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TEN

**DETECTIVE**  
ACES

JAN.

**THE  
BLACK FRIAR  
MURDERS**

by JOSEPH COMMINGS



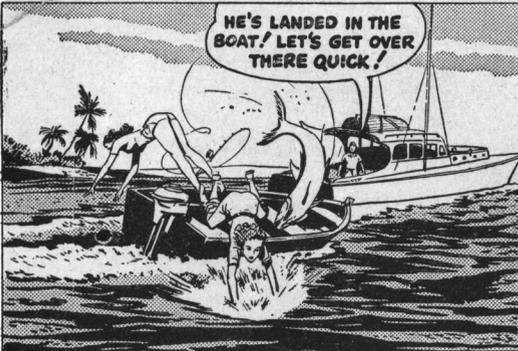
# LEAPING TARPON STARTS THINGS MOVING



THAT'S AN AWFUL LOT OF FISH FOR A GIRL TO HANDLE!

AND IT'S JUMPING MIGHTY CLOSE!

JERRY CANNON AND HIS BROTHER KIP ARE RETURNING TO PORT FROM A LONG DAY OF TROLLING FOR SAILFISH IN THE GULF STREAM, WHEN . . .



HE'S LANDED IN THE BOAT! LET'S GET OVER THERE QUICK!



HE'S FOULED THE LINE AROUND YOUR MOTOR. WE'D BETTER TOW YOU IN



THAT'S OUR PIER

HOW'S MY FISH?

RESTING QUIETLY SHE'S A KNOCKOUT



PICTURES? TAKE KIP HERE, BUT LEAVE ME OUT. I LOOK LIKE "BLACKBEARD THE PIRATE"

WHY NOT CLEAN UP IN THE CLUBHOUSE WHILE I GET MY CAMERA



SAY, THIS BLADE'S A HONEY! I'VE NEVER ENJOYED A QUICKER, SMOOTHER SHAVE

LOTS OF OUR MEMBERS USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE REALLY KEEN



NEXT TIME YOU AND HELEN WANT TO GO TARPON FISHING, MY BOAT'S AT YOUR DISPOSAL

THAT'S A BARGAIN!

H-M-M-TALL, DARK AND HANDSOME!

MEN, THIN GILLETTES HAND OUT SHAVES THAT ARE CLEAN, COMFORTABLE AND GOOD-LOOKING. AMONG ALL LOW-PRICED BLADES, THEY'RE THE KEENEST AND LONGEST LASTING. THIN GILLETTES ARE MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, TOO. THAT MEANS YOU ARE PROTECTED AGAINST SCRAPING AND IRRITATION. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES

4 for 10c

# TEN DETECTIVE ACES



January, 1948

Vol. LIV, No. 4

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Cover by Norman Saunders

Published bi-monthly by Ace Periodicals, Inc. Office of publication, 29 Worthington St., Springfield 3, Mass. A. A. Wyn, President. Editorial and executive offices, 23 West 47th St., New York 19, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter November 14, 1928, at Springfield, Mass., under Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1947, by Ace Periodicals, Inc. T.M. Reg. U.S. Pat. Off. Manuscripts will be handled with care, but this magazine assumes no responsibility for their safety. For advertising rates address Ace Fiction Group, 23 West 47th St., New York 19, N. Y. Yearly subscription, 90 cents; single copies, 15 cents. Please send all subscriptions and correspondence relating to subscriptions to Ace Periodicals, Inc., 23 West 47th St., New York 19, N. Y.



# The Black Friar Murders

By Joseph Commings



*She saw the black-robed figure lunge at her.*

*Mystery  
Novelet*

## CHAPTER I

**T**HE northbound Long Island train crawled through the thick fog like a worm in a cocoon. Snug in his seat in the day coach, Mayor Thomas Landin was saving a big hole in his capacious tummy for the succulent barbecued pig he was going to help consume at

Montauk Point—for today was Thanksgiving. He didn't think the world owed him a living, but the city certainly owed him this vacation. They didn't call him "Talkative Tom" for nothing.

The fog that swirled outside the stuck-down train windows didn't bother him a bit. He was chewing the end of an unlit cigar to a pulp and

*When Mayor Landin wasn't busy keeping his city in order, he'd delve into the latest murder mystery. But the killings in the cloister were an enigma to the part-time sleuth. For only a ghost could enter that impenetrable dungeon of doom.*



gazing narrowly at a word in the headlines of a newspaper fresh off the newsstand. The word was **MURDERER**. Landin heaved a pressure-cooker sigh. He reared up at that word like an old fire horse at a four-alarm.

The full headline read:

**12-STATE NET SPREAD FOR  
VIKI MARTINIQUE'S MURDERER**

Landin had read the accounts enough times to know the crime by heart. The victim of the hot-blooded stabbing, which occurred four days ago, was Viki Martinique, vice queen, the notorious Lavender Lady. The police labeled it a crime of passion. They knew the murderer's name. It was Viki's sweetheart, Eric Bayne. But beyond his name the police knew

nothing about him. He was virtually the man with no face.

Landin frowned at the next paragraphs. Eric Bayne was the man with no face because no accurate description of him existed in police files. He had a quicksilver personality. He had been in and out of the arms of the law several times without leaving a trace. He had always been a lawless customer.

Several years ago Bayne was picked up in South Dakota on a stolen automobile charge. Police took his picture, prints, and pedigree. But he was as slippery as a soaped whistle. He escaped that same night. Not only was he successful in getting away, but he took with him his police photo and fingerprint record.

A short biography of Eric Bayne did exist. For instance, police knew that he had attended some obscure college. A skillful actor and singer, he had appeared several times in the role of Octavian in semiprofessional productions of *Der Rosenkavalier*. Later Bayne became associated with Professor Maybrick, the phony spiritualist. Maybrick was finally caught with his ectoplasm down, and the professor died while serving ten years in Auburn Prison, having been sentenced for, among other things, defrauding the public.

The mercurial Bayne continued to defraud the public on his own. He was suspected of trying to palm off other people's silver mines in Mexico. The Feds got on his trail when it was learned that Bayne was engaged in a sugar black-market check-kiting scheme. The Feds never caught up with him. And now the man with no face had turned to murder. Landin closed his baby-blue eyes at the newspaper print and tried to bring his mind back to the barbecued pig.

Someone gave him such a thump on his broad back that his hat looped over one furry charcoal-black eyebrow. He grabbed the hat and pushed it back on his grizzled untidy mop.

"Hey, hey, Tommy!" said a girlish voice. "Wanna wrassle?"

**L**ANDIN struggled around in his seat for a gander. Everyone in the coach was looking at her. She was as cute as a speckled pup. She wasn't any taller than five feet in her open-toed sling-heel pumps. The waggish pompom hat on her mustard-colored long bob signaled her own waggish disposition. Her level natural eyebrows looked as if they had never felt the tweak of a tweezers, and her healthy apple cheeks were bunched up over a wide smile.

She continued to yip. "Mayor Landin! Don't you know me?"

He knew her. "Sherry McCord! Glory to Bessie's bustle! Sit down.

dumpling!" He threw away the newspaper. "Sherry McCord and all grown up!"

She plopped down opposite him, hugging her big navy lambskin handbag to her Cuban-lime suit and squeezing her round dimpled knees together. "Why, you big sperm whale," she said happily. "I was going through the coaches to see if there was anyone I knew on the train, and there you were. You're the same old hollering hooligan. Don't let anybody tell you different. You're looking simply grand." Her laughing eyes were electric blue.

"Mebbe," he said experimentally. "I'm putting on a little too much weight. If I get any fatter, I'll be able to spit gravy." He looked her over again. "You must be feeling the years yourself."

"I sure am. I'm almost eighteen. Oh, Tommy, you act as if I sprang up on you all of a sudden like jack-in-the-box. You did get a glimpse of me at the hog-wild goober convention two years ago."

"Goober convention? You mean gubernatorial?"

"I say goober 'cause I like peanuts. Jeepers! 'Member 'way back when I was a little girl, you used to walk me home from grammar school—whenever you had time—and I'd tell you how I had all zeros on my report card and how I was in love with my arithmetic teacher?"

Lardin, chuckling, managed to wedge in, "Do I!"

"Lucky thing you persuaded me not to become a child bride, Tommy, 'cause you know why? That arithmetic teacher was untrue to me. He was fickle. He married a widow who came to the P. T. A. meetings." She sighed romantically. "I should have picked you for a daddy. I'd have probably grown up to be a shady lady. Gee!"

"Still getting schooling, dimples?"

"Uh-huh. Winton Hall. An exclusive academy for refined young ladies. Reh-ley! I'm a social grace, and I've

been exposed to the finer points of singing, acting, and oil painting. Are you still dabbling in the old gore? You know—detecting?"

"Detecting! Betcher bootees I am! Why, they use me for transfusions to bloodhounds. If you hear me chuckling ghoulishly, it's cuz I'm savoring the windup of the Vampire Murderer. We caught him in a sub-basement one night last week."

"Oooh, Tommy," she said. "I love you!"

Landin grunted. "This's a fine time to tell me. You wait till I'm thirty-seven years older'n you are."

SHERRY grabbed his sleeve. "Now that I've found you, I'll never let you go. You're getting off at Golden Sands with me."

"Oh-ho? Noop, baby. The boys at Montauk Point have a porker on a spit for me. That's past your station."

She closed her eyes and shook her head firmly. "Mayor Landin, I'm offering turkey. You're gonna help me eat everything on that turkey but the gobble—at Golden Sands. I absolutely insist. You're one stag the boys'll have to struggle along without."

"This's my long week end, bunny, and I don't wanna get tied up with any jabbering females. And one of 'em's close enough for me to give her a nose-wipe. Listen. You tell Mom and Pop for me—"

He paused because her expression was so grave.

She said huskily, "Didn't you know? Both of them died in that Florida hotel fire over three years ago."

Landin was genuinely sorry to hear that. Pop McCord had been a sergeant on the New York City police force. And Mom's peach chiffon pies—

"And who," he said tenderly, "are you gonna visit at Golden Sands?"

"The Ponzis. They're a middle-aged married couple. Mom's friends.

Y'see, Tommy, I've spent most of my orphan time in boarding schools, while my vacations have been with friends of the family. The Ponzis invited me out for Thanksgiving dinner. Please come, Tommy. You'll like them."

"D'you like them?"

She didn't bat a natural eyelash. "Frankly, I'm not fond of them. I always feel that there's something strange going on beneath the surface with them. Nothing I can put my finger on. I accepted only 'cause I wanted to spend this holiday in a real house. I'm tired of being at school with a lotta squares."

