thousand men."

Cutter nodded. "I realize it."

"Why do you suppose he's here in Central City?"

"My guess would be that he's here because Sir Basil is here. Sir Basil, as you doubtless know, is a very wealthy man. Among other precious stones, he owns the Paladin, a diamond that is reputed to be worth close to twenty-five thousand pounds. I happen to know that he brought that stone with him to this country. It's our business to know things like that. And when I saw Soho Charlie on the street last night I decided to report to you."

"Have you told Sir Basil Thornsby?"

"No, I rang him again this morning but he had gone out. I came at once to you."

John Murdock got to his feet. "Let's go over to the President Hotel," he suggested.

THE manager of the President Hotel wasn't happy to see John Murdock. The President was Central City's newest establishment. The very hint of trouble that would bring in the police was exceedingly distasteful.

The manager said: "Sir Basil Thornsby is out. When he went out, I do not know, but I think that your request for permission to visit his room is outrageous. He is our guest and the room, while he is here, is his own. If you wish to enter it, you must see him."

Murdock nodded. "I don't blame you for feeling that way. It's just that I am a little worried. The floor clerk on the seventeenth floor doesn't remember Sir Basil's leaving. She doesn't have his key and it wasn't turned in at the desk."

"Lots of people carry their keys with them," the manager put in.

"There's no answer to his phone," Murdock went on, "and I have the feelin' that something may be wrong."

"Ridiculous!" the manager protested.

The detective shrugged and looked over at Irving Cutter.

"I'm a guest here," Cutter put in, "and I don't think that Mr. Murdock's request is unreasonable. He is not asking to search the room. He is just suggesting that you look in the room to see that

everything is in order. I know Sir Basil, and his heart isn't in good condition. He might be ill and need medical attention. It might be well to have a look."

The manager reached for a phone. Into it he said: "Send Harwood to me." Then he explained: "Mr. Harwood is our house detective."

Sam Harwood was young. He looked efficient and capable. He nodded to Murdock when he came into the room and said to the manager: "You wanted to see me?"

The manager nodded. "We have a guest on the seventeenth floor by the name of Sir Basil Thornsby. This gentleman, Mr. Cutter, is a friend of his. You know Mr. Murdock. They both seem to feel that Sir Basil may be ill and have asked us to open his room. I want you to go along with us."

Harwood said: "Okay." He led the way to the elevator and down the hall to Room 1742. He knocked on the door. When there wasn't any answer, he took a key out of his pocket and unlocked the door. The four men followed him into the room, stopping just inside the door, their eyes fastened on the bed.

For just a moment they stood there motionless, then Murdock spoke. "Get a doctor," he said to the manager. "The rest of you stay where you are. Don't touch a thing."

Murdock walked forward to the bed. He stood there, looking down at the body sprawled across it. One arm and leg hung over the edge. The face was contorted and purple, the eyes, open, seemed almost ready to pop from their sockets. The man was dead. A heavy red cord was twisted around his neck, almost buried in a deep fold of flesh. The pajama coat was torn and rumpled bed clothing gave evidence of a struggle, but there was no other disorder evident in the room.

Irving Cutter and Sam Harwood moved forward to stand at Murdock's shoulder. Harwood whistled and said: "Won't the boss love this." His eyes swept around the room.

Cutter said softly: "I was afraid of this. If I can be of any help—"

Murdock grunted. He went to the tele-

phone and called his office, reported the murder and asked for a photographer and the Bertillon man. Just as he finished, the manager came back with a doctor. The doctor took one look at the body and shook his head.

"It's a case for the coroner," he said shortly. "The man looks like he's been dead for hours."

A hand tugged at the detective's arm, and Murdock turned to face the manager of the hotel. The manager seemed a little pale. He said: "I—I—hope—that is—the papers—the publicity—"

"Tough break," Murdock grunted. "But you can't quite call it heart failure. I don't know how much pull your stockholders have got, but you better get after them right away. This case will be spread all over the papers so big you'll think they're your private house organs gone sour on you."

The manager scurried away.

The photographer came and took pictures, the fingerprint man took pictures, the coroner arrived, examined the body and called an undertaker.

Murdock prowled over the room. He talked to bell boys and to the floor clerk, the desk clerk, half a dozen reporters, the elevator men, and the people in the rooms on either side of Sir Basil's room.

He learned that Sir Basil had been at the President Hotel for three days, that so far as was known, he had had only one visitor, a man whom everyone described differently, but who had spent only a few moments in Sir Basil's room the evening before.

He discovered that Sir Basil was a rather quiet man, that he spent most of the day out of his room and that he usually retired early, that he had had dinner in the hotel the evening before with a woman whom everyone agreed was beautiful but whom no one knew.

She was tall, and dark, and young. She had left immediately after dinner, Sir Basil putting her into a taxi and going at once to his room. It was an hour later that he had been visited by the man. It was about two hours later that he had been killed, according to the best guess the coroner could make.

Going over this information with Bert Andrews and Irving Cutter at lunch, Cutter said: "I should have given him a ring last night, but I knew he didn't like to be disturbed in the evening. He always got grouchy after dinner. It was about five when I tried to reach him."

"You didn't lunch at the hotel?" Murdock asked.

Cutter shook his head. "No, I should probably have seen him if I had. I ate in my room and then took my walk. I got back at eight-thirty, dressed, and went to a cinema. It was out at eleven and then I went to a place called the Silver Slipper. I'm sure they'll remember me there. I was all alone. I think I was the only man who was alone all evening. I didn't leave until two-thirty. Sir Basil was killed before that."

Murdock nodded. "I'll check that just as a matter of form. You can understand."

"I expect you to," Cutter insisted. "Then, I expect you to let me help out in any way that I can."

After lunch Murdock went down to his office. He sent Jimmie Spence out to check Cutter's alibi. Andrews he assigned to the task of locating the taxi driver who had taken the girl home the evening before, and getting a line on the girl. He put three more men to work trying to discover how Sir Basil had spent the three days he had been in Central City, sent a wire to Scotland Yard, and spent an uncomfortable fifteen minutes with the police commissioner.

Then, because all of the work of his department wouldn't stop while he worked on one particularly hard case, he went over the reports on his desk and made other assignments.

CHAPTER II

THE STRANGLER

BERT ANDREWS called in at four-thirty. "I've had a bit of luck, chief," he reported. "Located the taxi driver and he remembered where he took the girl. She lives in a walk-up apartment over a grocery store on West Thir-

ty-ninth. The number is 2062. She just came in a few minutes ago and she looked worried."

"Stick around," Murdock ordered. "I'll be right out." He got his car and drove out there. Andrews was chinning with a man across from the grocery. When Murdock drove up, he left the man and came over to Murdock's car.

"She's up there now and I think she's alone. She's looked out of the window a couple of times, but I don't think she's spotted me."

Murdock got out and said: "I'm goin' up. If I need help, I'll yell."

He walked up the stairway and knocked on the door. He heard rapid footsteps hurry up to the door, hesitate, then tiptoe away. He knocked again and said: "Special delivery."

The footsteps came back, a lock turned and the door opened a crack. Murdock shoved against it and got into the room. The girl gave a little cry and backed away. She raised the gun she was holding and pointed it at the detective. It shook in her hand. She was pale and her breath was coming fast.

Murdock said: "Before you shoot me you might tell me what it's all about." He raised his hands and tried a smile. The gun in the girl's hands steadied.

"Stay where you are," she ordered in a low voice.

The detective didn't move. "My name's John Murdock," he said. "I'm chief of detectives here in Central City. If you look outside, across the street you will see one of my men. When that gun goes off, he will be halfway across the street, and up those stairs before the echo dies out. He'll call it murder, sister. They burn people for that in this state, even good-looking girls like you."

The girl shook her head. "It's a lie. You're not the police."

"Then, who am I?"

The girl frowned. She said: "Turn around."

Murdock turned around. He heard her come up to him, felt her press the gun into his back, felt her hand sliding into his pocket for his own gun. She took it and backed away.

"Now sit down in that chair over there," she instructed.

Murdock went over and sat down as directed. He lowered his hands. "What's your name?" he asked.

"What's yours?" the girl snapped back. "And what do you want of me?"

"I told you my name was Murdock, sister. I'm a detective. Maybe you've read the early afternoon papers. If you did you know that a man named Sir Basil Thornsby was murdered last night. Well, you had dinner with him yesterday. I want to know why, what your relationship to him may be, and what you know of the murder, who you expected, and why you drew a gun on me? Will that do for a starter?"

"How do I know you're a detective?" the girl countered.

Murdock reached into his coat pocket. He took out a handful of papers and letters and tossed them to her. They fell on the floor.

"Look those over, sister," he directed.

The girl looked at them. She said: "I thought detectives always had stars."

"I've got a star, too," Murdock grinned. "But it's tarnished. It doesn't sparkle. I never have time to take care of it."

The girl lowered her gun, but didn't relax her vigilance.

"How did you find me?" she asked.

Murdock told her and she nodded. "I—I thought the taxi driver might remember where he brought me. And if you could find me, others could, too."

Murdock grunted. "What's it all about?"

"He's my uncle."

"Who?"

"Sir Basil Thornsby. He came here to Central City especially to see me. It's the old story of the girl who married below her station and was cut off by her family. My mother did that. Both she and my father are dead. I guess Sir Basil, when he inherited the title, didn't worry much about what had happened to mother. I don't suppose he would have ever looked us up if he hadn't discovered that he needed mother's signature to a paper."

The girl stopped and Murdock said: "Yeah, well, go on."

"About two months ago a lawyer came to me and asked me to sign something. He told me it was something about the old estate over in England. He didn't seem to know much about it except that I would get five thousand dollars if I signed up. I—I got suspicious and refused to sign. Then two weeks ago I got a cable from Sir Basil saying that he was coming to visit America and that he would look me up. He called me yesterday and asked me to have dinner with him. I did and then I came back here. That's all I know about the—the murder."

"But what happened at dinner?"

"Nothing—that is, he did mention the paper. He was going to see me today. He said it would be well worth while for me to sign it."

"Did he tell you what it was about?"

"He said that it concerned some property that had been left by his father to be divided equally among the children or among the children's descendants. There was a chance to sell it, but it couldn't be sold if all the children didn't agree. They had all agreed but my mother. Since she was dead it was up to me."

John Murdock nodded. "Did your uncle seem at all worried?"

The girl shook her head.

"Then why were you so worked up when I came in? Why the gun?"

"I—well, I guess it's just nerves. The murder and all. Then I've felt for days like someone was following me, spying on me. I—it's given me the jitters."

"I don't understand just what you mean?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "I—I can't tell you any better than that. There isn't anything definite. Just a feeling."

Murdock got to his feet. He went to the window and signaled to Andrews. Turning to the girl, he said: "Of course, you'll have to expect to put up with a little inconvenience because of your connection with the murdered man. As a starter I'd like to have you come to dinner at the President Hotel again tonight."

"You mean—alone?"

"No, there's a man here in town from Scotland Yard, the house detective of the President Hotel, and one or two others that I'd like to include in the party. It'll be in a private room. If you have a girl friend, call her up and get her to come along."

"It'll be—"

"It'll be a nice party. Don't worry. How about it?"

The girl nodded. "I'll come."

There was a knock on the door and Murdock admitted Bert Andrews. He introduced the detective to the girl, but he had to ask the girl her name first. It was Alice Tait. Murdock told Andrews about the dinner party.

"While I'm arranging it," he said, "I want you to stick around here. Bring Miss Tait with you at seven. If she gets a girl friend, pick her up, too."

Andrews said: "Okay, chief."

To the girl, Murdock said: "He's a nice man, Miss Tait. He'll look after you, an' he don't like women."

THERE were six who sat down to dinner that evening at seven in a private dining room of the President Hotel. John Murdock and Bert Andrews of the detective force, Sam Harwood, the house detective, Irving Cutter, the man from Scotland Yard, Alice Tait and a girl friend whom she introduced as Mary Simpson.

Before the dinner John Murdock had said to the men: "I want this to be a perfectly harmless affair. I don't care if there is a little talk about the murder, but the Tait girl isn't to be grilled. If necessary, we'll do that later. She has a hunch that she's being followed and she is frightened. If she's connected with the murder, I'm sure she wasn't alone in it, and if some one is after her, this will hurry them up. I've men in the lobby and outside. When she leaves she'll be followed, to see where she goes and to give her protection."

Sam Harwood told Murdock that he was going Hollywood. "It's like a detective drama. Only trouble is you haven't got a lot of suspects present."

Cutter didn't comment except to say that he'd be interested in seeing the girl.

It was a nice meal. The food was good. Mary Simpson laughed a lot and cracked jokes with Harwood. Cutter talked to Alice Tait. Murdock ate his food with evident enjoyment and watched the others. Andrews watched, too.

It was just after the desert that it happened, so suddenly and so unexpectedly that the men at the table didn't have a chance. The door to the room opened and three men stepped inside. Masks covered their faces and they held guns. They didn't give any command. None was necessary. Mary Simpson saw the men first and uttered a little scream. She got to her feet and the other five at the table rose, too. The men elevated their hands.

One of the men stood at the door and the other two advanced into the room. Again Mary Simpson screamed, this time louder, and one of the men sprang forward and slapped her across the face. She staggered back and fell to the floor.

That was enough for Murdock. He shouted: "Bert!" And with that shout, he went into action. His fist snapped out and caught the man who had struck Mary Simpson on the side of the head. He caught a glimpse of Andrews springing at the other man. He heard a shot and then the lights went out.

The fight that followed couldn't have lasted very long. Murdock climbed on the man he had hit, threw him to the floor, and worked on him. He got up and charged at two struggling figures at the door. A fist grazed his jaw and another connected. The three of them went down.

To the left Murdock heard Cutter's voice cry out: "I'll get him, and he heard a door bang and the sounds of a fight in the connecting room. He got his hands on the throat of the man at the door and shook him like a rat. A voice said in his ear: "I can handle him," and he recognized that voice as Sam Harwood's.

He let go and got to his feet, found the light switch and turned it on. He saw the two girls clinging together in the center of the room. Andrews lay on his back, his eyes closed, his shirt dyed red. One man, the first one Murdock had

jumped, was getting to his feet, Harwood was sitting on the other.

In two swift strides, Murdock reached that man who was arising. He reached out and pulled him erect, then drove his fist into the man's face as hard as he could swing it. The man's body seemed to be lifted from the floor. He went down and lay as he fell, knocked cold.

"That's for Bert," Murdock said through his teeth. "Maybe you didn't do it, but you were in the crowd that did."

Then the detective looked up and over to the door to the adjoining room. It was closed. He had heard a man running into that room and heard Cutter cry out that he would get him. He had heard sounds of a struggle in there. He made his way to the door and pulled on the knob, but the door was locked.

Harwood said: "It's got a night latch. Maybe it slipped or was set to lock. That door was ajar during the meal."

Murdock made no answer but raced for the door to the hall. He stepped outside and hurried to the door to the next room. That door was locked, too, and although he crashed his shoulders against it, the door held. People were approaching from both ends of the hall, attracted by sounds of the fight, but Murdock didn't pay any attention to them. His body bounded away from the door, then crashed into it again.

Alice Tait came up to him and pushed a key into his hand. "I got it from Mr. Harwood," she explained.

Murdock took the key and unlocked the door. He barged inside. The lights were on and a body lay on the floor in the middle of the room. He reached the body, rolled it face up, and muttered a curse. It was Irving Cutter. There was a bruise on his temple, but it wasn't that which made the detective swear.

Cutter's face was purple, his mouth was open and his tongue was protruding. Around his neck was a heavy piece of red cord, twisted tight, choking him. It was the same type of cord as had been around the neck of Sir Basil Thornsby.

The detective got out his knife and cut the cord. He started giving Cutter artificial respiration. In a moment or two

Cutter started to gasp, making horrible noises in his throat. A man came up and said that he was a doctor. He took Murdock's place, and the detective went out and sent away the people in the hall.

Harwood had the two men manacled when the detective got back to the other room, and the two girls were standing near the house physician, who was working over Andrews.

"How bad is it, doc?" Murdock wanted to know.

The doctor shrugged. "Depends on his condition. He ought to pull through. I've sent for an ambulance to take him to the hospital."

Murdock nodded. He said to Alice Tait: "Sorry about this." But he wasn't thinking about her. He was wondering who the man was who had almost killed Cutter and who had got away.

Cutter was taken to his room and Murdock assigned a man to guard him. He was conscious, but couldn't talk above a whisper. The two prisoners were taken down to the jail. After an argument, Murdock persuaded Mary Simpson and Alice Tait to spend the night in the hotel where his men could be on guard.

Then, thoroughly disgusted with himself, he went back to headquarters. He didn't have to try to figure out the next step. There were two prisoners to work on. He was satisfied that they could tell him something of the man who had escaped, if they wanted to. And he thought he could make them want to talk.

CHAPTER III

THE RED CORD

JIMMIE SPENCE came into Murdock's office just after the chief of detectives returned.

"I checked that alibi of Cutter's," he reported. "I won't swear I couldn't crack it, but on the surface, it looks all right."

"What do you mean, crack it?" Murdock asked.

"Well, they remember him from my description at the Silver Slipper. They said he was still there after two, but he may have left for a while. It's a cover charge place. The orchestra goes on the

air for a couple of half-hour spots, twelve to twelve-thirty and one to two-thirty.

"They run long dances in between, but at those hours the dances are half an hour long. They darken the room and most people dance. The waiter said Cutter danced with some of the hostesses.

"Maybe he wasn't always dancing. It's less than ten minutes by taxi from the Silver Slipper to the President Hotel."

Murdock grunted. He said: "Put Eastman on it. Let him go after the hat-check girl, the doorman, and the taxis. He likes that kind of a job. I've got something else for you."

Spence went away and came back later. Murdock sent him downstairs. "Townsend's got a couple men down there, working on them," he said. "They're the men we arrested at the President tonight. The third man, the one who got away, shot Andrews and wrapped a cord around Cutter's neck. They've got to talk. Call me when they start breakin'."

John Murdock went on with routine work for almost half an hour before Jimmie Spence burst into his office again.

"Come on downstairs, chief," he called from the doorway.

Murdock looked up. "They ready to talk this quick?"

Spence shook his head, a queer look on his face. "They'll never talk," he blurted out. "I—I don't get it."

"What!" Murdock exclaimed.

"They're dead."

"They're what?" John Murdock got up and hurried for the door. Spence didn't say any more. They went down into the basement and into the room that they called the hell hole. It was a bare, plain room, equipped only with a single chair and a large light. Two detectives were kneeling at the body of a man sprawled out on the floor.

"Well, what the hell happened?" Murdock barked from the door.

Townsend looked up, got to his feet. "Nothing, chief," he said slowly. "We were going easy on him, taking our time. We hadn't touched him at all. I noticed

that his face was getting white, but that ain't unusual. I thought he was scared. Then he started breathing hard and suddenly keeled over. I figured it was just a faint and sent Ed, here, for some water. We pitched a bucketful on him but he didn't stir. Then I got down to lift him up. He was awfully limp and I felt for his pulse. He didn't have any."

Murdock scowled down at the dead man. "Where's the other fellow?" he asked.

"I went past his cell on the way upstairs, chief," Spence put in. "He's spread out on the floor just like this man."

Murdock got down on his knees and looked at the man on the floor. He said to Spence: "Get the coroner. We've got to have an autopsy and have it tonight. These men didn't die of heart failure. It can't be anything but poison."

Spence went away and Murdock asked Townsend: "Get anything out of them?"

"Just their names and they probably lied about that. Otherwise they just told us to go to hell."

"What were the names?"

"Al Cortez and Mike Silva."

"Fingerprint 'em and wire to Washington for identification," Murdock ordered. "An' tell that coroner to rush the autopsy. We haven't got time to wait for an order. Tell him I said to do it tonight or I'd knock his ears down."

Murdock went back upstairs and ordered a man to bring him the things that they had taken from the two men. There wasn't much of interest in the things they brought him, but on a piece of paper that had been in Silva's pocket, there was a telephone number. Murdock called a girl he knew at the telephone company, one of the night girls who occasionally helped him out. He asked her to identify the number and she did. It was listed under the name Cully Bryan.

That bit of information made Murdock feel better. Cully Bryan was a budding racketeer with a lot of ambition and a cool head. He was a power

on the East Side. Murdock didn't like him and welcomed the chance to go after him. For several weeks he had been thinking that it was about time to clip Bryan's wings. He decided that this would be a good night.

Spence came in and said that the coroner was busy. "He don't like it much, but I reminded him of a couple things he overlooked once," Spence said. "It'll be okay if there is any poison in their stomachs."

MMURDOCK grunted. "Get your hat, Jimmie. We're goin' places an' we may do things."

Jimmie Spence grinned. "Suits me. Who's the victim?"

"Cully Bryan."

The two detectives located Cully Bryan in a gambling joint that he had just opened. The doorman scowled as they entered, and a half dozen men spotted around the room seemed suddenly to lose interest in everything else. Bryan arose from the table where he was sitting and came forward. He was short and heavy. There was a smile on his rosy face. He stuck out his hand and when Murdock didn't take it, pushed forward one finger to poke the detective in the ribs.

"How do you like it?" he asked.

John Murdock shrugged. "It's rotten, Cully. Better shut down."

The smile didn't leave Cully Bryan's face. "That an order?" he asked.

"No. Not yet," Murdock answered. "I want to talk to you about something else."

Bryan nodded. He led the way to a door across the room, opened it, and went through it to an office beyond. The two detectives followed him, Spence kicking the door shut with his heel.

Bryan sat down at a desk. He opened a box, took out a cigar, and stuck it in his mouth. He struck a match, lit the cigar, and flicked the match to the carpet. "What's bothering you?" he suggested.

"Know Al Cortez an' Mike Silva?" Murdock asked.

Cully Bryan drew on his cigar. He

puffed out the smoke, shrugging his shoulders. "I ain't sure. I know lots of people."

"Well, if you know them, you'll be wantin' to send flowers," Murdock went on. "They're both dead — passed out down at headquarters."

Bryan straightened. He took the cigar out of his mouth and said: "Down at headquarters?"

Murdock nodded. "Yeah. But it wasn't lead, Cully. It was poison."

With his left hand the gangster started drumming on the desk. He kept his eyes fastened on the detective's face. After a while he said: "Poison—that's funny—poison."

Murdock still didn't speak.

"It might have been an accident," Bryan suggested.

The detective laughed. "Sure. It might have been suicide, too. With one other man that had just attempted a holdup. They had been caught. That other man I want for murder. They could have told who he was if they hadn't died. Accidents don't happen that convenient."

"Tell me more about it," Bryan requested.

Murdock shook his head. "Tell me about them."

"They were just a couple of the boys."

"Where did they live? Who did they pal around with?"

"I don't know."

"You better talk now, Cully," Murdock snapped.

The gangster stood up, a sneer crossing his face. "I don't even know them," he said shortly, starting for the door.

Murdock reached out and grabbed him by the shoulder, whirled him around.

"Spit it out, Cully," he ordered. "I want to know about those two men."

Bryan twisted free. "Keep your dirty hands off me."

Murdock laughed. He released his hold and said: "All right, Jimmie, bop him."

Spence stepped forward and his fist, traveling in a short arc, landed full on Cully Bryan's nose. The gangster staggered back, tripped, and fell. He twisted

around and pulled a gun from his pocket. Spence kicked it out of his hand, picked it up, and dropped it on the desk.

"Good work, Jimmie," Murdock appraised.

Bryan sat up and wiped at the blood on his face with a silk handkerchief. He cursed the two detectives, threatened them. Murdock took a pair of handcuffs out of his pocket, snapped them on Bryan's wrists, and pulled him to his feet.