"Imp," he said, "I think you're angling for my sympathy. You know goldarn well that if I traipse up to the other end of Long Island and leave you spattering gravy all over yourself at the Ponzis, that after this little confab I'll be worrying over whether these are the right people for you to associate with. What's old man Ponzi like?"

"His first name is Alonzo. He told me once, Tommy, that all his life he burned for romance and adventure, but his marriage to Carrie—who in his opinion is a bit of shrew—compelled him to live a prosy middle-class life. Those're his very words."

"Why doesn't he leave Carrie?"

"Why, she has all the money."

"Rich family connections, eh?"

"She came into big money about a year after the war."

Landin kneaded one of his chins. "Very *mysterioso*. I'll have to see Alonzo and Carrie for myself before I pass judgment."

Sherry clapped her hands. "I knew I'd win!"

"Besides," said Landin, "I like turkey better'n pork."

"It's all settled. You'll adore Golden Sands. It's right on Long Island Sound." She bounced up. "Now for being so sweet, Tommy, I'll take you to the next coach to meet the most awfully romantic thing you've ever seen. He wears a slouch-brim hat

and a trench coat with a tight belt. He's tall. He's handsome — classic Greek nose and X-ray eyes. The last time I saw him, he was smoking a pipe with an amber stem. Oh, what heavenly tobacco. His name is Ben Dolan."

"How long've you known him?"

"Not very long. I met him on the train."

"You're nothing but a little pick-up."

She laughed down at him. "What's more, he said he was going to Golden Sands."

"So what's that — besides coincidence?"

"So I invited him to dinner, too."

"If you hand out many more invites," said Landin, "old man Ponzi'll think he's running Sloppy Joe's."

Sherry pouted. "Gee willikers! This's Thanksgiving!"

LANDIN heaved his girth out of the seat. "That's right, Sherrykins. Watch out for the arrows in your hat. Lead the Great White Father to the paleface smoking the peace pipe loaded with heavenly tobacco."

She started briskly back down the aisle between the rows of mottled green seats. Landin, trailing her, admired the rhythm of her spine.

Two cars to the rear Ben Dolan was still smoking his pipe. Sherry's description of him had been accurate enough. Landin thought that Dolan's slouch hat and tightly belted trench coat were exaggerated effects. He looked as if he were trying too hard to cut a dashing figure. He seemed pleased that Sherry had returned.

Sherry started to introduce Dolan to Landin, but Dolan waved the introduction away. He said that it was really unnecessary to be introduced to Landin. He had often seen the mayor around town.

Landin watched Sherry sit down cozily beside Dolan. Then he sat op-

posite them so that he could keep an eye on the pair. He rumbled casually, "Where do you come from, Dolan?"

"Washington. I work there."

Sherry said, "Ben told me he was a detective."

"Yass?" queried Landin.

Dolan grinned. "For the government."

Landin eyed Dolan warily. "The F. B. Eye?"

"That's it, mayor." Dolan looked serene. "I'm just one of the many latent young men in the organization."

Landin picked his teeth thoughtfully with his raccoon's bone toothpick. Dolan seemed to be trying too hard to look like a detective. In that getup he looked like a low-budget movie director's dream of the perfect sleuth.

Landin said, "You're doing a rotten job of making a secret of it, young-fella-me-lad."

"Why should I make a secret of it?" Dolan still grinned. "Not to you, anyway. I'm not hunting for either of you."

"Who are you hunting?" said Landin.

Dolan leaned forward until his pipe bowl was over Landin's lap. He whispered confidentially, "Eric Bayne."

"Hey?" Landin felt himself rearing up like the fire horse at the gong. He forgot the toothpick. "What's the scuttlebutt on Bayne?"

Sherry interrupted excitedly, "Oh, I read about him in the papers. He killed his girl friend in Manhattan. A *crime passionnel*, Tommy. He's the man with no face." She was giving herself a delicious shudder.

"Yup," said Landin. He waited for Dolan to go on.

Dolan's voice stayed low. "How right you are. Eric Bayne, the unknown. He could be sitting with us in this very coach, and we'd be none the wiser. I'm after him on that old federal charge, his black-market activity. But the murder of Viki Mar-

tinique makes our catching him all the more imperative."

Landin said, "You'll be getting off the train with us. What do you expect to find at Golden Sands?"

Dolan hesitated, as if debating the next move. Then he thrust his hand into one of the slash pockets of the trench coat and ferreted out a folded yellow telegram. Without a word he unfolded it and held it out so that Landin could read it. The telegram read.

GOLDEN SANDS, L. I.  
POLICE DEPARTMENT NEW YORK  
CITY:  
I KNOW WHO ERIC BAYNE IS.  
CARRIE PONZI

## CHAPTER II

**J**UST as Landin was opening his mouth to say something to Dolan, the conductor bawled, "Golden Sands!" The train jarred to a stop at the fog-clouded station.

They were the only three to de-train. The train pulled out again in a moment, leaving the white vapors eddying about them. Landin shivered a little as the chill penetrated the thickness of his wraprascal. He led them to the edge of the platform and engaged a rattletrap taxi to take them to the Ponzi house.

Sherry rang the bell at the bungalow door and Alonzo Ponzi opened the way for them. Ponzi was one of those talkative men. He had a tower forehead and intense eyes behind pink-lensed glasses. He fell over himself greeting them. Sherry's sudden guests were more than welcome, he said. He took all the overcoats and hung them up himself. Then he rushed into the front room and began pouring out burgundy into glasses.

While Ponzi was passing the glasses around, a girl came into the room. She was about five feet four with a gray-eyed sober-looking face, black bangs, and a red depressed mouth.

She seemed startled to see so many people gathered there. Landin didn't miss the expression of annoyance that crossed Sherry's face at the appearance of the other girl. Dolan, for his part, looked interested.

Ponzi reached out to throw an overly familiar arm across her tailored shoulders. He said, "This is Pam Thackery, everybody. A friend of Carrie's. Pam's staying with us." He made a round of all the names, then he removed his encircling arm to pour some burgundy for Pam. He said to her, "No Carrie yet?"

Pam shook her black head. "No, Mr. Ponzi. I'm beginning to get worried."

Those words gave Landin a feeling of uneasiness. He was as anxious as Dolan to get an explanation of the telegram.

Ponzi was saying, "Fah!" Nothing ever happens to Carrie." He glanced at Landin. "Carrie's my wife." He peered nearsightedly at the clock on the piano top. "But if she doesn't come back soon, dinner'll be mighty late."

Landin said, "Where is she?"

"I must apologize for her not being here," said Ponzi. "It was like this. Carrie and Pam took a drive out to the cloister earlier today. Carrie promised to be back in time to have dinner ready before Sherry got here. Pam didn't care to stay too long, so she walked back, leaving the family car there with Carrie. We're still waiting for her."

Dolan was moving across the opaque window. "The fog's getting as thick as a blanket, Mr. Ponzi. Perhaps your wife doesn't dare drive back in it."

**P**AM looked distressed. "I feel badly about this, Mr. Ponzi. I shouldn't have gone off and left her. I could have handled the car in the fog. I'm a much better driver than she is."

"Don't get so concerned about it,

Pam," smiled Ponzi. He swallowed his burgundy and filled the glass again for himself.

"What's this cloister?" said Landin.

"It's a monastery that belongs to an order of black friars. It's on the end of Satan's Thumb." Ponzi grinned at Landin's puzzled look. "Satan's Thumb is a low strip of land sticking out into the Sound. Right on the end of it is a mass of concrete and granite, going to rack and ruin. That's the cloister."

"It's open to the public?"

"Oh, yes," said Ponzi, "as a sort of relic of old days. Nobody goes out there. And nobody lives there except one deaf old friar who shows people around. The place attracts Carrie. It's just like poor old Carrie to make a hobby of monastic architecture. How duil. But maybe she gets a kick out of being there at that. You know, the cloister is haunted."

"Who's the haunt?" said Landin.

Ponzi refilled Landin's glass. "Well, we hereabouts call him the Black Friar. The cloister was built by the black friars back when we had Indians. According to the legend that's been handed down, about a hundred years ago one of the friars was accused of being in league with the devil. They confined him in his cell, barring the door. His is the only cell you'll find there with a heavy bar on the outside. But bars and thick walls couldn't hold him. He left the cell at will and roamed in the night, seeking blood."

Sherry squeaked, "How'd he get out of the cell?"

"Through the solid walls," said Ponzi with an odd smirk. "I told you he was in league with the devil."

"He could have used a secret passage," said Landin.

Ponzi shook his head. "People have been examining that cell for decades, and not one of them yet has come up with more than a mousehole."

"Leaving a cell through solid walls!" scoffed Sherry. "I'd have to

see a thing like that to believe it."

Landin grunted. "Not necessarily, pigeon. Sometimes you see things and still you don't believe 'em."

Pam's sober voice said, "In another hour it will be dark."

Ponzi looked at her intensely. "You think she might not attempt to come home at all?"

"I think we ought to go and look for her while it's still light." Pam turned on a high heel and walked to the clothes closet for her coat.

"By golly," said Landin, following her for his own wraprascal, "we'll all go!"

"Fine," said Ponzi.

"What'll we use for transportation?" asked Dolan.

"I'll borrow neighbor Sam's car," said Ponzi.

**A**LONZO PONZI did the driving. At last he braked the borrowed sedan and turned to the others in the woolpack fog.

"We're almost there. We have to walk the rest of the way."

They all got out into the soupy atmosphere. Landin could hear the slap of invisible water on rocks.

A few yards farther on they saw the misty outline of a coupé. Ponzi scrambled up to it and looked in.

"It's ours," he called over his shoulder. "Carrie's still at the cloister."

With Ponzi in the lead, they clambered along a narrow causeway that was hardly more than a row of glorified steppingstones.

A crumbling refuge rose before them like the Bastille in a nightmare. They filed through the age-blackened archway, their feet scraping hollowly on the worn flagging. They had all brought flashlights and they played them into the dark moldy passage.

Landin assumed command of the party. He saw a steady light at the other end of the passage, and he led them toward it.

It was a friar's cell electrically lighted with a bulb in a wire cup. The

cell was practically bare. In it were an iron cot, a table, a chair, and an iron-bound chest.

"Who's home?" hollered Landin. His voice rolled down the empty corridors without an answer. The others stood in a tight group. Landin lifted the lid of the chest and found it full of musty black cloth. He picked up a handful of it and found it was a monk's habit. He dropped it and let the lid slam down again. The dust that drifted up made him sneeze.

Ponzi said, "This is where the old friar that takes care of the place lives."

Then a voice grated in from the blackness, "You are looking for the lady?"

Landin had to confess that this was the start of the willies.

An old black-robed monk was shuffling in under the light. His dingy cowl was thrown back off his head, and his fringe of fur-cap hair was a rampart for his fortification of a face. His arms hung long and loose. The tangle of black hair growing on the backs of his hands and fingers made them look like two five-legged tarantulas plucking at the sides of his habit.

Landin remembered that Ponzi had said that the old friar was deaf. He said loudly, "What's your name, cousin?"

The old friar was painfully reading his lips. "Friar App," he said.

"You mentioned the lady," said Landin. "Where'd you see her?"

"I saw her with this other young lady" Friar App pointed to Pam. "I told them it was getting foggy and to leave before it got dark." A fixed, glazed stare came into his eyes. "I warned them that it's on foggy nights like this that we often see the Black Friar."

Ponzi gave a half-tipsy laugh. "If Carrie ever meets the Black Friar, my sympathies are with *him*."

"Where's she now?" said Landin to Friar App.

"I don't know."

Sherry said with an obvious shiver in her voice, "Carrie must be around here somewhere. Let's each take a different corridor and look for her. I don't wanna stay here any longer than I have to."

"I agree with that suggestion," said Dolan. He was getting impatient.

"But," said Ponzi, "do the ladies care to roam around unattended?"

"They don't believe that bunco story about the Black Friar," said Landin.

"Speak for yourself, John," said Sherry. She took a tight grip on her flashlight.

With the old friar's help, they decided which passages to explore. He told them they would have to depend on their own light; his cell was the only part of the cloister wired for electricity.

Landin watched them all strike out into the dark, even Friar App. Then Landin took the south passage.

WHEN Landin tramped back into Friar App's cell twenty minutes later, Ponzi was there waiting for him, taking nips from his flask. Landin shot him a quizzical look. Ponzi silently shook his head. He hadn't found Carrie.

"I'm willing to swear," said Landin, "that there ain't a living soul in the southern part of this dungeon."

Ponzi sat in the only chair and continued to help himself liberally from the flask. "I wonder—" he began. "No. She has to be here."

Landin froze and listened. "I hear someone running."

The scurrying became louder, then Landin heard Sherry squawking his name, her echoes ringing in the passage. She burst into sight, with Pam closely on her heels.

"Oh, lordy," panted Sherry. "Tommy! Alonzo! We found her. She's in a cell in the north end. Somebody stabbed her!"

Ponzi was on his feet. "How badly?"

"I think she's—" began Pam.

Landin pushed his way out. "Show me the cell, Sherry."

She scampered ahead of him. In the gloomy northern reaches they came to a cell door that was made prisonlike with a massive oak bar. Landin lifted the bar and opened the rivet-studded door. He stepped just inside, weaving his light. There was a table and a chair. That was all. No light came through the foot-square window on the opposite wall; a window that was iron-barred in the shape of a cross, with spaces hardly big enough to get a fist through. The door and the window were the only openings in the cell.

"She's—behind that table," said Sherry.

Ponzi came forward to look with Landin. Both girls held back in the doorway.

Carrie's overcoat was unbuttoned and had fallen wide open. Landin saw the stab slit in the front of the simple gabardine dress, and the blood. There was no knife. By looking at her Landin knew that she was dead. But he touched her wrist and temple to make sure. The pulseless flesh was warm.

"We can't do anything," he said to Ponzi. "Come back where it's light. We'll have to wait and tell the others."

Nobody spoke as they trooped back to the lighted cell.

Then Ponzi said, "That was the haunted cell I told you about. The cell where they locked up the devilish—"

"All right," said Landin sharply. He didn't want Ponzi to start raving. He turned to the girls. "What I want to know is, which of you found her?"

"Both of us," said Sherry.

"When'd you two team up?" said Landin. "We all started out as singles."

Sherry cleared her throat to explain. Landin stopped her before she got started. "You and Ponzi waltz

outside, Sherry. I'll talk to Pam first."

"Okay," said Sherry with a shrug. She stepped outside, and Ponzi followed.

Pam sank on the rusty-sprunged cot. "I"—her voice sounded hoarse—"we weren't together at first. I went along the west side of the cloister, the side nearest the Sound. Then my flashlight battery burned out. I fumbled around in the dark, getting more scared by the second, and I lost my way. Then I heard somebody moving down the next corridor and I called out and it was Sherry.

"Well, I told her about my light being out, and we went along together, using hers. We came to the only cell that was closed; barred, in fact. Sherry handed me her flashlight while she strained at the bar and lifted it. She swung the door open gingerly, and I shoved the light in. It was all musty and cobwebby.

"We were both crowding the doorway when a bulky black shape sprang up from behind the table. It wore a cowl and a loose habit. One arm was bent stiffly at the elbow and there was a knife in the hand. The shape slid toward the wall—the side wall. I was horrified. I knew it was the Black Friar. When it reached the side wall it seemed to duck down and then—then—"

Landin had to prompt her. "Then what?"

"And then the Black Friar vanished into thin air!"

### CHAPTER III

**A** CHILL started to climb his back and goose the roots of Landin's hair. He said loudly, "Whoa, sister! Backtrack a little. You saw the Black Friar in the cell when you unbarred the door. Right? That would mean that somebody was able to enter the cell by a means other than the door, since the bar's outside, and it can't be dropped into place from the inside. But that's the lesser of the

spooky effects." He took off his hat and pawed a hand through his hackles. "How big was he? An averaged-sized man?"

"Oh, very large. Like you."

"And this bird dived for the wall with the knife in his hand and apparently went right through it, eh? Are y'ure you weren't hoaxed? Are y'sure he didn't slip around behind you and duck out the open door?"

"Oh, no. He couldn't have. We were standing right in the doorway when it happened. We were blocking it."

"How far away from you was he when he disappeared?"

"About eight feet. After he disappeared, we heard a groan coming from behind the crude table. We forced ourselves to look. Carrie Ponzi was lying there on the floor. She was still breathing, but her eyes were starting to glaze. As we bent over her, I heard her start to say—and Sherry must have heard it too—'*The Black Friar stabbed*—'" Pam hesitated, looking very white. "By this time our flesh was crawling. We both lost our heads and rushed out."

"And barred the door on the outside again?"

"We slammed the door. Sherry did take a second to push the bar back into place. Then she outran me down the passage."

Landin was frowning. He was completely baffled. He trotted to the cell door. Outside in the corridor Sherry was talking in whispers to Ponzi. Landin called Sherry into Friar App's cell and dismissed Pam. The girls passed each other in the doorway.

Landin asked Sherry to tell him what happened. Sherry's story was identical with Pam's save for the words they used in telling it. None of Landin's shrewd questions could shake it. He finally released Sherry and told her to join the others outside.

Alone in the cell, he paced back and forth, thinking. Had Sherry and Pam murdered Carrie together and

short-ordered this claptrap to keep their skirts clean of suspicion? Or had there been a ghost in the cell? Who thought he was foxing Landin this time? How could two girls who had only met each other today collaborate on a murder? That was impossible. The only answer to it was that they had both told the truth about what they'd seen. The Black Friar had murdered Carrie. And he had left the cell by going through the solid wall.

Another thought struck Landin: *How solid are those walls?* He'd find out for himself.

Where was old Friar App? Why hadn't he shown up? And where was the handsome Gee-man?

Landin looked at a spider crawling across the floor, sighed, and then moved toward the door.

He was startled to find no one in the passage. Sherry, Pam, and Ponzi had faded away. He flicked his light around, but there was no sign of them.

**G**RUMBLING about the lack of co-operation he was getting, Landin bumped along the dank, dismal north passage to the murder cell. "I'll lay odds that Pam and Ponzi sneaked off together somewhere!"

He got to wondering about that pair. Ever since he had seen them together at Ponzi's house, Ponzi with his arm across her shoulders, they had been clicking like Mom's sewing machine. Was it just a surface attraction or did it go deeper? Pam looked like the genteel, sober-minded sort. Ponzi had strong emotions boiling under his skin of cynicism. Suppose Ponzi desired Pam and had decided to do away with—

Landin reached the cell. He unbarred the door and went cautiously in. Nothing had changed. Carrie lay stiffening on the stone floor. She was growing cold now. Landin took his eyes away from the body and stared at the grim walls. As a one-time front man for a carnival ghost-show, he

thought he was well equipped to expose any mumbo jumbo. He went to work on the haunted cell.

Brushing cobwebs and dust off the thick sleeves of his wraprascal, Landin tramped out of the cell and clanked the door shut. His expression was a study in defeat. He wrestled the bar in place and listened to the echoes after it dropped.

Somebody began chanting in Latin. Landin swung the flashlight beam around on the black cowl and robe and the folded hairy hands.

"It's about time you showed up, Brother App!" Landin rumbled.

Friar App advanced slowly. Landin directed the light up to his own face so that the deaf man could read his lips. "Where've you been?"

"I wandered afar. I've been down to the shore line. Have you any means of getting back to the mainland?"

"What d'you mean? Why can't we walk back the way we came?"

"The tide," said Friar App with a ghost of a smile. "The tide has come in. It comes in swiftly, and the whole causeway is covered. You can't walk back to the mainland for six hours or more. You could swim. But it would be a long cold swim on a November night."

Landin shifted his feet on the smooth flagging. "So we're all bottled up on a little island! Haven't you got a telephone or a boat of some kind?"

Friar App shook his fur-cap head. "No telephone. There is only one boat. A rowboat."

"Just so long as it floats. Where is it?"

"Down at the little boat shack by the mooring block. I've been caulking it these past few days."

Landin gripped Friar App's stringy arm. "Let's go down and take a look at it."

SEVEN minutes later Landin groped back to the groined entrance of the cloister. He paused, and the fog packed him in cotton batting. The eerie note of a foghorn drifted

in from the mists of the Sound. The cloister maintained a tomblike silence.

Then he heard someone walking. A shoe was scraping on the slippery flags as it felt its way.

Landin stood with his back to the rough wall and waited. He saw Sherry's small figure drifting a few yards away. He was glad that she was safe. She came to a halt, frowning and pursing her lips in thought. She hadn't seen him.

Then Landin saw the outline of a slouch hat and a trench coat and he knew it was Ben Dolan. Seed pearls of moisture were on his hatbrim and shoulders.

"Hello!" said Dolan in surprise to Sherry. He sucked his pipe. He hadn't seen Landin either.