SPENCE opened the door and the three of them stepped out into the room. An immediate silence fell over the place.

Murdock said, in a loud voice: "Go right ahead, folks. "We'll be back for some more of you later on. Now all that we want is the owner."

The men spotted around the room who had been so interested in the detective's arrival, hesitated, looked from one to another and back at the three men crossing the room. But no one offered any immediate opposition. Murdock and Spence got Cully Bryan outside, dumped him into their car, and drove off.

John Murdock, who was driving, didn't head back for the city hall. Instead, he turned left and made for the open country, and Cully Bryan, revived by the night air and somewhat cooled off, seemed to realize quite suddenly that he wasn't just under arrest. He grabbed at the detective's arm.

"Where are you taking me?" he demanded.

"Watch him, Jimmie," Murdock ordered. "If he doesn't shut his mouth, bop him again."

Spence said: "Hey, you. Shut up." He shook his fist in the gangster's face.

Murdock headed the car out into the country. He found a dark, deserted road, drove down it for a short distance, then stopped the car, and got out.

"Looks like a good place, Jimmie," he commented. "Kick him out."

Jimmie Spence shoved Cully Bryan out of the car and followed him, keeping hold of his arm.

Noises came from Bryan's throat. He choked over words. Finally he managed to gasp: "My—my God! You can't do this. Listen—what do you want? What do you—" His voice trailed off.

"Shall I let him have it, chief?" Spence asked.

Murdock nodded. "Right in the guts."

Like a frenzied man, Cully Bryan turned on Murdock. He clawed at him, whimpering, pleading. His voice kept getting louder—more shrill.

"I'll talk," he screamed. "I'll talk—you can't—my God—"

"Well, then—talk," Murdock snapped.

Bryan started talking. He told things about Cortez and Silva, useless, everyday things that the detectives had already half-guessed. They were new men—had come to Central City from Chicago. There was another man who usually hung around with them, a man named Slim Jensen. He had been with them earlier in the evening—where they lived Bryan didn't know—he thought at the Hall Hotel.

Finally Murdock cut him off. "This isn't gettin' us nothin' Jimmie. Let's finish it up. We gotta tie those men up with the affair at the President Hotel."

Bryan said: "President Hotel? Isn't that the place where there's a dick named Harwood?"

"Yeah? So what?" Murdock grunted.

"Well—I saw him with this man Slim along about noon today."

"What's that?" the detective cut in. "Where?"

"Near my old place on Custer Street."

Cully Bryan went on. He started using his imagination. He said that they had looked suspicious, that they had been whispering together, that Harwood was a crook.

"Shove him back in the car, Jimmie," Murdock said, as Bryan's statements started getting more and more wild. "We'll give him a few more hours."

Spence put the gangster back in the car and then Murdock called Spence aside.

"I want you to take him down an' lock him up," he said. "One of his men will probably have a lawyer there to spring

him. Let 'em get by with it, but you trail him as he leaves. Stick with him. Find out where he goes, what he does, an' forget about this little trip an' what he said about Harwood. I'm tellin' you this now, because I want you to drop me off at the President Hotel on the way downtown."

"What about this Slim Jensen?"

"He might be Soho Charlie. Wire Chicago after you get Bryan locked up an' before they spring him. We'll get a better description out of Bryan on the way to town."

At a suburban business district near the edge of the city, Murdock slowed down the car and called over a kid who was selling extras, about the strangler's third attempt at murder. The story in the paper was quite brief. It said that Sam Harwood, house detective at the President Hotel, had been found in his room with a red cord twisted around his neck, half strangled.

A woman in the next room, alarmed at the sounds of a struggle going on in Harwood's room, had called the telephone operator, who in turn had called one of the detectives on duty in the hotel. That detective had rushed to Harwood's room, arriving there barely in time to save his life. The rest of the story was a rehash of earlier stories that reported the death of Sir Basil Thornsby and the attempt to strangle Irving Cutter.

Spence, to whom Murdock read the story as they rushed toward the city, commented: "Well, that lets Harwood out."

John Murdock shook his head. "Not necessarily. It's a favorite stunt of a murderer to try to clear himself through almost being a victim himself. It's beginnin' to look damn funny, though. Step on that gas."

CHAPTER IV

DEATH IN THE DARK

IT was just before one A. M. when John Murdock reached the President Hotel. There weren't many people in the lobby, but on the eighth floor

where Harwood's room was located, there were several groups of people standing around, talking, and Harwood's room was crowded with detectives and reporters. Murdock elbowed his way in, glanced at Harwood who was lying on his bed sipping a highball, nodded to Cutter who was standing near him, and then called: "Pete, come here."

One of the detectives moved over to join him.

"Who are those people out in the hall?" Murdock demanded.

"They're just hangin' around," the detective answered.

"Well, clear 'em out," Murdock snapped. "Tell 'em to go home an' go to bed. Get 'em out of the halls. Who's watching the girls' room?"

"Murphy an' Slater."

"See if everything is okay down there, then come back here."

The detective left the room and Cutter put in: "The girls are all right. I was down there an hour ago and Harwood just phoned to them."

Murdock grunted. "What happened here?"

Harwood said: "I came into the room a little after eleven to get my flashlight but before I got my light on, some one grabbed me. We had a hell of a fight, but he got his damn rope around my neck, cracked me over the head with something, and my lights went out. The next I knew, one of your men was standing over me, cursing like a trooper and throwing water in my face."

"What was he like?"

"I don't know. It was dark."

Murdock said: "You're a hell of a help." He crossed the room, walked back to the door and over to the bed again, scowling, his hat pushed back on his head. Suddenly he stopped and glared at the three reporters who were watching him.

"What the hell are you stickin' around for?"

"The next murder," one of them answered.

"Well," Murdock snarled. "Get the hell out of—" His voice broke off as the room suddenly became dark. In three

strides the detective reached the door and pulled it open. Outside, the corridor was dark, too.

"What room do the girls have?" he demanded.

Harwood's voice answered: "Eleven-twenty. Three floors up."

Murdock said: "I want you to stay here—every one of you. Get that. My men on the eleventh floor will know what to do. I've got a hunch that some one has pulled the master switch and that all the lights in the hotel are out. You three reporters, if you don't want a red rope around your neck by mistake, stay here."

Murdock went outside into the corridor, slamming the door behind him. He hurried to the stairway and went up three steps at a time. Reaching the eleventh floor he called: "Murphy. Slater."

From the left a voice answered: "Down here."

He went that way. A flashlight picked him out and the voice said: "What's up, chief? What happened to the lights?" Murdock recognized the voice as belonging to Detective Slater.

"I don't know," he answered. "Everything quiet here?"

"The women are right in that room behind me. There hasn't been a peep out of them for a couple of hours," Murphy stated.

Down the hall a door opened and someone came out into the hall. Another door opened and some one else looked out. A voice called out: "The lights are all off." Some woman screamed.

Murdock knocked on the door of 1120. There wasn't any answer. He knocked again. The woman's screams had aroused other people and they poured out into the hall like the place was on fire. Murdock knocked on the door more insistently. He called: "Miss Tait—Miss Simpson."

Suddenly from behind that door a woman screamed. It was a sudden, wild scream of utter terror that chilled the blood. Again it came—and again.

Murdock drew back and threw his body against the door. A panel split but the door didn't give. The detective crashed against it once more, his two

hundred pounds thudding into it. But the door still held. Pulling his gun, he ordered Murphy to train his light on the lock, then one after another he sent five lead slugs from his service forty-five boring into the door where the lock was placed. Once more he threw himself at the door, and this time the weakened lock didn't hold. He staggered through into the room.

Murphy's searchlight swept the interior, centered on the form of a woman cowering in the corner, her face white, one hand over her mouth, and above that hand eyes that were wide and frightened. Murdock grabbed the flashlight and shot it around the room again. Between the twin beds the light picked out a woman's foot. Murdock stepped forward and swung the light so that he could see the whole body of the second woman. He saw a red cord twisted around her neck.

"Get to work on her," he snapped to Murphy. "Get that rope off her neck. Give her artificial respiration. Yell for a doctor." He swung the light around the room again, found a door that connected with the next room.

In three strides he reached that door and tried it. It was unlocked, but the door beyond was fastened. He hurried out into the corridor and tried the door to the adjoining room. It was locked.

AS suddenly as they had gone off, the lights went on. Murdock saw a dozen or more people in the hall. "Get back to your rooms," he snapped.

He saw Harwood hurrying forward and near him was Irving Cutter.

"Where the hell did you two come from?" he snapped. "I thought I told you—"

"After all," Harwood cut in, "I happen to be the house detective in this hotel."

Murdock said: "Yeah? Well, then, open this door."

"What for?" Harwood asked.

"Open it an' talk about it later."

Harwood shrugged. He took a key out of his pocket, opened the door. Murdock searched the room. It was empty. He came back out and said: "Now look it."

Harwood locked it and with Murdock started for the room occupied by the girls. Murphy met them at the door. "A doctor won't help any, chief," he said. "The girl was stabbed. That red rope was put around her neck for scenery."

"Dead?" Murdock asked.

Murphy nodded. "The other woman's jittery. She woke up and saw the killing. There was a little light from the window. She says she saw a huge black shape, saw a glint of light on the blade of the knife. That's all I can get out her."

"Which one was it?" Cutter asked.

"The Simpson girl," Murdock answered. "I think he meant to get the other one, an' made a mistake."

Jimmy Spence came hurrying down the corridor. His face was cut and there was a lump on his head.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Murdock demanded.

"Cully Bryan's here."

"What!"

Spence nodded. "There was a man at the jail to spring him the minute we got there. When he left I followed him. He made a telephone call, met a man a block away, an' two of them came to the President Hotel. They went downstairs, collared a bell boy. I was close enough to see the man with Bryan pull the light switch, but they must have known I was after them, for they mobbed me. I don't guess I was out long. I threw the switch back as soon as I came to."

Murdock nodded. He said to Cutter: "I don't know how you boys do things across the sea, but I'm beginning to see the end of this case. We'll either crack it tonight or some more of us will be wearing red necklaces before morning."

"You mean—" Cutter started.

"I mean," Murdock stated, "that I think I'm far enough along to call for a showdown."

A man, obviously drunk, staggered down the hall and up to the detective.

"I wanna see the manager," he stutered. "I wanna make a complaint—a sherious complaint."

Murdock said: "Yeah? Well I ain't the manager. Beat it."

But the man shook his head. "I paid a plenty lot for my room," he stated, "an' the bed ain't even made up. I don't like to sleep in mused-up rooms."

Murdock grunted. "Hunt up the manager. I'm busy."

He went into the room where the murdered girl lay and telephoned the manager. "This is Murdock," he told him. "I want a large room for an hour or so. A room big enough for a dozen people." He listened for a while and then said: "Thanks. Have it unlocked."

Turning to Irving Cutter he said: "We're all goin' down to Room 337 to talk this over. I want you to help me. I want you to come along, Harwood. I want the girl, Miss Tait. It'll be hard on her, but it's necessary. We'll take the house doctor along. Then I want Cully Bryan an' the man who came out here with him."

"Hell, they're miles away from here by now," Spence put in.

Murdock shook his head. "You go down with these fellows, Jimmie. I'll be right along. I've got one little job to take care of, first."

John Murdock went down to the desk and asked what rooms on the eleventh floor were vacant. He got a pass-key and searched every vacant room. It was a quick search. In none of them did he find that for which he was searching, but in the linen closet he was more successful. He called one of his men:

"I want this place watched," he said. "Don't be too obvious about it, but don't let anyone go into this place until you hear from me."

Then he rounded up the other men on duty. "I want every vacant room in this place gone over," he told them. "It's just a hunch I have, but I believe that Cully Bryan an' that man with him are still here. If you find them, bring them to Room 337."

He called his office and asked that whatever men were available go out to look for Cully Bryan with instructions to bring him to room 337 President Hotel if he were discovered. Then he went down to that room himself.