"Where've you been?" asked Sherry bluntly.

"Looking."

"What'd you find?"

"Nothing worth reporting."

There was a little silence from Sherry. Then she said bitterly, "While you were gone, we had a murder. Carrie Ponzi is dead."

Dolan showed no reaction. He waited till she told him about it. When she finished, he looked oddly at her and said, "What do you think of all that?"

"I don't know," she said shortly. "You're a detective. Or are you?"

Funny, thought Landin, he was thinking that same question himself. For all anybody knew, Ben Dolan might be Eric Bayne. He wished he'd had time to check on Dolan by calling the Department of Justice. The telegram to the police that Dolan was carrying was legitimate enough. But Bayne might have drygulched the real Dolan on the way to Long Island and taken his place.

Dolan had laughed at Sherry's last remark. "You seem angry with me, Sherry. I wonder why."

"I noticed the way you were googling at that Pam creature. Why, you only met her today."

"I only met you today too."

"Humph!" snorted Sherry. "Excuses!"

Landin thought it was time to break it up. He bayed, "Is that you out there, Sherry?" And he lumbered up to them. "And Dolan, too."

Sherry said swiftly, "Tommy, I told him about the murder."

"Okay," said Landin. He watched Dolan relight his pipe and eyed the face in the flare of the match. "Here's the puzzler: The cell where we found Carrie has only one door. It was barred on the outside. I've just come from there, and I know it's impossible to work the bar once you're inside. So how'd the Black Friar lock himself in? Wait a minnit! I ain't finished yet.

"Windows? Sure, there's one. It's a foot square and quartered by two iron staves. You can just about get a starved cat through. Trap doors or revolving walls? Not on your tintype! That cell is just a large cube of empty space surrounded on all six sides by blocks of granite a foot square.

"There ain't the least bit o' presto chango connected with the walls, floor, or ceiling. Yet when those two ladies unbarred the door, the Black Friar was inside the cell! With their own eyes they saw him jump for the solid wall and vanish straight through it! Well, sir?"

**D**OLAN refused to take up the challenge. He said, "There's something else you may not know about this place. When the tide comes in—"

"I know about that," interrupted Landin. "There's a boat we can take. Thank yuh kindly for the information. What I wanna do now is get everybody together so that we can have some order. Have you seen either Ponzi or Pam?"

"No," said Sherry.

Dolan nodded. "I did and they were together. I didn't interfere with them, although it seemed to me he was forcing his attentions on her in

a drunken sort of way. She was handling him with tact and grace. I admire that girl."

"Oh, you do?" sniffed Sherry. Her voice had a razor edge on it. "Tommy, take me back inside. Mr. Dolan will find those people for you."

Back in Friar App's lighted cell Landin waited and looked at his kettle-sized hunting-case watch. "Where in Tophet is everybody?" he growled crossly.

Sherry was sitting on the cot. She was beginning to get some of her humor back. "You sound like an old grizzly."

Then something went bump in the night.

Sherry jumped up in fright and grabbed Landin. "What—who's that?"

Landin cocked an ear. Someone was shuffling outside in the passage, slowly and painfully. They heard a bubbly gasp.

An awful figure lolled in the doorway.

It was Ponzi, but his appearance was so changed that Landin hardly recognized him. His glasses were gone, and blood was mingled with foam on his lips. His clothes were torn and filthy as if he had dragged himself part of the way. A look of sheer astonishment was weighing down the muscles of his pallid face. He stumbled forward and Landin pushed Sherry away to catch the falling man.

"Creeping crawdads!" snapped Landin. "What happened to you?"

Ponzi rolled his filmy eyes up. "The murderer! I've seen him!" His voice was guttural. He coughed blood. "It's—his—hair—" He went limp in Landin's arms.

Landin hauled him to the cot and laid him face down. There was a rent in the back of Ponzi's coat. Blood seeped through it. "Stabbed in the back."

"The Black Friar again," whispered Sherry. "Oh, Tommy, I'm scared. Scared stiff."

"Huh?" Landin's attention was on Ponzi. "He's gone. Dead."

"Tommy, let's take the boat and go away. Please!"

"We can't."

"Why not?"

"Look. I found out about that row-boat. It ain't in the boat shack where Friar App usually keeps it."

"Someone took off in it and escaped!"

"No," said Landin. "Someone moved it to another place on this part-time island."

"The murderer!" she said with a gasp. "He doesn't want us to find it! He doesn't want us to get away!"

Landin shook his big head. "No. I moved it. So that the murderer can't get away."

**S**HERRY started to sag at the knees. She sat down in the chair and kept her eyes away from Ponzi's body on the cot. "That," she said, "is like locking yourself inside a cage with a man-eating tiger."

Sherry's gaze had gone back to the doorway. Landin twisted his head to see what she was looking at and stared into the pale, strained face of Pam Thackery.

"Mr. Ponzi!" breathed Pam, her eyes on the cot. "Is he—"

"He's dead," said Landin brusquely.

Pam edged in. Sherry said to her accusingly, "You were with him."

Pam turned gray eyes at Sherry. They looked steely in the bright light. "I was with him—for a little while. I had a little struggle with him, and then I left him. When I came back this way, I saw blood in the passage. It was his blood." She remained leaning against the rough wall.

Landin hitched up his baggy gray britches. "Here's the big picture: I can see a man's hand in the crimes tonight. As a general rule, wimmen ain't the stabbing kind; they prefer poison and other mild things that corrode a fella's carcass by small degrees. That's why we call 'em the

gentler sex. Ponzi, with his dying breath, said, 'It's his hair.' Note the masculine pronoun. Evidence pointing to a man again. So you, Sherry, and you, Pam, would be completely outta the big picture."

"Hair!" cried Sherry. "Friar App's fuzzy hands! Haven't you noticed them? He's the murderer!"

"Could be," said Landin, not greatly disturbed. "But let's think this to a conclusion. Take Ben Dolan. If we believe the story Dolan told us on the train, he's sleuthing for the man without a face, Eric Bayne. Bayne is the only one I know of who had a motive for killing Carrie. Carrie was gonna give his identity away to the police."

The cords were rigid in Pam's neck. "You mean Eric Bayne is here in the cloister?"

"There're only five people," said Landin gravely. "And Eric Bayne is one of us."

#### CHAPTER IV

**T**HERE was a graveyard silence. Landin knew he had the two girls. Finally he said, "When we know how Bayne made use of the solid walls of the barred cell to do that vanishing trick, we'll know all we'll ever have know about him. It's as simple as that."

"Do you know how he did it?" piped up Sherry. She sounded like a mystified schoolgirl who was afraid to look up the answer in the back of the book.

"I know one thing. Bayne has foxed us. He's foxed us cute. There's some things I can't deny. One of 'em is—that cell is absolutely foolproof, and Bayne was in the cell while you and Pam were there—and he got out the easiest way imaginable. Anybody could do it. He left through the—" He thought of something else and got stuck.

Pam's lips looked frozen. "I can't believe it, unless this Eric Bayne has no more substance than—"

Sherry cried, "Tommy, who is—"

Landin kept a tormenting silence. A battered brass lantern was underneath the cot. Landin dragged it out and shook it to see if it had any oil. It had enough. He struck a large kitchen match. As he was lighting the lantern, he said, "Somebody'll have to go ashore for the police. How about you, Sherry? You're anxious to leave. Think you can make it?"

She nodded eagerly. He put the lantern into her hand. Her handbag was lying on the table with Pam's. Landin picked one up and shoved it under her arm. He told her where he had hidden Friar App's rowboat and wished her luck.

She darted out.

Pam stared absently at the remaining handbag on the table, then she picked it up with more interest. "This isn't mine," she said.

"Not yours?"

"You've given mine to Sherry."

"Sure?"

"Certain."

"We'll see." Landin took the handbag from her. He unsnapped the metal clasp and turned the whole thing upside down. Articles clattered on the table. Besides a money purse, cosmetics, and a handkerchief, there were innumerable other objects: aspirin tablets, a comb, gloves, kleenex, sunglasses, a folder of matches, a pack of cigarettes, a silver pencil, pins, nail file, a key ring with two Yale keys on it, a program for Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *Le Coq d'Or* with sketches of hair-do's on the margins, and a Pennsylvania Railroad ticket stub.

Landin put the lip of the bag to the edge of the table and scooped everything back in again. "Just like a woman."

Then he moved toward the door.

Pam stiffened. "Mayor Landin! Where are you going?"

"To round up Dolan and Brother App. You stay put till I get back.

There's nothing to get the jitters about. I'll account for everybody."

Pam said, "How can you say that when—" She stopped because Sherry was standing in the doorway.

Landin said, "What're you doing back so soon, chicky?"

"I was halfway down the path," said Sherry, "when I found I'd taken your bag, Pam."

"You came all the way back just for that?" said Pam.

"I'm helpless without my own," said Sherry with a queer smile. The girls exchanged bags, then Sherry hurried out again.

Landin waited till her rapid footsteps died away, then he gave Pam an encouraging nod and trotted out.

**S**HERRY came to the place at the water's edge where Landin had said he'd hidden the boat. She lifted her lantern as high as her arm could reach, but she couldn't see any boat. The fog wrapped up the lamp in dingy vapor.

"I mustn't have come to the right place," she said out loud.

She went searching along the shore.

Her high-heeled pumps wobbled over slippery stones and tripped on tough briars. Still no boat.

She wondered if she were imagining things. Someone was walking behind her. Or was it the echo of her own footsteps? She stopped, and so did the other sound. She swung the smoky lantern high around her head. She couldn't see a thing but engulfing haze.

Having no landmarks to guide her, she was getting twisted about. With a twinge of panic, she wondered which was the way back to the entrance of the cloister. She moved on aimlessly, getting lost and bewildered.

She wheeled suddenly, feeling a nerve-prick of hovering danger, and she saw a shape flap out of the lantern's range. What was it? Something baggy and black! Her heart

swelled to choke her. It was the Black Friar!

Sherry forgot about the boat. She forgot about everything but safety. She wanted to run. Run!

She stumbled forward, the lantern bobbing in her flailing arm. The thing behind her wasn't stealthy any more. It was at her heels—running, panting. Sherry cringed at the thought of a knife in her back. She spun around and faced it.

The Black Friar was looming out of the murk, the cowed robe making the figure look gigantic. In his right hand he was carrying a bloodstained bowie knife. His face was all shadow. The man without a face.

He reached out his left hand and dashed the lantern to the ground. The burning oil spread around their feet as they struggled in an infernal dance. Sherry caught the knife-arm in both her hands, but the Black Friar was much stronger. He tore her fingers away. She was going down. She felt the earth sliding away from under her feet.

The Black Friar poised the knife for the fatal plunge. Then something just as huge and black lunged at the Friar. Both forms locked in a shapeless, swirling mass. Sherry got to her knees, then to her feet.

There was the ringing crack of hard wood on a skull, a groan, and somebody sank to the ground.

"All right, baby?" said Landin's calming voice.

Sherry sobbed with relief.

Landin was swinging a big club. "I got a surprise for you." He stooped down and pulled the black cowl off the battered head. He shone his flashlight into the murderer's face.

Sherry saw it, but she couldn't believe it.

Pam Thackery was lying there!

"No, Tommy," cried Sherry. "It's all a mistake. The murderer is a man. It has to be a man. This's Pam—"

Landin chuckled. "He foxed all of us, tot. This's *Eric Bayne!*"

THEY finally had that Thanksgiving dinner. It was late, but they had it—with the compliments of the Long Island Police.

Sherry and Dolan were busy eating and looking at each other, so they didn't mind Landin's doing all the talking.

Landin turned a picked-clean drumstick over in his greasy fingers, dropped it on his plate, and reached for another meaty one.

He said, "We knew all along that the killer was a man, yet when I figured out how the Black Friar passed through the foot-thick cell wall, the answer always came out Pam Thackery. How was I gonna reconcile that? There's one way: The killer was a man disguised as a woman! It sounded pretty far-fetched. Few men could get away with it. But that newspaper I was reading on the train unwittingly supplied the essential clue. It said that Bayne was a skillful actor and singer, and that several times he'd played the role of Octavian in productions of *Der Rosenkavalier*.

"What about it? I'll tell you. The role of Octavian in that libretto is an artful female-impersonation part. On the stage Octavian dresses up like a pretty girl; he fools everybody and the comic villain falls in love with him. That meant that Bayne was an experienced female impersonator. And he'd have no trouble finding dresses if he wore Viki Martinique's clothes."

Sherry said, "What was his reason for showing up at the Ponzi house and killing Carrie?"

"Black market," said Landin promptly. "Dolan here was after Bayne for his illicit sugar selling. Carrie Ponzi secretly worked with Bayne in the lush days of the war. No doubt they used the unfrequented parts of the cloister as a cache. After the war was over, Bayne paid Carrie off. That's where the large mysterious sum of money comes in, Sherry. Carrie was through with Bayne. She

wanted to settle down to a peaceful life and grow old on the sugar proceeds. But when Bayne murdered Viki Martinique, he had to have a safe place to hide. He picked Carrie Ponzi's house, showed up in girl's clothes, and warned her to keep her mouth shut. Fearful of disrupting her whole life by getting tangled with Bayne again, Carrie double-crossed him and sent the telegram to the New York Police."

"That's where I came in," grinned Dolan.

"Yass," said Landin, "if you hadn't looked so much like a detective, I might have been more convinced that you were a detective. So that's how the solution popped into my head. Knowing that Pam was Bayne, and Bayne was the killer, I had to trap him. I staged that little boat hunt for Sherry. I hadn't moved the boat from the shack at all. I told Sherry to look where the boat wasn't, giving the killer a chance to get at her."

**S**HERRY shook a parson's nose at him. "That's something I wanna know, Tommy. What'd he wanna kill me for? Gosh! Did I ever do anything to him?"

"It was on account of the handbags I purposely switched on you."

"Something he had in his?" asked Sherry.

"Nope, what he didn't have. I took the liberty of emptying your bag of all its rubbish." Sherry's cheeks started to redden. "I remarked to Pam that it was just like a woman. It takes time to accumulate one of those rat's nests. He knew that you must have opened the one that he'd been carrying, to check to make sure it wasn't your own. As soon as you had time to think, it'd dawn on you that his wasn't just like a woman's, and your suspicions of him would be aroused.

"He wanted to kill you to keep himself safe. That's why he killed Alonzo Ponzi. He said that Ponzi had got

fresh with him. That's true. Ponzi started a love tussle in one of the passageways and accidentally knocked Bayne's wig loose. He was stunned to find himself wrapped up in a young man. Then he knew it was the murderer—as Bayne stabbed him. He tried to tell us by saying, 'It's his hair!' when he really meant the wig."

"And I was sure he meant that hairy old Friar App!" said Sherry.

Dolan said, "The part that isn't clear at all is how both Sherry and Pam—or Bayne—saw the Black Friar in the cell immediately after Carrie was stabbed. Bayne couldn't have been in two places at once. He was by Sherry's side, holding the flashlight. What was the black figure they saw, and how did it go through the granite wall?"

"Glad you brought that up," said Landin. "Shows you're thinking. Well, sir! A baby could do it. All you need is this." He laid down his laden fork and took an ordinary flashlight out of his pocket. "And this." He took something else out of the other pocket.

The second object was so small that both Sherry and Dolan had to lean closer to see it. It was a cardboard cutout doll hardly more than half an inch tall. It was cut in the shape of the Black Friar with a knife held out at half an arm's length.

Landin held up the cardboard cutout in his thick fingers. "That's what Sherry and Pam saw in the cell. Remember now! Pam had said her flashlight had burned out. She'd taken the batteries out of it to make it unworkable, that's all. Bayne had come prepared to kill Carrie. He had the bowie knife in his handbag. He knew Carrie was in the barred cell. He'd locked her in there before he left the cloister earlier in the afternoon. The deaf old monk caretaker couldn't hear her cries. So! As soon as we all separated in the cloister to look for Carrie, Bayne slipped into one of Friar App's black robes that

*(Continued on page 96)*

# Big House Buffoon

By D. A. Hoover

*It was no circus for the crook who donned a clown suit. For when he pulled that hicktown job, he was headed for the big house, not the big top.*



**C**HET HUBER removed the clown suit from his luggage and listened for the coming of the circus parade which would cover the daring robbery he had planned. He

stepped inside the orange and black folds of the whispering silk and buttoned it up under his receding chin. His manicured fingers trembled slightly as he adjusted the cone-shaped hat over his pale blond hair. Good, the lightweight mask would divert critical glances from his moist, prominent eyes.

While the band blared and the cavorting clowns entertained the gaping sidewalk crowds, Chet would be removing a fat roll of green bills from Amos Flack's department store register.

Chet sneezed and breathed heavily through his open mouth. He cursed this little town, whose dusty streets supported a verdant growth of healthy ragweeds almost to the town square of Hilltop. Hay fever had him in its relentless grip. He couldn't leave, however. Chicago was too hot after he'd left the old man dead in the filling-station holdup.

Below his upstairs window the babble of the waiting crowd died away. The clear, lilting tones of a trumpet pierced the hot August air like silver needles. Chet could hear the *clap-clap* of the ringmaster's horse's shod hoofs as they struck the red

cobblestones. The parade was coming!

Chet's upper lip beaded with nervous moisture. A quick slap to his left armpit assured him of the presence of his flat automatic pistol. He tiptoed around crooked ranks of hat boxes and stacked bolts of gaily colored gingham. It was good of Flack to let Chet have a cot here in the stock room with housing so scarce, yet Chet was not grateful. The world owed an easy living to the clever.

He paused at the stair-well banister and peered over with caution. The parade should have emptied the great, jumbled store below. No one would be inside but Flack himself.

Chet cursed again. The old goat was going to linger inside his disarrayed emporium of shoddy goods. He was sitting within six feet of the cash register. He'd excused the little red-headed cashier and let her go out to watch the parade. Flack was always doing silly things which he called "heart-warmers." Bunk, Chet called it. He wasn't anybody's flunky.

Chet hesitated only a second, grinding his teeth together. He wasn't going to stop now. His money from the Chicago holdup was about gone. If he were recognized here, he might have to move fast, without notice. It took dough to seal mouths and eyes along an escape route.

He tiptoed down the steps, avoiding the eighth one which groaned like the victim on a dentist's chair. Flack was sitting with his snow-white goatee elevated at an interested angle, face to the front. A cigarette smoked in 9

long, rakish holder. His brown, supple hands held a pair of binoculars. He would enjoy the parade from the elevated position of the cashier's cubicle. No wonder, Chet had to wet his hands and sprinkle his white shirt an hour ago washing that plate glass.

Chet reached the bottom of the stairs, crossed the store, and was half-way up the steps leading to the cashier's sanctuary before Flack stirred. Chet froze. Flack was only getting a better aim with his glasses at a slim-hipped girl in tights who was doing a little dance on the back of a white horse.

*Oompah, oompah.* The band covered Chet's movements until he stood directly behind Flack. He had to rap his gun sharply on the guard rail to get the storekeeper's attention.

**F**LACK'S gray eyes went frosty at the sight of the gun. He looked Chet up and down. He kept his hands in plain sight. But his face, seamed and brown as a battered suitcase, revealed no fear.

Chet waved his gun toward the cash drawer and the safe. The really big wad, Flack kept in the safe. Cashing checks for workers who were paid after banking hours was one of his friendly "heart-warming" services. He usually sold the fellow something before the deal was over, though. Chet knew there was five thousand dollars waiting for him there.

Flack's wide galluses were taut. "You can't get away with this, fellow," Flack said, slipping down off his stool. "I'll get Police Captain Moss and we'll take your gol-dang circus apart. We'll get you."

Flack's eyes wavered, and Chet knew he was bluffing. He didn't know Chet from a cigar-store Indian.

Chet saw Flack fumble in the tray where the cashier's supplies were kept, as if he might grasp a pair of long-billed scissors and try to use them as a weapon. But his hand moved on and picked up the big green roll tied with dirty string.

Flack thumped it down next to his wiry belly. Chet reached out to claim his prize, and Flack moved like a window shade whirring up. His hand flicked out toward Chet as he took an uncertain step backward. Instantly Chet saw that it was no gun Flack held. Chet felt only the feeblest tap against his hand and the heartiest contempt for anybody who would dare resist a killer such as he.

It was only the fact that Chet was already too hot for further flight that he spared Flack's life at all. He grunted and laid the barrel of the gun along Flack's graying temple with all the force he could command. Much more than needed to knock the old man out.

Blood spurted from the cruel gash in Flack's temple as his eyes glazed over, and he fought with every particle of his will to stay on his feet. His mouth sagged open wider. He fell sideways, slowly dragging the blotter off the desk. The crash of his body was loud in the deserted hollowness of the small-town store.