CHAPTER V

APPOINTMENT WITH DEATH

CAPTAIN JOHN MURDOCK leaned back in an easy chair and chewed on the cigar in his mouth. On the davenport across from him sat Alice Tait. Her face was white and her eyes stared vacantly around the room. From time to time a sob choked her. The house physician next to her scowled at the detective. He didn't approve of having the girl there. Murdock didn't like it, either. But already too many people had died and he felt that it was necessary for the girl to be present at what he hoped would be the showdown. She might be able to help.

Harwood sat next to the physician and Irving Cutter was seated in a chair to the left of the detective. Jimmie Spence was behind Murdock, near the door.

In terse, monotonous tones, John Murdock had reviewed the case. He told about Cutter's visit to his office, about the discovery of the body of Sir Basil Thornsby, about his visit to the girl and her story about the paper Thornsby had wanted her to sign. He told about the dinner at which Cutter had almost been strangled, about the death of the two men who had been arrested, about his visit to Cully Bryan, about the attempt on the life of Sam Harwood, about the death of Mary Simpson.

He ended up: "It's pretty damned involved, isn't it. And yet, I'm satisfied that we have enough information to solve the case."

Cutter said: "I'm satisfied it's the work of Soho Charlie. That man who came to the hotel with Bryan. I'd like to see him."

"We may have them here soon," Murdock remarked. "I think they're around here some place. My men are looking for them."

"Why would they be around here?" Cutter wanted to know.

"I think to see Sam Harwood," Murdock answered.

"Huh?" Sam Harwood leaned forward. "What do you mean by that?"

"I'll tell you what I mean," Murdock

agreed. "It's time to get a little frank. Bryan said that he saw you the other day talking to those three men who called on us at dinner time tonight. You knew them, didn't you, Harwood."

Harwood flushed. "Well, what if I did? It didn't have anything to do with this case."

"What was it about?"

Harwood shook his head. "I tell you it didn't have anything to do with this case. I did know them, yes, but it was about something else I went to see them."

"You're bein' a damn fool, Sam," Murdock cut in.

"Yeah? Well, what's your case against me?"

"You could have killed Sir Basil. You have a pass-key that would have admitted you to his room. You could have killed the girl. Again you have a key that would let you in the adjoining room and through the connecting doors to her room. You could have faked that attack on yourself. You see, it's a possibility, Sam."

"Yeah, well, what about the attack on Cutter. I didn't wrap the rope around his neck."

"You could have hired those men, an' one of them could have done it—the one who got away. You could have slipped them a drink that was poisoned—those two who were arrested."

Harwood laughed. "Hell, Murdock, you've got to prove it before I'll worry." Harwood looked at Cutter. "What about him, Murdock. How do we know he's really from Scotland Yard. He could have done it, too."

Murdock frowned.

Cutter said: "What are we supposed to do, sit around here and accuse each other of murder? Why don't we get after this man Bryan an' the man who was with him?"

"We're doing that, Cutter," Murdock answered. "I'm just tryin' to clear up a few things while we wait. You could have done it, too, you know."

"How?" Cutter snapped.

"Perhaps you knew Sir Basil well enough to get into his room. Perhaps

you just knocked an' he admitted you. You were here at the hotel, you know."

"Then would I have run to you? Wouldn't it be more likely that I should leave?"

"Not if your job wasn't done. Not if you wanted Alice Tait out of the way. Suppose, instead of being a man from Scotland Yard, you were one of the heirs who would benefit through the inheritance that Sir Basil came to this country about. His death an' the death of Alice Tait would make your share larger. A bear story about some Soho Charlie would give an excuse for the murders."

IRVING CUTTER laughed. "You'll convince me in a minute. I suppose, then, that I wrapped that red cord around my own neck after I chased that man into the other room at dinner to-night."

"Yeah, that's right."

"I wouldn't have made it so tight," Cutter said sarcastically.

Murdock grinned. "It was rather convincin'."

"Then, how did I poison those men who were arrested after dinner?"

"I don't know. How did you do it?"

"Suppose I said I did it by remote control," Cutter's voice was still sarcastic.

Murdock shrugged. "I'll have to work on that a bit."

Alice Tait spoke up for the first time. She said: "Those men—each took a drink from the table last night."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Murdock asked.

"They—after they were arrested—before they were taken away they each reached for a drink."

"Well, I'll be damned," the detective grunted. "They had just served our dessert an' there were drinks on the table. You mean they helped themselves?"

Alice Tait nodded. "One of them said: 'I might need this.' He picked up a cocktail and drank it. The other did the same."

"Sounds fishy," Harwood grunted.

"But you could have arranged it, couldn't you, Harwood. You knew the

help well enough to fix a thing like that."

"I wouldn't be that big a fool," Harwood answered. "Cutter could have done it, too. He could have dropped something in the drinks just after the men came in the room and when we were all looking toward the door."

Cutter said: "Tag. I'm it. Where do we go from here?"

"You could be the man who waited in Harwood's room an' tried to kill him."

"Only I'd have done a better job," Cutter answered. "But how could I have been the one to kill the other girl?"

"All you would have needed," Harwood put in, "was a key to get into that next room. We left my room together after the lights went out. We went up to the eleventh floor together. Somewhere up there I lost you. Where did you go?"

"Well, where did you. You had a key. I didn't."

"You could have gotten a key," Harwood accused.

"Where? How?"

Murdock took a hand. "How about the maid?" he asked.

Cutter flashed a look at the detective. He got up. "We're not getting any place," he said flatly.

"How about the maid?" Murdock asked again.

"Well, how about her?" Cutter shot back.

"Sit down, Cutter," Murdock advised. "Remember that drunk that came up to me in the hall upstairs, thinkin' I was the manager, wantin' to report some-thing to me? Well, he set me thinkin'. I looked around a bit. I found the maid."

Cutter scowled. "Well?"

"She was dead. There was the same red cord around her neck as there was around the necks of the others. There was only one reason to kill a person like her. Some one tried to get a pass-key from her and failed. Wantin' that pass-key and afraid that she might report him, the murderer silenced her."

Cutter said stiffly: "Are you accusing me of these murders?"

"Besides," Murdock went on, "there was that trip you made to the girls' room."

Irving Cutter's face hardened.

In a voice, scarcely above a whisper, Alice Tait said: "He went to that door to see that it was locked. He—he—joked about it."

For a moment no one spoke. The silence in that room was uncanny. It was the girl who finally broke it.

"We—we changed beds after he left. Mary didn't like sleeping by the window. I—we—"

Her voice trailed off into another silence, broken abruptly by Irving Cutter's harsh laugh.

"Lies. All of it—lies," he snarled. "I told you who I was. Why not get after the real murderer."

Murdock smiled rather grimly. "Perhaps some of it isn't just true, Cutter. We'll check up on the details—later. I should have a wire from Scotland Yard on my desk now. It's daytime over there when it's night here. I told them it was important and to answer right away. I asked them more about you than about Soho Charlie, although he figured in it, too. I asked them to check up on Sir Basil's relatives. You aren't a relative, are you?"

Cutter snapped: "Of course, I'm not."

"Phone the office, Jimmie," Murdock ordered. "See if my wire's been answered."

SPENCE said: "Okay." He got up and started for the telephone.

During that first moment when he moved, the attention of almost everyone in the room shifted from Cutter to him, and in that instant, Cutter acted, jerking a gun from his pocket, firing.

But as quick as he was, John Murdock was quicker. A hand that had been toying with the watch chain across his vest darted beneath his coat to the gun in his shoulder holster. The detective flipped it out, squeezed the trigger. A heavy lead slug tore through Irving Cutter's shoulder, striking with jarring force just at the instant that he fired. The bullet from Cutter's gun plowed into the arm of the chair.

Murdock fired again, his second bullet shattering Cutter's arm.

Cutter staggered back, his gun dropping from a hand that could no longer hold it. Sam Harwood dived for it, then backed away, covering the wounded man. The girl had fainted and the physician, his face chalky, was rubbing her wrists, but was still crouching down in the davenport. Spence hung up the receiver, forgetting his call. He got out his gun.

Irving Cutter spoke: "You guessed uncomfortably close but you'll get no help from me." He fished in his vest pockets with the fingers of his left hand, then brushed that hand across his lips.

"He's just taken poison," Harwood shouted. "Get a stomach pump."

Murdock shook his head. "You're seein' things, Sam. He's a confessed murderer an' the city's damn near broke. Besides, I'm good at figurin' out details."

Cutter smiled ironically. He sat down in a chair, leaned back and closed his eyes. He said: "They switched beds. I should have looked to make sure."

Sam Harwood went over to Murdock. "Nice work, chief," he said.

Murdock grunted. "I ain't done yet. Say your piece, Sam."

"I don't get you."

"Just where do you figure in this picture."

"Why—why not at all."

The detective shrugged his shoulders. "I'll find out when I locate Cully Bryan. Better talk."

Harwood paced back and forth across the room. The doctor finished reviving the girl and went over to look at Cutter. He prepared a hypo and shot it in the wounded man's arm.

"He'll rest easier, now," he said.

Harwood stopped suddenly in front of John Murdock. "I may as well tell you," he admitted, "that I had heard about the stone Sir Basil was carrying around. Knowing about things like that is part of my job. I figured he had given it to the girl. I hired Cully Bryan to lift it at that dinner we had."

"Why did you think the girl had it?"

"I was near their table the night before. I saw him pass her something. I

didn't know that she'd have it with her, but I wanted the men to kidnap her and make her tell where it was."

Murdock stood up. "You damn crook," he snarled.

Harwood shook his head. "But—but—"

"One of those men damn near killed Bert Andrews," Murdock snapped. "As white a dick as ever walked the streets of Central City."

His fist shot out and smashed into Harwood's face. Harwood staggered back and Murdock followed him, hitting him again and again. When Harwood fell to the floor Murdock pulled him erect and pounded him again.

Finishing his work at last, he stirred Harwood's body with his foot and said to Jimmie Spence: "Take him in, Jimmie, an' don't be too gentle with him."

The doctor came up and said: "That

wounded man can't live long unless we get him to a hospital."

The detective went to a phone and gave the necessary order. If Cutter had taken poison, even the hospital wouldn't help much, but after all, he wasn't sure that Cutter had taken poison. It was just a notion that he had.

"I wonder," he said aloud, "why Bryan pulled that switch. I think Cutter just took advantage of the opportunity the darkness gave him, but why did Bryan pull that switch?"

"Harwood was the house detective," the doctor suggested. "Wouldn't he investigate a thing like that? Wasn't that the simplest way for Bryan to get Harwood down there to talk to him or even to—to—get even with him?"

Murdock grunted. "Maybe that was it. Before I knock that damned dick cold again, I'll ask him."

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No. 15. Clues That Caught Criminals.

A True Crime Story

By CLIFF HOWE

MURDER will out! No matter how strange the setting. No matter how clever the murderer's method may be, there seems to be a grim Nemesis that dogs his footsteps—whose name is Retribution.

Proof of this came in Canada a few years ago. In all the Dominion there was no spot more desolate, more lonely, or apparently better suited to murder, than the Blenheim Swamp in the great wilderness north of Toronto. And here a killer came one bleak February day—and left his hideous handiwork behind him.

Probably he went away thinking he had committed the perfect crime. Fast falling snow covered his footprints. He had taken precautions to hide the identity of his victim. He thought surely that the body would not be found for months or even years. He left, feeling secure in his own evil cunning. He did not know that even then the shadow of Retribution was close on his heels, following through the somber, wind-swept forest like an unseen ghost.

For that very evening chance guided the steps of two woodsmen. Because of the chill snow, they were in a hurry to reach their cabin before nightfall. They did something unusual for them. They took a short cut through the Blenheim Swamp, crashing through the tangled undergrowth, slipping and sliding over the frozen bogs. And in the snow, they stumbled over the body of a man!

They were excited, for they saw at once that he had been killed recently, and a brief examination proved that he had been treacherously shot from behind. Whoever the murderer was, he had given his victim no chance. The man's pockets were empty. He was young, good looking, but there was nothing to be found on him which gave the woodsmen any clue as to who he might be. They made a rude litter of fir boughs and carried him back to the nearest town.

Here the local constable communicated with the Toronto department of justice. Detective-Inspector John Wilson Murray started north at once. He was a rugged, patient manhunter, an ace of Canada's police, who had figured in several homicides, and whose specialty was the solution of seemingly unsolvable mysteries. The unidentified dead man found in the Blenheim Swamp stirred his imagination at once.

But when he reached the small lumber camp where the body was being held, he found that he had run full-tilt into the biggest mystery of his career. The murder victim was no woodsman, no native of the locality. That was evident by his dress and appearance. He was young, somewhere in his teens. His clothes were of an expensive English cut. He looked like an aristocrat.

Besides the crimson, ghastly bullet hole in the boy's back, there was other evidence that a ruthless, scheming murderer had been at work. All labels had been cut from the victim's clothes. Even the buttons had been cut off and the hatband removed. Death and the cold had distorted the features so that it was doubtful if any photograph would be recognized. Detective Murray was up against it. He questioned many people. No one in the region had ever seen or heard of the boy before.

Doggedly, then, Detective Murray went back to the scene of the crime, guided by the two woodsmen. A great deal of snow had fallen; but Detective Murray scraped it away for many feet around the spot where the body had lain. Evil red stains in the snow told him when he was over the exact place. He got down on his hands and knees then.

For nearly two hours he moved in ever widening circles, hunting over every inch of ground. There was little use on speculating about the motive of this terrible murder until he learned who the victim was. Ex-

perience had taught him that killers often leave a clue behind, even when they think they have destroyed everything.

He found a few vague footprints, stamped places in the snow, indicating that the dead man had staggered before he had gone down. Then, under the heel of one of the footprints, half buried in the mud beneath the snow, Detective Murray found a clue that Fate itself seemed to have left. It was a cigar holder with an amber mouthpiece, marked with the initials F. W. B.

It might have belonged to either the murderer or his victim. Murray didn't know which. But his clever brain worked on the problem. He reasoned that it must belong to the victim, young as he was. The murderer surely would not have left such an article behind him. And the sporty, amber-mouthed holder fitted in with the young man's dashing clothes.

BACK in civilization again, Detective Murray got in touch with Toronto. He gave a detailed description of the dead man and ordered it printed in all Canadian papers, together with the initials F. W. B. Then he resumed his detailed questioning of all people living within ten miles of the swamp.

While he was engaged in this, a young couple arrived in the lumber camp where the body was still being held. They were a Mr. Reginald Birchall and his wife. They said they had recently landed in New York on the liner *Britannic*, having crossed over from England with a young man named Frank Benwell.

Visiting in Canada, they had seen the description of the murdered man in the papers, and also the initials, which had at once convinced them that the murder victim was their recent acquaintance. Mr. Birchall identified the corpse at once, and offered Detective Murray all possible help.

Birchall was a handsome, suave, well-dressed man with keen brown eyes, a light mustache and a gentlemanly bearing. His wife was quiet, rather tired looking. Detective Murray had met many crooks and killers. It seemed to him at once that Reginald Birchall was altogether too eager in his offers of help.

A dark suspicion came to the detective's mind, an extraordinary suspicion that only a man deeply schooled in the complexities of human nature would have entertained. It was a suspicion that Birchall himself might be the killer.

It was the possibility of some unknown factor in the case that made Detective Murray doubly active in the next few days.

He learned then, from other passengers on the *Britannic*, that the Birchalls had been intimate not only with Frank Benwell, but with another young man named Pelly, son of an English clergyman. Detective Murray at once looked up Pelly in his New York hotel and had a talk with him.

The unknown factor that had puzzled Murray came to light now. It was Pelly who, looking over a Canadian newspaper, had seen the item about the murdered man and the initials on the cigar holder. Birchall and young Benwell had gone north to look at a farm that Birchall owned.

Birchall had returned alone with the explanation that Benwell had decided to remain in Canada. When Pelly had seen the news item, he had immediately suggested that Birchall go back again and see if by any chance this was their mutual friend. Birchall had seemed reluctant. Pelly had grown insistent. He had threatened to go north himself with a detective if Birchall did not.

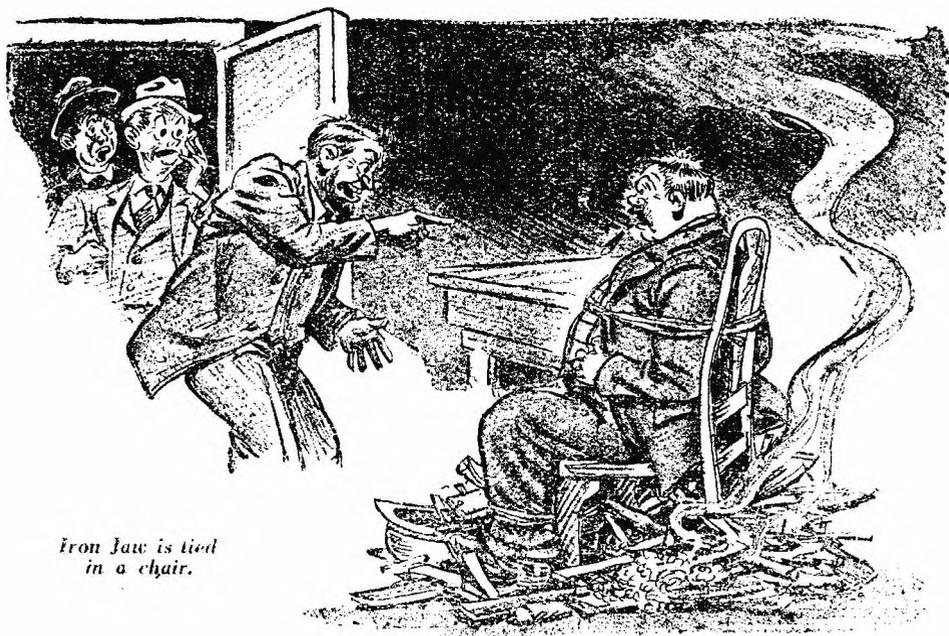
Now Detective Murray was certain that his suspicions concerning Birchall were correct. A murderer had returned to identify his victim because he had been forced to by circumstances. Here was as strange and ironic a twist of Fate as Murray had ever run into. He questioned Pelly further, and found that both Benwell and he had answered an ad of Birchall's in England asking that a young gentleman with five thousand pounds to invest come to Canada to look at Birchall's farm. Pelly had been invited to go north next and visit the alleged farm.

Here was the murderer's motive! Birchall was a deep-dyed criminal. He was a murderer for profit, luring young men with money to invest into the northern wilderness where he could murder and rob them.

The case came swiftly to a climax after that. The evidence piled up day after day, until an hour came when Murray's first flimsy bit of suspicion became a damning and rock-ribbed case against the killer, which resulted in a sentence of death. And the thing that had started him on the road to the gallows, the thing that symbolized the Nemesis he could not escape, was that one slender clue—merely a cigar holder with the three initials of the helpless victim upon it.

The Dizzy Duo are Called—

Fire Cheaters



Iron Jaw is tied
in a chair.

By JOE ARCHIBALD

Author of "Dizzy Duo," "Night Howls," etc.

Snooty Piper's vigorous articles on the razing of eyesore tenements were eclipsed only by his more vigorous attempts to trap a notorious firebug.

But Fate and Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy fitted them both together and claimed that Snooty was doing the razing.

"IRON JAW" O'SHAUGHNESSY is very mad at me and "Snooty" Piper, and it is all over nothing at all. Iron Jaw is a very big and very dumb citizen, and is also a flatfoot down at Joy Street which is Beantown's Scotland Yard. The only thing that Iron Jaw hates more than newspaper reporters is a good laugh.

One night after dusk Snooty Piper and me are walking along the edge of the Harvard River and Snooty is asking me what I think about his very

brilliant articles he has been writing for the *Evening Star*. They are about the very terrible conditions of the buildings in various parts of the town and what should be done about them.

"I will carry on the crusade until they tear them down and build others," Snooty says. "It is quite a disgrace. What if the Pilgrim Fathers ever came back and—"

"I shudder at the thought, don't you?" I says with a very noticeable sneer. "I should think, Snooty Piper, that you

would be interested in the terrible fire-bug that has terrorized the city, or does speaking of arson bore you?"

"Oh, I am giving quite some thought to that, too," he says. "He is a very sneaky sort of citizen, don't you think? Setting fires when lawful citizens are not looking."

"Why, yes, Snooty Piper," I come back, "I should think he would be honorable about it at least. I would expect him to walk right into the general offices of the John Hancock Insurance Company and light up a very big bonfire right in the midst of the employees. Snooty, you are not even half bright."

"Well," he says, "the tough boy who likes fires must be tired. We have not had a real good fire for three hours. I—oh, oh!" Snooty stops very short and points into the river. There is quite a moon out, and it lights up the drink very prettily. I look where Snooty points, and then I feel very faint and my knee-caps start to melt. There is something floating on the water and it is not a swan. I see a very ghastly face with staring eyes and from where we are at, it looks like a guy who is not in a very good state of health.

"S-Snooty P-Piper," I says, "some day will you try and point me out something quite pleasant? Come on, we must yell for somebody."

There is a drug store maybe four blocks away and we make it in very fast time, like a guy who has been bit by a snake and wants an antidote. Snooty gets in the phone booth first and calls Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy.

"We found a body," Snooty yells at him. "Me and 'Scoop.' Hurry very fast before it floats away. Bring some policemen, too."

We are no sooner back to the edge of the river than sirens start howling and up comes Iron Jaw in a hack led by some motor cops.

"I'm glad I caught you awake," Snooty says to Iron Jaw. "You were quite prompt and I will mention it in Mr. Guppy's paper."

"If you are kidding me, you fresh cluck," Iron Jaw yowls at Snooty as

he unloads his torso from the hack. "I'll—"

"What does that look like out there, you big strong man," Snooty yaps, pointing into the drink. "A banana split?"

"Ha, ha," I laughs, and Iron Jaw growls and goes to the edge of the river. There is a boat near, and he lowers himself down into it and starts rowing out to the body. The boat is very, very low in the water, as even the Leviathan would settle if Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy got on it. He is very close to the thing in the drink when he leans out to snag it with a kind of hook, and then the boat turns over and Iron Jaw spills out. Two policemen jump in after Iron Jaw, and me and Snooty run down the bank to where they is another boat.

"Hurry," Snooty hollers, "get the oars, Scoop, as—"

"There ain't no oars," I says. "What'll we do, as Iron Jaw might drown?"

"That has its good points," Snooty comes back. "Why, look, he is standing up in the water, Iron Jaw is! It is only up to his ears. Ha, ha!"

When we get back, Iron Jaw and the policemen, who are all very wet, climb up to the bank and pull the body after them. All at once Iron Jaw lets out a very coarse yell and points to it.

"It is a wax clothes dummy," he hollers. It is not very polite what Iron Jaw says and he stoops down and turns up a placard that the dummy has wired around its neck. It says:

"Ha, ha! April fool, even if it is only March!"

"Ha, ha," Snooty laughs, and he leans over and picks up an envelope that is sticking out of the inside pocket of the dummy's coat. "Well, I will use this to find its parents. I bet the Harvards done this. It is very prankish of the Harvards. Ha, ha!"

When he is dry, Iron Jaw is very disagreeable, but soaking wet, he is not even fit company for a city editor. He swears quite shameless and chases me and Snooty all the way to the North Railroad Station. So do the policemen.

"I hope a train is pulling out," Snooty

gasps between pants. "I don't care very much where it is going."

Iron Jaw and the policemen are not ten feet away from us when a fire whistle starts blowing, and it is all that saved us from two very bad cases of assault.