Chet raced around a rack of all-wool underwear with trap doors, cut to half price for the summer sale. He fairly leaped up the stairs to the place he had started from in the stock room. In seconds he was out of the clown suit and had it hidden as before in his luggage. He was already dressed in street clothes. Three minutes later he was mixing with the crowd on the street, and not a soul had seen him slip quietly from the back door of Flack's store. Everybody was out front.

"The elephants are coming—watch your kiddies." The grandly dressed horseman doffed his shiny silk hat to the ladies. The scaly, blue-gray elephants moved ponderously from side to side, dully bored. Overalled farmers tongued brown cigars, kids licked at ice-cream cones and buxom women in shapeless dresses gasped with awe.

Chet enjoyed himself to the full, laughing more at the crude hayseeds

who talked too loudly and pointed at everything, than he did at the animals. To him, the farm was a backwoods wilderness because he had always thought so. He had never tried to understand that people in small towns and along dusty roads pulse with the same life as that along the boulevards. That was why he so sadly underestimated Amos Flack. When Flack closed his big, country-style store, he, too drove home and milked his cows.

A heavy hand fell on his shoulder. Captain Moss stood there, his eyes more frosty than Flack's. Flack had a red bandanna handkerchief tied around his head, a wisp of white bandage showing at his temple. One eye was swelled almost shut, and a blue area was rapidly spreading across his brown cheek.

"He's the one who robbed me," Flack said, pointing to Chet. "I knew right away he wasn't a real circus clown because the wrinkles were still to be seen in his clown suit. It had

been laid away, not ironed and carefully carried on a hanger. Then I smelled moth balls on it, too. Guess Chet couldn't smell them. He has a bad case of hay fever."

Chet held his face sober in proper chagrin for the damage Flack had suffered. But inside he was leaping with joy like the two clowns leading the long-eared jackass at the windup of the parade.

"Why, you two country hicks. I've a good mind to sue you for slander. How long would evidence of that sort last in court, away from here where I would appeal for a retrial?"

Captain Moss looked acutely uncomfortable. "I told you, Flack—"

"Have a look at his right hand," Flack said softly. "I think I made a good impression on the thief."

Chet turned the palm of his hand up, and paralysis gripped him. In bright purple ink was the impression of a rubber stamp; *Paid in full. Flack's Friendly Store. Come Back Sometime.*



*The stranger had traveled plenty and had seen bloodshed before. But he'd never made better time nor seen more gore than when he took that . . .*

# Fast Trip to Hades



By H. Q. Masur

**S**HE was a Second Lieutenant in the United States Army Medical Corps, and her crisp white nurse's uniform contained the standard equipment in its proper disposition. She stood in the doorway to my room at the Veterans' Hospital and adjusted a bright smile on her mouth.

"Well, corporal," she said, "how do you feel?"

"Okay."

"This is the big day, isn't it?" I shrugged indifferently. "The same as the rest, twenty-four hours big."

She gave me a troubled look and shook her head and said, "Come along. Major Zachary is waiting for you."

I followed her down the long white corridor into a small office that held a desk behind which a short fat man with round moist eyes and no hair on a flat skull sat folding his pudgy

hands on a blotter. He looked up at me.

"Sit down, corporal," he urged heartily, "sit down." He eyed me carefully. "You're glad to be going home, eh?"

I shrugged.

"You have no relatives?"

"One," I said. "But she took a powder on me when I was overseas."

He pursed his lips solicitously. "What are you going to do as a civilian?"

"Loaf," I said shortly. I was glad this was the last time he would try to pick my brain like a buzzard picks the bones of a dead steer.

"No more headaches?"

"No, sir. That silver plate in my head feels fine."

He nodded, apparently satisfied, but I saw his hand move surreptitiously along the desk and tip a book off the edge. It fell to the floor with a resounding wallop. I sat there under his sharp scrutiny, not blinking an eye, motionless.

"Satisfied, major?" I asked finally.

"Nerves okay, not jumpy, shakes all gone. I'm sounder than the Federal Reserve Bank."

He was on his feet, smiling, hand out. "Splendid. Your papers are ready. And remember, if you feel any distress, just walk into any veterans' hospital and they'll take care of you."

Two years had been enough. I wouldn't be found dead in one, with all the brass and chicken that floats around an army installation.

In an hour I had my discharge, my mustering-out pay, and was on a bus to town. When I got there, I bought a suit and some haberdashery and told the clerk to give my uniform to the Salvation Army. I caught another bus to New York and went directly to Penn Station.

There, at the ticket window, I pushed a ten-dollar bill at the clerk and said:

"One-way ticket to Hades."

The train passing through Hades left at midnight. I sat up in a coach all night and watched the telephone

poles race by. At 5:45 the train jolted to a stop, and I swung off. The chilled fog of dawn enveloped the red brick platform, and I stood there, shivering. Once the sun broke through, it would be hotter than the belly of a blast furnace.

A SCRAWNY old gent with a green eyeshade hobbled down the platform to gather the sack of mail tossed off by the train. He didn't see me in the murky haze until I spoke.

"Hey!" I said.

He jumped and peered hard through the fog, blinking. "You give me a start, son," he said. "You get off that there train?"

"Yes. Any place I can get some chow around here?"

"Nick's Diner," he said. "Straight back towards Main Street. Visitin' somebody in town?"

"Nope."

"Gonna stay long?"

"Maybe."

"You oughta stay," he said wistfully. "The Hades Machine Works needs men."

"I'll look into it," I promised.

With the voracious curiosity found in most small towns, he asked with a friendly grin, "What's your name?"

"Falk," I said. "Louis Falk."

He muttered his own name, and then his voice got lost in the fog as he dragged the mail sack along the red brick platform to his shack. Off in the distance the taillight of the train retreated and vanished. Its whistle hooted twice, and I was alone. I trudged over to Main Street and found Nick's Diner.

It was early, and there were no other customers. I got settled on a stool and basked in its steamy, aromatic vapors. Nick came over and slopped his rag over the counter and showed me a large gold tooth in the front of his mouth.

"What'll it be?"

"Eggs, bacon, wheat cakes, sausages, coffee, and sinkers."

He gave me a fast double take. "Where do you wanna start?"

"Anywhere at all," I said.

He got busy, and I wolfed everything, not embarrassed, while he watched me. He brought me a third cup of coffee and said:

"This one is on the house. Stranger around here?"

I nodded.

"If you're lookin' for a place to roost, this is a good town."

I looked up at him. "Sure has a hell of a name."

"Hades?" He shrugged. "Named after a man, old John Hades, who came up here years ago and built a factory, and the town just grew around it. Factory really spread out during the war. Things are a little quiet now."

"Can a guy get a job there?"

He stopped, wiping a plate. "I need a man. Wanna work here?"

"I can't cook," I said.

He guffawed. "This ain't no Waldorf. We serve short orders only, and anybody can learn how."

"I'll think about it," I said. "Who runs the Hades plant?"

"Lawyer, by the name of Alton Lemaire. Runs the town, too."

"Where's old man Hades?"

"Dead. He had a nephew, Chris. He's dead, too. Killed in the war. Chris's wife inherited the plant, but she's fixin' to sell to some New York syndicate. A cool million they're gonna pay. Cash." He shook his head, his eyes glistening as he thought about it.

I said, "Maybe I'll go over there."

"It's closed. Today's Sunday."

He was right. I had forgotten. I had lost track of the days. "Any kind of a hotel around these parts?"

"Yeah. The Grand House. Next corner, and turn to your left. Say, what's your name?"

"Herman Schneider," I said.

"Well, Herman, you really oughta work for me."

I told him again I'd think about it,

then I went out and turned left at the corner.

THE Grand House was neither grand nor a house. It was an overgrown, dilapidated old barn with about twenty seedy rooms. The clerk said he had a bed, peered over the desk for my luggage, saw I had none, demanded two dollars in advance, then swung the register around and handed me a gnarled pen. I took it and wrote: *Ira Gillen. Houston, Texas.*

He read it and sized me up, curious. "Long way from home, ain't you, Mr. Gillen?"

"Couple of thousand miles," I said.

"That might be a long hike for a turtle with a broken leg, but I took the train."

He arched back, his brows knitted together in a broken line, an unhappy look in his eyes. I held my hand out for a key. The Grand House didn't seem to have a bellhop.

It was just a room on the second floor, with the usual trappings of a third-rate hotel, bed, chair, bureau, and a washstand. The washstand had a dead fly in it. I shot him down the drain with a squirt from the faucet. Over in the east the sun was beginning to blossom, and it was getting hot in Hades.

I peeled off my clothes and washed and studied myself in the cracked mirror.

They had done a good job. All the scars had healed, and you couldn't see where they had trephined my skull to install the silver plate. Even the transplant job on the cornea of my right eye was all but unnoticeable, though the Army had nothing to do with that.

I darkened the room by pulling the shades and flopped on the bed. I was tired, bushed. I hadn't slept a wink on that old jogging train, and I felt like a squeezed-out sponge. In five five seconds I was fast asleep. . . .

It was late afternoon when I awoke. The sun was sinking beyond the horizon, and I was glad that I

had missed most of the hot part of the day. I got dressed, then went over to my jacket that was draped over the back of the chair, and took out the gun.

It was a 25-caliber pocket revolver made in Eibar, Spain, that I had brought back to the States as a souvenir. Not much of a weapon, judged by American standards. Bad workmanship, soft metals, and poor assembling do not make for gun efficiency. But even so, it was better than no gun at all.

I left the hotel and went down to Nick's Diner.

He had plenty of customers now. A bold-eyed blonde with upswept hair and too much hips stood behind the cash register punching change. Nick made a motion with his rag and seemed glad to see me.

"Hello, Herman, make up your mind about working here?"

"Not yet," I said. "I'm still thinking about it."

"Twenty-five bucks a week and all you can eat." He followed my glance to the blonde and added, "Good scenery, too."

I didn't say anything. After all I had been through, twenty-five bucks a week in a beanery was not exactly what I was looking for.

I had a minute steak that tasted as if it had been cut from a camel's hump. The vegetables were as watery as a Fascist's eyes, but at least the coffee was hot.

When I was finished, I called Nick over. "I'm rested now," I said, "and I feel like a walk. What's worth seeing around here?"

"Nothing," he said, "unless it's that old Hades house up or the hill the old man built. Cost fifty grand or more, they say."

"How far?"

"'Bout a mile."

I thanked him and took my change from the blonde and went out and walked to the edge of town and then plodded on. The country was bare and desolate with an occasional farm-

house and not a single vehicle passing in either direction.

**T**HEN I was climbing the long hill. Up ahead in the dusk, I saw the grotesque structure on the summit, huge, with gables, turrets, vanes, and narrow leaded windows, most of them shuttered. The house was dark, not a light glowing.

Overhead in the half-light a hawk wheeled and swooped and screamed, and that was the only sign of life. I climbed to the top and stood there. I began to get steamed up. It was building inside of me. My palms were wet, and I wiped them along the side of my pants.

Then I moved fast. I broke through the hedges and ran crabwise across the lawn that was as smooth as glass and as green as envy, taking cover in the shadows lurking at the side of the building. I skirted the wall, looking for an open window. When I found one, I shot a last look behind me, got a foot over the sill, and climbed in. The moon had risen and was spraying yellow light through the panes. I found myself in a high-ceilinged room with heavy rugs and ponderous furniture.

I went through the door into a hallway and up the circular staircase to the second floor. Then I began to open doors, searching for a woman's room because that would be the most likely place to find jewelry.

The fourth door gave me what I wanted—and more. A lot more than I had bargained for. I opened it and stepped in and locked my brakes hard, with my spine growing stiffer than a standpipe.

A girl sat on the edge of the bed, pointing an automatic.

"Stand still," she ordered in a thin voice. "Stand very damn' still, my friend, or you're dead."

She reached over and yanked the light cord of a reading lamp.

"Put your hands up," she said, "and clasp them behind your neck."

And if you think this is an ornament just to frighten people with, go ahead and get tricky."

I licked my lips and looked at her. She was wearing a green silk wrap-around and under that a negligee. Her dark hair was ruffled, and so was the bed. She was attractive in a hard way, with wide-apart dark eyes, a full mouth, and a square-cut chin. Her nostrils were flared wide.

She had me on a spot as uncomfortable as a trench foot in a ballet pump. She could drill me cold, and the local cops would come in and shake her hand.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Just a guy passing through town," I explained. "The house seemed deserted, and I thought I'd come in and look around."

"That's a lie! You were looking for something to steal. I heard your footsteps."

So that was why she had been sitting up, waiting with a gun in her hand, and me walking in there like a revolving duck in a shooting gallery.

"Just passing through town?" she said bitingly.

"Yes, m<sup>a</sup>'am."

She exhaled a harsh laugh. "Well, here's where you get short-stopped."

The sound of an approaching car pulling up the hill grew louder. Headlights slid across the wall and died as the car stopped in the driveway out front.

Downstairs a door opened.

"Hazel." It was a man's deep baritone.

"In the bedroom," she called. "Come on up. I have a surprise for you."

Footsteps mounted the stairs, and a man came into the room and walked over beside her and looked at me, owl-eyed.

"Well," he said. "What have we here?"

"A burglar," she said. "I caught him prowling around. Call the sheriff's office, Alton."

THAT pegged him for me. A guy named Alton Lemaire was the lawyer for the Hades estate. I examined him with interest. He was an oversize specimen in his early forties, high-shouldered, redhaired, with a smooth, long-boned face and a competent jaw, and large gray eyes that considered me carefully.

"Were you looking for anything special, Mister?" he asked softly.

"No, sir," I said.

He stepped around behind me, being careful not to get between me and the girl, and deftly patted my clothes and relieved me of the Spanish revolver. He stood in front of me and skewered my face with his eyes.

"Carrying a loaded gun," he said. "That makes it serious. Where are you from?"

"Boston," I said.

The girl grew impatient. "Oh, call the sheriff and get rid of him."

"Patience, my dear," he told her. "What's your name?"

"Krehm. Max Krehm."

"For Pete's sake!" the girl said irritably. "Must you play games?"

A speculative look developed in his eyes. "Leave us for a while, my dear. Go down and get a drink ready and wait for me."

"Now, what are you up to?" she demanded petulantly.

"You're a girl," he said quietly. "You don't know how these things are handled. Let me have that gun, and do as I say."

She handed him the automatic, went out, and closed the door.

Lemaire stood there, a gun in each hand, like an arsenal, then he dropped my Spanish into his pocket and nodded at a chair.

"Sit down, Krehm."

I sat.

He said slowly, "You realize that if I call the sheriff and turn you over, you'll be sent away for at least five years."

"Yes, sir."

"And that if I shoot you and said

you tried to escape, I'd be considered a hero."

I yessed him again.

"However, there would be no point in that." He smiled thinly. "You're not going to try to escape, are you?"

"No, sir."

"Good. How would you like to get out of this jam?"

"I sure would like it."

"Well, Krehm, I'm going to give you that chance." He bent forward and contemplated me earnestly. "However, there is a string attached to the offer. I want you to do something for me, and after you do it, I'm going to give you a decent stake, say a thousand dollars, and then you're going to get out of town and as far away as you can, and stay away. How's that?"

"It sounds fine," I said.

He drew his eyes level with mine and puckered his lips like a man marshaling his thoughts.

"The girl who just left the room, do you know who she is?" he asked.

"She lives here," I said. "That's all I know."

"And that's quite enough. Well, Krehm, she has something I want. A certain jade necklace. To put it briefly, its intrinsic value is not great, but I've been collecting jade for years, and I want that necklace to round out my collection. I tried to buy it from her, but she's a stubborn wench and refuses to sell.

"In your position you may not understand this, but when a collector covets an item badly, he's willing to underwrite almost any adventure to acquire it. The idea struck me that you could help me get what I want. Do you follow me?"

I nodded and watched him, wall-eyed.

"Good. The suggestion that presented itself was this: She's going to wear the necklace tonight. I'll see to that. We'll stage a holdup, you grab it, and make a getaway. Later you will meet me at a designated spot, hand over the necklace, and re-

ceive in exchange one thousand dollars and your freedom. If you run away, I can always have an alarm put out, and you'd be picked up. What do you say?"

I shook my head. "Nothing doing."

**H**IS eyes widened. Then his jaw snapped and he said sharply, "You don't seem to understand, Krehm. You're in no position to refuse."

"It's my privilege," I said. "I can refuse, and you can call the cops. That's your privilege, But I wouldn't like it. I wouldn't like it any more than I like your story about being a collector of jade."

His eyebrows arranged themselves in a puzzled triangle and the muscles in his face shifted and stretched flat against the long bones while he got an intense look for what seemed a long time. Then the scowl faded away and he nodded as if he had reached a decision.

"All right, Krehm," he said, "I guess you're entitled to know the truth. That necklace has a sentimental attachment for her. She got it from her husband before he went overseas. She's a widow, you know. The point is, I want to marry her." He twisted a smile at me. "The reasons are obvious. She's beautiful, and she has a lot of money. However, the necklace keeps reminding her of Christopher Hades, her dead husband.

"It's become an obsession, a sort of symbol. Even after we're married, it would be a barrier between us. It's a lot easier to forget things if you're not reminded of them, and I think that once the necklace is out of her life, she'll forget a lot of things."

I met his eyes directly. "I'm thinking of money. You'll be able to dip your hooks into plenty after you marry her."

"What are you driving at?" he demanded in a harsh tone.

"One thousand dollars," I said bluntly. "It isn't very much."

"It's plenty," he snapped. "I could hire almost anyone to pull this job."

"No," I said. "You wouldn't want any local talent in on this deal. I'm your best bet."

He took his lips between his teeth and mangled them. "All right, how much do you want?"

"What I want first," I said, "is some information. Like, for instance, what you're going to tell her about not turning me over to the sheriff?"

His face split into a canny smile. "Simple. I'll tell her you got desperate, jumped me, and escaped. There's trellis-work outside the window. After you descend, I'll fire a couple of shots into the air, and then I'll fake a call to the sheriff's office. How's that?"

"Pretty good," I conceded. "But if I'm going to stage a holdup, I'll need a gun. You have mine."

He looked thoughtful. Then he said, "I'll drop a weapon out the window. You can grab it before you get away."

"Now about the money—"

"I'll double my offer," he cut in promptly.

"I accept it," I said. I rubbed the tips of my fingers together. "All right, now what's the setup?"

He shifted his weight and crossed his knees and concentrated. He rubbed the back of his head and then settled his eyes solidly on mine.

"Listen, carefully. About two miles north of town, there's a roadhouse called the The Blackbird. We're going there, and we'll be leaving about midnight. A half mile beyond the roadhouse, there's a left turnoff—you can't miss it—that runs through a wooded section to the lake. We'll park in there. It's an ideal spot for a holdup."

"And all you want is the necklace?"

He hesitated. "Yes, but perhaps you'd better take whatever is available, and also demand my wallet. We

don't want to be obvious about this thing."

"Can I keep the other stuff?"

"Everything, except my wallet and the necklace."

"Where will we meet?" I asked.

He considered. "Better make it my place. Thirty-three Lantern Road, behind the garage. You'll find it. It's only three blocks behind the station."

"When?"

"At three A.M. That will give me time to get her soothed and settled down for the night."

"One thing more," I said, "how will I get out of Hades?"

He shrugged. "Freight cars are passing through all the time."

"No good." I shook my head. "She may insist on going to the sheriff with you. They'll be watching the roadbed."

**W**RINKLING his forehead, he screwed up his lips and gave it some thought. Then he said; "You can take my car. I won't report it stolen until morning. By that time you'll be a hundred miles away, and you can abandon it."

"It sounds all right," I said, nodding.

He smiled. "I might add that the law enforcement agency in this county is run by a couple of hayseeds who don't know a fingerprint from first base. You'll be okay."

"You made yourself a deal," I said, standing up. "How come a dame like that Hazel buries herself in this town for so long?"

"Not so long. Her husband had a fight with his uncle, old John Hades, about eight years ago, and went out to the Midwest. He met Hazel there, and she came here for the first time when the old man died and inherited the estate. Under the old will it had been left to her husband or his heirs."

A sharp knock sounded against the door. The girl called peevishly, "Alton, what's keeping you?"

His chin jerked and he waved the

gun at the window. "Okay, Krehm, take off."

I ran to the window and looked out at the trellis-work and then climbed down, skidding the last few feet and sinking ankle-deep in lilies of the valley. I looked up and saw Lemaire raise the gun and point it at the moon that was riding high in the cloudless indigo sky. Red-blue flame lanced wickedly from the muzzle blast and two flat reports fractured the night.

He bent over the sill, a white blur, his large gray eyes gleaming, and he brought the barrel of the gun slowly down. He aimed at me, a wide black hole in the blur of his face where his mouth was open, and I stood there, rooted in that soft flower bed, with my fingers spread out stiffly like sticks of cold dough and my heart clattering against my ribs so hard it hurt.