"The firebug!" Iron Jaw yelps as he turns around to run the other way. "And me chasing you two baboons. Mr. Guppy will hear of this. You blankety-blank——" His voice fades out when he gets two blocks away, but you can still understand him. Iron Jaw could stand in Vermont and talk to Maine without using a telephone.

I lean up against a newsstand and look very nasty at Snooty Piper. "I don't know why I have a thing to do with you," I says. "I would feel much safer in an upper berth with a crocodile. You——"

"Please be quiet," Snooty interrupts. "I am trying to make out where the fire is, Scoop. There is another alarm going on There it is. I got it. We must hurry, as it is our duty to Mr. Guppy to get as close as we can to fires."

IT is very silly to argue with Snooty Piper. I just bite back some very mean words and follow him to a taxicab. The fire is over on Elliot Street, and it is burning quite merrily when we arrive. There is a lot of apparatus everywhere and fire hoses all over the street, and the smoke is very thick, like every dame in Beantown is burning her biscuits. We flash our badges and get through the fire lines, and then we see somebody do a very artistic flop, and flop right down on the pavement which is quite damp, to say the least. A derby hat rolls over and Snooty picks it up.

"Scoop, it weighs as much as a good-sized stew kettle," he says to me. "Ha, ha, do you know whose it is? It has to be Iron Jaw's. Ha, ha!"

"Yes, it is mine, you two smart-Alecks," Iron Jaw says, and he gets up and grabs it out of Snooty's hand. Iron Jaw is quite a mess.

"Ha, ha," Snooty laughs, "for a guy who ain't been out in the rain, you

manage to keep very wet, Iron Jaw. Did you trip over a fire engine?"

"Go ahead and laugh, you fathead," Iron Jaw yowls. "But——"

"But when he speaks to the waiter in French, you'll be very, very surprised. won't you Scoop? Ha, ha," Snooty comes back. And then the fire chief comes over and gives Iron Jaw quite a lot of hell, and says: "How can my men hear my orders with you trying to make sounds like the South Railroad Station, you big stiff?"

"I have never enjoyed a fire quite so much before, have you?" Snooty says to me. "You can easily see now why I am carrying on the very good fight against such fire traps, can't you?"

Before I can cook up a dirty answer, I bump into a fireman who is quite busy taking a kink out of a hose. His fire hat falls off and he gets very angry.

"Get out of here!" he hollers and actually threatens us with a fire ax.

"A very nervous type of person," Snooty says and drags me toward a hose wagon. "I should not have him on my fire department."

"Don't tell him," I says sarcastic, "it would hurt him to the quick, Snooty. Oh——er——pardon me." I bump into a common citizen who is watching the fire and he has a package under his arm. It flops to the pavement and I stoop down to pick it up. The package is split open and something falls out. The citizen does not thank me.

"Ya clumsy cluck!" he bawls at me and you can see how ungrateful some persons are. "I got a good mind to bust ya in the snoot!" And he tucks the package under his arm and walks away like he is quite sore, and he gets his very yellow shoes all wet. He is a very funny sight.

"Quite a lowbrow," remarks Snooty. "But he dresses very distinctive. His shoes were quite unusual."

"He looked like he had his feet in two summer squashes," I says disgusted.

"It makes him stand out in a crowd like my green suit," comes back Snooty. "You don't understand sartorial perfection, Scoop Binney. Why, look what he

dropped. It is a mousetrap. Now what would that citizen be doing with a mousetrap?"

"He'd catch mice, you damn fool," I blazes. "Did you think he was planning for a trip to shoot moose?"

"Well, well," a voice comes from behind us and, of course, we know it is Iron Jaw, as he shuts off the sun, "a mousetrap! Going to catch the firebug, you famous reporters? Ha, ha, have you got any bait?"

"Can you spare yourself for a day or so?" Snooty pipes up. "We need a big hunk of cheese."

Now Iron Jaw cannot take it, and he makes himself very much of a nuisance yelling and running around, trying to grab us. The upshot of it all is that the fire chief calls some tough policemen, and tells them to eject Iron Jaw forcibly from the fire. Me and Snooty Piper climb up on the seat of a hook and ladder, and it is very hard to keep from falling off, we are laughing that hard. When the fire is out, Snooty and me hurry fast to the *Evening Star* office, and sit down and write a very vivid account of the firebug's latest masterpiece, and Snooty writes all about the very disgraceful behavior of a certain detective who hampered the work of the very brave firemen.

"Listen, Scoop," he says, "I say here that half of the building might have been saved if it had not been for Iron Jaw and—"

"You'll walk the streets of this city alone tomorrow, Snooty Piper." I tells him right out, "and that is my bottle you've got, you Scotch tightwad."

"Listen, you two half-baked flatfish," the night city editor hollers at us, "I quit the day job to get away from you. By cripes you hurry up or—" The telephone in a booth rings and Snooty's mouth opens wide, like a fish when it sees a worm.

"I wonder who it is this time of night," he says. "Why—er—"

"If you answer it, they'll tell you," the guy at the desk shouts. City editors are very impatient.

We both go to the phone. Snooty says: "Hello, who—"

"Ha, ha," laughs somebody, "this is the firebug. How did you like my fire, huh? Ha, ha!"

"Oh, it was just ducky," Snooty growls. "Listen here, you—you fiend—" But the very undesirable citizen hangs up after a very nasty laugh, and Snooty swears and slams down the receiver.

"Who was it?" the night city editor barks at us.

"Alice in Wonderland," Snooty yelps back and picks up the phone again.

"I'll have you fired in the morning!"

"**P**ARSLEY, just parsley," Snooty offers, and jiggles the hook. "Hello," he says, "this is the managing editor of the *Evening Star*, operator. Somebody just called up. Trace it. It is police business about a very wicked firebug, sister, so step on it!"

"What a liar!" I says. "Snooty Piper, you—"

"Yeah? Cornhill 467? I got it. Thank you very much," he says. "Ah—er—are you doing anything tomorrow night, huh?" He digs into his ear as he hangs up. "She was not very sociable, Scoop. Oh, well, I got plenty of dames. Say, we have got to hurry very fast over to a cigar store on Hanover Street. It is where the fiend called from."

It is not very far to the cigar store from the *Evening Star* and it is right in front of the store that we run into something very unpleasant. *Bang! Bang!* They are not toy balloons busting, as toy balloons do not kick pieces of sidewalk into an honest citizen's face.

Our quite amazing agility saves Snooty and me from getting laid out on two stone mattresses in the city ice house. We jump into the cigar store, and make two swan dives over a counter and land on something soft that says: "Ugh!" When we get off of it, we find it is a very fat little guy that seems quite short of breath.

"Bunker Hill," he yelps, "she is a-fight again. Wadda you t'ink? Vive Moosilunny, we licka da Brit'. shoos!" Then the foreigner picks up a gun about

two feet long and starts shooting plaster out of the ceiling, and me and Snooty dive out into the street again. This time we bump into two great big policemen.

"I wish you would put some notices up in post offices," Snooty says to one of them, "and remind the citizens that it is illegal to carry firearms. Is no place safe?"

"Who shot at ya?" a big cop says.

"The firebug, no less," Snooty says. "And if I were you, I would go in and take the gun away from the Italian person, or he will ruin his overhead. And I would like to get my hat."

We go into the store and the fat guy has got his marbles back. It is very hard to make him listen to reason, as all he wants is to have us locked up for twenty years. He also wants to shoot at us again, but the policemen tell him he is acting very silly, and they will have to bend a club over his noggin if he does not listen to reason.

"We want you to describe the guy who came in here about fifteen minutes ago to telephone," Snooty says to the Italian. "Then we will know who started it all. It is quite simple, after all, isn't it?"

"She ees only da man joosta same like you," he yelps. "Two ears, one eye, two nose, two foots—bah. Santa Maria, do I taka da pitch' of alla da cust-mers, hah?"

"Come on," Snooty says, "we're getting no place fast, Scoop."

"I am going to, though, Snooty Piper," I says. "I am going to demand admittance to a very strong armory tonight. I—oh, look what the white wings missed!" It is Iron Jaw who comes up.

"Would you just as soon move your family to another city, Iron Jaw, if I paid all expenses?" I greet him. "We are getting very, very tired of you."

"In a mess again, are you?" the big slewfoot trumpets like a bull elephant. "I heard shots. Do I have any luck?"

"Look at my hat," Snooty says. "A slug right through it! That is the third this year. It is terrible."

"It sure is," Iron Jaw says. "You forgot to leave your dome inside of it. ha, ha!"

"I don't think he is a bit funny," I says, and Snooty and me get out of the neighborhood with alacrity.

"Things are plenty screwy," Snooty says. "That firebug figured we would trace the call and he ambushed us. It always was a mystery to me where policemen go when something is happening."

"It has been quite a day," I says, very weary, and I take the mousetrap out of my pocket and toss it into an ash can.

We get to the *Evening Star* at noon of the next day and "Dogface" gets very unpleasant and says: "Aren't you two mugs here too early or something?"

"Don't get wise, Dogface," Snooty snaps at him. "We worked most of the night at risk of life and limbs."

"Mr. Guppy called me about that cock-eyed stunt you pulled last night with the wax dummy," Dogface says. "The police commissioner is raising hell about it. I'll stand just so much more from you two halfwits."

"It was the Harvards that did it," Snooty says. "Did you ask the commissioner if he heard there was a firebug around? And I looked at my story I wrote last night, and you cut out that part about Iron Jaw. That is the trouble with this rag. They are afraid to print the facts."

It is a very jittery city room that day as everybody is sitting almost off their chairs listening for fire alarms. A sob sister swallows an apple when the noon whistle blows and Snooty Piper drops a whole quart and is out into the street when I catch up with him.

"Now we are out, we might as well go to a gin mill and wait for the next fire," he says to me. "It is very stuffy up in the rookery."

Three hours later we are still sitting in the Greek's when somebody over on High Street smashes a glass in a red firebox and signals very urgently for the brave firemen. The alarm is still going strong, when me and Snooty are going across Scollay Square in a checkered hack. We arrive at the very same time and on the very same spot as a fire

chief, and the fire chief is very angry when he gets out his car in the show window of a hardware store. Snooty and me get a break as the cab driver is sitting on the front end of the car too dizzy to remember who we are.

WELL, it is quite a fire, and we are enjoying it until Snooty steps right on the foot of a citizen, and the guy must have been a champion corn grower, as he comes quite close to a stroke. He says something very insulting about our origin and he is a very funny-looking tomato with a black mustache that curls up at the ends. Snooty grabs me when he starts walking away.

"S-Scoop," he says, "them yellow dogs! It is the mousetrap guy. Something is very screwy. We got to follow him."

"He has got a brush over his lip," I says. "It can't be him."

"You can buy 'em for a dime," Snooty says. "An honest person would not have so much time to attend fires. Come on, Scoop."

"I'm afraid I will," I says.

Outside the fire lines, we spot the citizen who is walking along very nonchalantly about a block ahead. He turns his head and looks back. He starts walking faster. So do we. Then two blocks away the suspicious-looking character starts the heel-and-toe like the guys in a bunion derby. A block from Atlantic Avenue, he breaks into a run, and that is no way for an honest tax payer to act, any way you look at it.

"Look," Snooty says, "he ran into that old building. We got him cornered."

"Ha, ha," I says, "what fun. If that is the firebug, I imagine he will get a little rough. Don't you think it would be very wise to get the militia?"

"And let them get all the credit?" Snooty says. "Don't be silly. Come on, you ain't afraid, are you Scoop?"

"Look how cool I am, Snooty," I says. "Ha, ha, I am perspiring sherbet."

It is very gloomy in the old building. We go up to the third floor and walk into a loft. There is a sound that comes from out a door that is half open.

"Sh-h-h-h," Snooty says. "He is hiding in there. He would have shot us by now if he was armed, don't you think?"

"I don't dare to," I says as I follow him in through the door. All at once it slams very hard behind us and somebody turns a key and laughs. It is not quite like any ordinary laugh but one that makes you think of strait-jackets and butcher knives all covered with very red blood.

"Ha, ha," the awful fiend says, "I will make it very hot for you. Ha-a-a-a! Did you ever want to know how a piece of burnt toast feels? No? Ha-a-a-a!"

"Would you just as soon make it an ice cube?" I says. "Listen here! You let us right out or—" All I got is another very dirty laugh and I hear the fiend walk away.

"It is your fault, Snooty Piper," I says. "What a terrible end!"

"Wouldn't it burn you up, Scoop?" he says. "Here we—"

"I am afraid it will, you fool," I yelps. "Was it the price of haddock in the fish market you thought I was quite concerned over? Now you get me out of here, Snooty Piper—"

"It is a very strong door," he says, as he tries it. "If we was movie actors we would just bust it down like it was a cheese wafer. Ha, ha!"

"You can laugh in the damndest places," I says and take a look around. It is not very light in the room, and it is a place filled up with rubbish, old packing cases, excelsior, rats, spiders. It is not a very nice place for a baby's nursery. There is one window and it looks out at another blank wall, and when I holler for help out of it, the word bounces right back at me.

"Do you see a way out, Scoop?" Snooty asks.

"Just as plain as if I was trying to spot a Chinaman with yellow jaundice," I says. "Would you help me push at the door, Snooty, if you don't mind?"

It is very apparent after quite an assault on the door that it was certainly built for the entrance to a bank, and got in the loft by mistake, as if you rammed a crowbar against it, the crow-

bar would curl up at the end like a soda straw.

"We will just have to sit and wait," Snooty says. "Sometime somebody will find us."

"Frank Buck, maybe," I says. "Well, if I ever get out with the meat still on me, I will sever my acquaintance with journalism, as it has become very nerve shattering to me."

Two hours pass and it is very dark. We are exhausted from calling for help and our voices at the moment are maybe half as audible as the cry of a centipede.

"Well, he forgot to set us on fire, anyway," Snooty says. "Ha, ha. I bet he forgot his matches or used wet kindling wood."

"Shut up," I says. "And listen—"

There is a funny sound like you scrape your finger nails over a rough board. Then comes a squeak.

"Rats," Snooty says. "I am not very fond of them. Don't make a noise as they will not hesitate to attack a human being."

"You are safe," I whispers, "but how about me, Snooty Piper?"

We hear the rat go into some excelsior, and then all at once there comes a snap, and there is a flash of fire and the excelsior starts burning up fast.

"Oh-h-h-h!" I yells at Snooty. "Hurry fast. Stamp it out or we will be burned very crisp."

"Look, Scoop," he says and kicks something across the floor. It is a mousetrap and tied to it is a gadget with a piece of sandpaper pasted to it. "That is what he was doing with them mousetraps. Oh, we got him now."

THAT was quite a silly remark, don't you think?

"Listen, Snooty," I hollers, "look at that stuff burn. It is beyond our control. Oh, oh!"

"Put it out," he hollers. "Scoop, do somethin'—"

"Can't you see I am tryin' to spit," I yells, "but my mouth is so very dry, it is no use. Snooty, in a couple of days we will both be put in an urn. Oh—"

"My green suit," Snooty wails. "It'll be ruined. To the window, Scoop, or we will choke with smoke; it is very thick now."

It is three stories down to the alley paved with cobblestones, but me and Snooty Piper are quite desperate, and we climb out and hang from the window sill.

"We are saved, Scoop," Snooty cries.

"Ha, ha, if you saw somebody pull a guy out from under a guillotine after his noggin had dropped in the basket, you would call it a rescue. Snooty Piper, don't be quite so silly, please."

"We would make quite a stain down in the alley if we dropped, huh, Scoop?"

"Ha, ha," I laughs, "you are a scream, Snooty. Shut up as I need my strength to hang on."

All at once there comes a very loud fire alarm, and me and Snooty each agree to say a prayer. Five minutes later half the Boston fire department is outside the building, and you have no idea how much water there is around.

"Do you think they will drown us before they save us?" Snooty gulps, and we crawl in through the window again. We are up to our eyelashes in water when two big firemen come to our rescue.

"They are the firebugs," somebody yells. "They got caught themselves. They—"

"You're a liar!" I yelps. "We are—"

It is just then that Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy shows up, and he looks down at us, and I can see very plain that we will need a very good lawyer.

"Tell 'em who we are, Iron Jaw," Snooty says. "They think—"

"Never saw 'em before in my life," Iron Jaw yaps and that is just like him. "Of course, they look a little familiar, but I was to the zoo this morning, and maybe that accounts for it. Get up, you fiends. You are under arrest. So, Mr. Piper, you wanted to get rid of eye-sores, huh? You've been writing about how it ought to be done in Mr. Guppy's scandal sheet. Well, well!"

"Lynch 'em!" a very indignant citizen hollers and somebody agrees with him: right away.

"You hear that, Iron Jaw?" Snooty yips? "You—"

"Yes, isn't it wonderful?" the fat-headed slewfoot says.

"If you was solid chocolate, Iron Jaw," I says, "I could not stomach you very well."

We are in jail in three minutes. Snooty sends out right away for Mr. Guppy. Iron Jaw is outside the cell, leering at us like a very ugly ghoul.

"Listen," he says, "I'll get you clucks out when you come clean about the firebug, see? You have pulled stuff over me too often. Well, where is he at? I know you got him tagged, ha, ha! This is one time Mr. O'Shaughnessy gets on the front page."

"You viper!" I says. "All we know is he did it with mousetraps. You get us out of here, you—"

"We are licked," Snooty says very abject, and he pulls an envelope from his pocket. "Here. Iron Jaw," he says, "is where he lives. It is his address. You are a very hard man, Iron Jaw."

"Ha, ha," the flatfoot laughs and grabs the envelope. "Guppy is coming over right away with bail. So long, halfwits, I will be promoted in the morning."

"What was that, you sap?" I says to Snooty.

"Ha, ha," he comes back, "I don't know. It was what I took out of the pocket of that dummy the Harvards tossed in the river. Ha, ha, is Iron Jaw very bright or what do you think?"

Ten minutes later Mr. Guppy comes and bails us out. "And don't dare to jump it, you flatheads!" he yells at us. "Otherwise, I'll chase you until I find you."

"Any time you want me, Mr. Guppy," I says very meek, "just come to the nearest feather bed. Good night to you."

It is twenty-four hours later when all of the police department is very much agog. Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy has not been heard from since we handed him the phony address. Not that we cared. But Joy Street sends for us and gets us out of bed as that is still where we are.

"It is foul play. We know it!" a big policeman yowls.

"WELL, we can hope so," Snooty says. "It is a good thing I remember the address but not the name. It is at 46 C Street, South Boston. I hope we are hours too late."

You would think it was the governor who was being taken over the bridge to South Boston but it is only me and Snooty Piper who have got a very technical charge of murder against us.

"You had better stop playing with the siren," I says to a cop with a very fat neck. "The guy who has got Iron Jaw might cut his throat if he hears us coming."

We stop a block from C Street, and then the gruff policeman tells me and Snooty to go ahead and don't try and do nothing funny.

"I don't think I ever will again," I says.

Me and Snooty go into the house which is a very disreputable-looking den and climb to the second floor, and it is outside a door that we stop as we hear a very familiar voice on the other side. Somebody starts to let out a yell downstairs and we look down, and it is quite a frowsy-looking landlady and a policeman has got both hands around her neck.

"Ha-a-a-a!" we hear a laugh. "Soon a mouse will come and nibble the cheese, smart detective. Then the trap will go off. The match will scratch. This is the last time I come to entertain you, ha!"

"That laugh, Scoop," Snooty says. "You get it?"

But just then the door opens, and who looks out at us but the citizen who wears the very, very yellow shoes. This time he has got on a goatee, also a very surprised and ugly look on his mush.

"So you are not dead, ha-a-a-a," and he gets very rough, and pushes Snooty in the face, only his hand is closed up. It is amazing how strong a citizen is who has not got all his marbles, as he shakes me off like dandruff, and then he hits me a very wicked smack where I have got a cold sore and I fall into the arms of the police force.

"It is time you remembered you was with us," I says, as they go to work on the unlawful citizen. "We—"

All at once there comes a howl and then I smell smoke. I run into the room, with Snooty Piper, while the policemen sit on Nero and play taps on his dome with night sticks. In the middle of the room is Iron Jaw, and he is tied in a chair, and all around him is excelsior and kindling wood.

"Fire!" he is yelling, and he is quite right for once.

"Why, it is Joan of Arc," Snooty says brightly. "Warm this evening isn't it, Iron Jaw? Ha, ha, well—"

"Murderers!" Iron Jaw yells, and Snooty and me are enjoying it very much.

"Cut him loose!" yelps a great big policeman. "He will burn up."

"Somebody always spoils everything," Snooty says with a sigh and then starts kicking the kindling wood away from Iron Jaw. I take out a knife and cut his bonds, and then Iron Jaw runs around the room, batting fire out of the seat of his pants.

"You sent me to this, you two helions," he yowls, all red in the face like a stop light. "I will get hunk, you see. I will—"

"I had no idea where you were going," Snooty says. "That was an address I took

out of the dummy's pocket, ha, ha! It looks like Nero one time hocked his clothes to buy mousetraps, and they were put on a dummy and stood out in front of a second-hand store where the Harvards found it. Look at—all—the—mouse-traps!"

They are on the table in a corner and some of them have all been fixed up to set fires. Nero has wired matches to the springs and has put gadgets on the ends where the cheese goes, and this gadget has a piece of sandpaper attached to it. It is a very illegal and ingenious way of setting fires. The rats and mice set them off while the firebug is at a safe distance.

"Why did you do it?" Iron Jaw yelps at Nero, when we get him down to the jug.

"The town was gettin' too dead," the guy says. "I like excitement. I want a lawyer. I didn't set no fires. It was the rats and mice. Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is quite beyond understanding, the diseased mind, don't you think? Scoop?" Snooty says as we go out.

"I am afraid so," I retorts. "I been trying to figure you out for many months. I am going back to bed, Snooty Piper. Will you call me at ten o'clock next month?"



Picked Clean

By **ROBERT S. FENTON**

Author of "Dead Reckoning," etc.

NICK PARA'S hands trembled as he gathered up dirty dishes from the counter. One plate slipped, fell to the floor with a smash. Nick swore under his breath as he dumped the rest of the pile into the greasy water behind the counter. He glanced at the clock on the wall and his lips tightened. Eleven o'clock.

The man ought to show up around midnight, he thought. There was a chalky tinge to Nick's swarthy features as he shuffled to the front of the all-night lunchroom and pulled down a tattered green window shade to a little below the middle of the window. The street outside, he observed, was deserted. The lunchroom was near the outskirts of the city and Nick knew that the patrolman on the lonely beat would not look in on him until around twelve-thirty.

Nick Paras had decided to kill a man. He did not even know the name of his intended victim. Two or three times a month the man had made a habit of stopping at Nick's place on his way through the city. He was a heavy-set fellow who liked his food. On the little finger of his left hand he always wore a ring, and the big diamond that glittered in it had sown the evil seed in Nick Para's mind.

Nick needed money. Not that the lunchroom had been a losing proposition, but rather that its proprietor had a passion for playing the horses. And for some time now his luck had been running against him. If Nick Paras could not secure two or three hundred dollars within the next forty-eight hours, he would have to close up the lunchroom.

A surge of self-assurance dispelled the prospective murderer's nervousness as he

rehearsed his well-laid plan. There were two black, snub-nosed revolvers reposing on a shelf beneath the lunch counter. He would use one of these. The other would be found on the floor beside the "holdup" man. Nick wore a smug smile.

"It's different," he mused grimly. "All the other guys I ever read about put the gun in the fall guy's hand. That takes too much time an' anyways it's pretty dumb. Why, a gat would slip out of a guy's hand when he fell down, sure."

It was a clever idea, the plotter assured himself. There was no possibility of a slip-up so far as he could figure. No one thereabouts knew this man who, at that very moment, should be driving toward his doom. An epidemic of stickups had borne down on the fringe of the city during the past several weeks. Why, even the law had advised owners of various business places to shoot to kill.

Time passed. Nick Paras began to walk up and down the narrow space between the counter and the wall, tortured by the fear that perhaps the man would fail to appear. If he had to wait much longer, he knew he might lose his nerve. The clock's soiled face drew his gaze. The minute hand was within a hair of the figure twelve.

Suddenly Nick Paras stiffened. A car had driven up. Grimy brakes screeched as it came to a stop. Heart thumping, Nick waited. The door swung in. A man entered, a thick-set individual. Nick's beady eyes caught the glitter of the rock on the arrival's left hand.

"Hullo," said the Greek. "Gettin' damp out, huh?"

"Yeah," replied the man, climbing onto a stool. "How's the pork chops tonight, Nick?"

"Good," said Nick, striving to keep his voice steady. "I'll put 'em on the fire. Kinda dead around here tonight, ain't it?"

The customer yawned and said: "Yeah." Then: "Get a lot of trucks through here, don't you?"

"Around eleven," answered Nick. "Then they start comin' in around four in the morning. On the way out an' on the way in, that's the way it goes." He paused, grinned coldly. "Get kinda leery about this time. They been knockin' off joints around here."

"Should think you would," declared the customer. "Those pork chops smell good. Say, I'd pack a gun in this place if I was you."

Nick's heart leaped. He turned to face the customer, grinned, then reached under the counter. He produced a thirty-eight caliber revolver which he handed to the man. "Not bad, eh? Heft of it. Ever use 'em?"

The customer smirked. "Once I drove a truck through from New York to Detroit. In the good old days when the suckers paid plenty for beer. This rock here, well, I hold on to it to remind me of the time I was in the dough." As he spoke the man gripped the gun, weighed it briefly, then returned it to Nick.

The Greek was careful in his manner of retrieving the gun, handling it by the barrel. He placed it under the counter again. Nick Paras realized that his intended victim was not altogether a citizen of repute. His plan was air-tight.

The pork chops were duly placed in front of the customer. As he began to eat them, Nick stifled a yawn and walked out to the door. He looked out briefly, saw nothing. One street lamp glowed, its light reflected by the wet pavement.

A fine drizzle of rain was falling and Nick knew that the copper would stick to shelter as long as he could. Nick returned to his place behind the counter and let his eyes fall to the guns lying on the shelf. Near the one handled by the customer was a dry dish towel.

"Pork chops are good, Nick," the man commented around a mouthful.

"Yeah," agreed Nick, and his voice

was a little strained. He began to tidy up behind the counter, shooting occasional glances at the clock on the wall. After a time the customer gulped the last of his coffee. Nick Paras set his jaws and his fingers glided toward a gun.

"Guess that's all," said the man. "Gotta be goin'. What's the damage?" His hand, reaching into the container of paper napkins, stiffened. His eyes widened, flickered with an incredulous expression. A forced laugh issued from his lips as he backed away from the stool.

"Ha," he gulped, "quick work, Nick, yeah. No stickup guy could—" The words thickened as Nick Paras pulled the trigger. The thick-set man shuddered as a bullet struck. He toppled from the stool, his eyes dilated, glazing fast.

EVEN as his victim's body thumped to the floor, Nick Paras was working swiftly. By the barrel he picked up the gun he had let the man heft several minutes before. His hand was insured against contact with it by the dry dish towel. He flung it over the counter so that it would drop near the dead man on the floor, then raced from behind the counter.

The man was sprawled out on his back, lifeless eyes staring up at the ceiling, that expression of stark surprise still written on his face. Nick Paras lifted a dead hand and worked the ring from the little finger. But he was not through.

He rifled the victim's pockets, found a car key attached to a leather license case. Running to the door, he opened it a crack and looked out. Not a sound. Quickly he crossed the sidewalk to the curb and climbed into the roadster, inserted the key, and turned on the ignition. A press of his foot against the starter and the engine started to purr. He leaped out, then began to shout. A minute or two later, and a policeman came running.

"A stickup," shouted Nick and ran back into the lunchroom. He was behind the counter in a flash and dropped the diamond ring into a pan of stale coffee that stood beside the big percolaters. By

the time the policeman came in breathlessly, he was out in front of the counter looking down at the dead man. In his hand he gripped the gun.

"Got 'im, did you, Nick?" the cop said. "Fast work. Do ya know him?"

"Nope," replied Nick. "He's been in before. He got through eatin' and was goin' to pay up when I saw he was grabbin' for a gun. I got mine first an' let 'im have it. They can't do nothin' to me, can they, Reilly?"

"N-no," Reilly laughed icily. "Not much. Them guys ask for it. Sooner or later they meet up with a guy like you, Nick."

"Yeah," agreed Nick. "When I hollered for you I saw that he had left his car runnin'."

Reilly looked at the dishes on the counter. "Had his grub first, you say Nick?"

"Yeah."

"Pork chops, too," remarked the cop. "He picked his bones pretty clean." As he spoke, Reilly looked down at the dead man with curious eyes. Then he knelt quickly and picked up the gun. Nick kept up his front with desperation. Reilly placed the gun on the counter and again stooped over the corpse. Lifting one arm by the sleeve, he scrutinized the dead hand. He dropped it to the floor and reached over to lift the other. Suddenly he straightened up.

"What did you bump him off for, Nick?" he shot out bluntly.

Nick Paras took a backward step. "R-Reilly, you're k-kiddin', ain't ya?" he blurted out, face ghastly. "Why, the guy stuck me up an' I dropped him. He—"

"You're a liar, Nick," said the cop deliberately. "You got him, but you should've waited until he had wiped his hands!"

"H-hands?" Nick muttered, body limp. "What d'ya mean, Reilly?"

"The poor guy's hands are all greasy," the cop said, "from eatin' pork chops with his fingers. That gun hasn't got a sign of grease on it. But I'll bet his fingerprints are on it. Smart idea, Nick, but you slipped up. What did you kill him for?" Reilly was on the alert.

"I—I tell y-ya—" the Greek stammered, panic-stricken, "he stuck me up—he—"

"There's a mark on his finger where there used to be a ring," the cop went on, his own weapon pointing at the murderer. "Was there a rock in it, maybe? I heard you was pretty well busted, Nick. owe four months' rent on this joint. Come clean, now, or I'll let them work on ya downtown. They're pretty rough, y'know."

Nick Paras was through. The supply of nerve he had gathered up for the job had petered out. Face pasty, he lifted a shaking finger and pointed toward the counter.

"I-in the bottom of that p-pan of coffee, R-Reilly," he whispered hoarsely.



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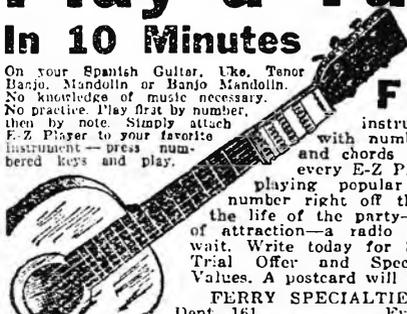
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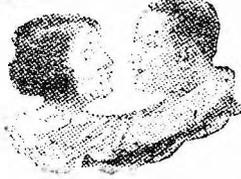
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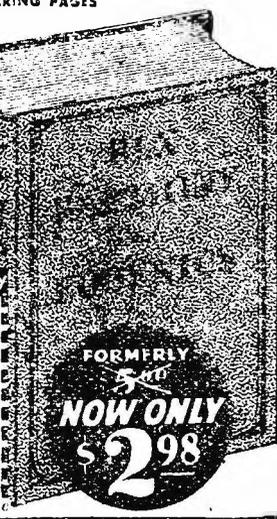
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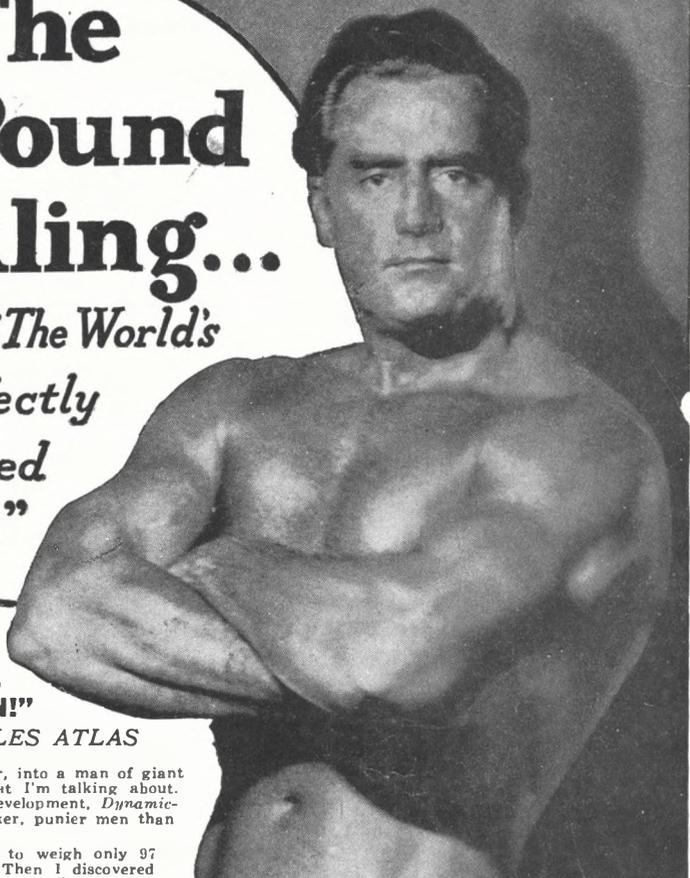


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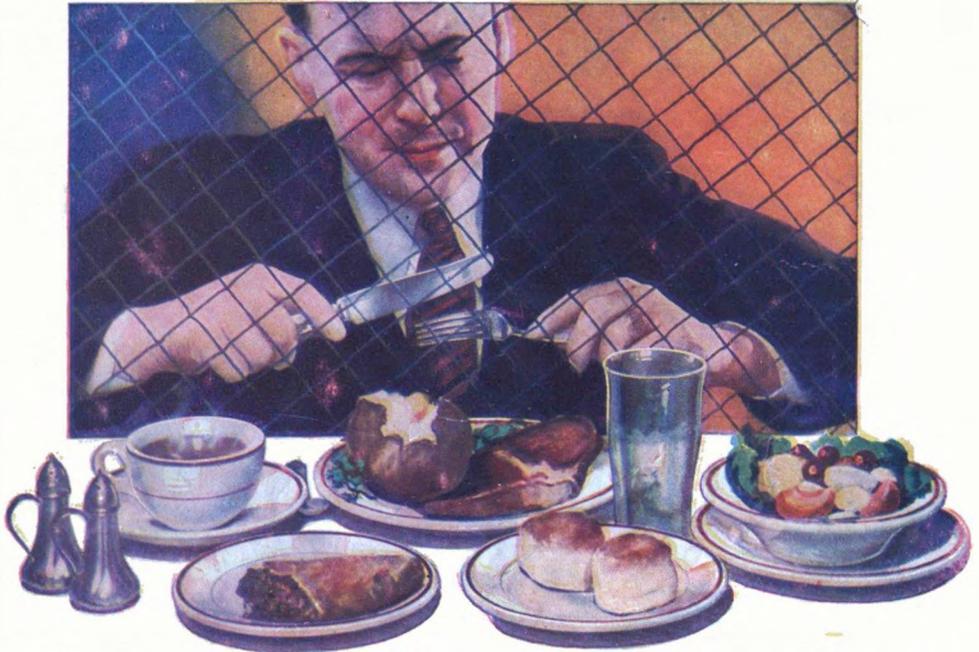
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