He could shoot me now. He could kill me in cold blood, and the girl would be a witness that I had tried to run away.

Then the gun left his hand, and I reached out and caught it. For a moment I couldn't budge. My knees were wobbling and knocking together. Then I yanked my shoes out of the soft earth and went racing across the smooth lawn, vaulting the hedge, galloping down the long steep hill into the darkness, and sucking air into my lungs through my mouth like a guy with a heart attack.

At the bottom of the hill, I halted and sat down and mopped my streaming face. The shirt was soggy against my back. I was soaked clean through. After a while I went back to the Grand House to wait for midnight. . . .

The Blackbird was an old, white, frame house that had been converted. It had a small dance floor, a three-piece band, and a meaty blonde singing in a brassy tenor.

I had been watching from behind some trees, and I had seen Lemaire

and the girl emerge and get into his car and drive away.

I stood at the bar and ordered a Scotch and banged it down and ordered another and did the same. That was enough. I didn't want to get drunk. Then I went out and walked down the road, looking for the turnoff that led to the lake.

I found it where he had said I would, a rutted dirt road under overhanging trees whose leaves filtered the moonlight and cast weird flickering shadows all around. I moved quietly, watching sharply for the dark shape that would be parked along the side of the road.

PRETTY soon I spotted the dull shine of the car's chromium bumper. I sneaked up behind them and listened to the murmur of voices.

"I hate this town," the girl was saying. "Nothing to do but sign papers. You promised that everything would be wound up this week."

"It will be," he answered. "The syndicate took title this afternoon."

I sneaked around to Lemaire's side of the car, ducking low and hauling out the automatic. Then I straightened and looked in. He was kissing her.

"All right," I growled. "This is a stickup."

The girl snapped back with a choking gasp. Her eyes stared at me enormously and she whispered, "*You!*" out of constricted throat.

"Do what your told," I warned, "and maybe nobody will get hurt."

Lemaire blustered. "You can't get away with this."

"Shut up!" I snarled. "You, lady, take off that necklace."

She fumbled with the clasp and handed it to me, her face whiter than tissue paper.

"The rings, too," I said.

She handed me two rings without argument, moving automatically.

I menaced Lemaire with the gun. "Your wallet, Mister. Haul it out."

He licked at his lips and put his

hand in his pocket. Then he brought out my Spanish revolver and half turned in his seat and put the gun against the girl's chest. She must have known what was coming because she cried, "No, Alton, no—" in a thin, bleating voice.

The first shot cut her words short and knocked her back against the door. At the second, her chin flopped loosely down and rested against her breast.

It froze me. I stood there, petrified, impaled to the ground, with my mouth open and lower lip thrust out, like the mouth of a fish out of water, and my throat knotted up like a fist.

Lemaire dropped the Spanish, and his hand flipped open the dashboard compartment and scooped out another gun.

I jerked up the automatic and squeezed it at his face. Nothing happened. The clip was empty. It had held only the two shots he had fired at the moon back there at the house. I hadn't checked it. A guy makes mistakes like that, but not often. He had me now.

He laughed crazily and swung the new gun toward me.

I hurled the automatic. It cracked him between the eyes against the bridge of his nose with a fine bone-splitting sound. The gun exploded in his hand, and a jagged, white-webbed hole appeared in the windshield.

I whirled and raced blindly into the woods. Behind me a shot barked out, and a sharp searing pain burned my left thigh just above the knee. It knocked me over, pawing clumsily at the ground.

There was no time for thought. Lemaire's steps were crashing through the thickets. If he caught me, I was done. Dead and done, the one thing a guy never wants to be, that you'll fight against with your last breath. I crawled frantically through a clump of bushes and rolled headlong into a narrow gully covered by twigs and low-hanging branches.

Lemaire reached the spot I had just abandoned and started beating around. He was cursing. He flailed the bushes, calling:

"Hey, Krehm, hey, Krehm."

My groping fingers found a rock and closed over it. That was really a laugh. A rock against a gun. The whip of muscle against the explosion of powder. A wounded man against a sound one.

THE slug in my thigh was burning like all the fires in hell. And all I could do was lie there and wait for him to find me. I bore down hard on my back teeth. Then I thought of something. It was older than Genesis, but it might work. Anything now was worth a try.

I pitched the rock over his head, as far as I could from a prone position, and heard it fall thumpingly. He fired twice in rapid succession at the noise. Then he listened. Silence. He laughed triumphantly and moved off where he thought he'd hit me.

This was my chance. I pushed upright clenching my jaws against the pain, and dragged limpingly back toward the car. Lemaire heard me. Almost immediately he emitted a shout and doubled back.

I got there first. I scrambled behind the wheel and reached for the ignition, but the key was gone. I saw him break out of the woods, driving hard. I began to tumble out of the door at the other side when my foot kicked something on the floor. I reached down and grabbed it. It was my revolver that he'd dropped there.

I floundered out and reached over the front fender and squeezed two shots at him. He ducked behind a tree and answered with a shot of his own, the bullet biting viciously into the hood.

I felt weak. The blood was coming out of my thigh in spurts. He knew that he had winged me because he had seen me fall in the clearing just before I rolled out of

sight. He had to finish the job. He had staked everything on it, including his life.

There I was, crippled, with an inaccurate and badly made foreign revolver. Against a desperately determined man, sound of limb, and armed with a fine heavy weapon. That was the situation. He was worming his way along the ground, hugging the shadows, coming closer.

I fired another shot. He answered that one with a harsh laugh. It was no use trusting the Spanish again until I had him at point-blank range. There was only one shell left.

Now he was only a few feet away, almost on the other side of the car.

The night was hot and still. A cricket chirped, and a twig cracked under Lemaire's weight. And then he said it:

"Hades," he called softly. "Come on out, Christopher Hades."

So he knew. He knew who I was. He had known all the time. All the changes they had made in my face after that mine blew up practically under my feet, hadn't fooled him.

"How did you guess?" I asked heavily.

"Your right eye," he said. "That was what gave you away. That was the tip-off. The cornea is almost square and I remembered hearing that you'd had a transplant after a steel sliver flew into your eye and injured it. I wasn't sure, of course, but finding you at the house, and using my imagination, I decided to play it safe."

I said: "You intended killing me all along."

"Why not? You had been reported missing in action, and your sudden reincarnation did not suit my plans. I'm rather curious, Hades, what happened to you?"

He was not moving now. He was behind the last available tree.

"I was taken prisoner," I said, "and after the liberation, when it was all over, I got caught in the explosion of a land mine, I was in a hospital

for almost two years, suffering from amnesia and being patched up. When I finally wrote to my wife, the letters came back marked address unknown."

"Yes," he said. "She went away when you were reported missing in action."

"But you found her. You traced her."

"I did, Hades. I certainly did. After your uncle died, I went looking for her. It was quite a job, but it was worth it. I found her in Chicago, and since you had never even mentioned your uncle, she was naturally quite surprised to learn that she was about to inherit a fortune."

**T**HERE was a dry ache inside me —and a kind of emptiness. "A fortune," I said bitterly, "that you never intended her to get."

"Quite true, my friend. She was too young and too inexperienced to appreciate that kind of money."

"So you got this brunette to take her place, to masquerade as my widow, intending to split the take between you."

"You guessed it," he said carelessly, "for all the good it will do you." He paused. "Tell me, Hades, how come the army never communicated with your uncle?"

"Because they didn't know about him. I never mentioned him in my army records." I was down low, creeping toward the front of the car where a slanting moonbeam gave me some light. I said, "As a matter of fact, I hardly thought of him, until a few days ago when I read an item in a newspaper about a New York syndicate buying the Hades plant from a Mrs. Christopher Hades. That's what brought me here, posing as a stranger, to check on it."

My fingers were busy with the gun while I spoke. I broke open the cylinder and pried the last live bullet out of its chamber and held it in my left hand.

"And that's why I sneaked up to

her room," I continued, "looking for that jade necklace I had given her before I went away, and that she must have told you about. I was looking for other things, too, to see if everything was on the level."

Lemaire laughed again. "Exactly as I figured it," he said. "I'm rather proud of myself, Hades. That's why I pulled this stunt, certain that you'd play along with me if only to see what I was up to. I intended it to look like a simple holdup. I was going to tell them that I shot you after you killed the girl. They'd believe it after I put your gun back in your hand and removed any identifying papers you had. As I said, the sheriff here isn't very bright, and I practically run this town."

"But why kill the brunette?" I asked.

"Because, my friend, we were secretly married last week, and with her out of the way I'd be able to pocket the entire loot myself. A neat scheme. wouldn't you say?"

"And my wife, where is she?" I asked, though I guess I already knew what his answer would be, since he had taken the jade necklace away from her.

"In Wisconsin," he returned indifferently. "Lying in the old well of an old deserted farmhouse."

I sobbed a curse at him and lifted the Spanish over the hood. Then I pulled the trigger and kept on pulling it though it produced nothing but sharp empty clicks.

"You're stopped," Lemaire called gloatingly. He stepped out from be-

hind the tree and put his head back and laughed. "You can't run away, and your gun is empty. You're licked, Hades. You're finished."

My fingers broke the cylinder and shoved the last live bullet into the chamber to come up under the firing pin.

He took two steps to stand opposite me on the other side of the hood.

"Get up, Hades," he said. "Stand like a man and take it."

I stood up, and I knew that my face was only a parody of a face, twisted all out of shape. I pointed the Spanish at his cold inhuman grin and shot him in the teeth, and I saw the blood burst out of his mouth and his chin dissolve in glistening crimson. His big torso swayed clumsily, like a drunk, and then he fell heavily against the side of the car and went thumping to the ground.

I felt gutted. I sagged against the fender and hung there, weak and sick and empty. I dropped the Spanish and sucked in a long scraping breath.

Whatever else I felt, remorse and pity were not among my emotions.

The scheme had started with death and it had to end that way—with death. I lifted the girl out of the car and placed her beside Lemaire. They made a ghastly couple in the moonlight. Then I bent down over Lemaire, and one of his pockets yielded the ignition key.

I climbed behind the wheel of his car, kicked the engine into life, backed out onto the road, and headed back toward Hades.



# The Belle Told

*"Dizzy Duo" Yarn*

By Joe Archibald



*Snooty and Scoop, those Beantown newshounds, scented something strange about that landlady's rub-out. But before they could nose out the culprit's trail, their old menace, Iron Jaw, put the bite on them.*

**M**E AND Snooty Piper come home one night from a trying day's work at the Boston *Evening Star* and find our landlady waiting in the hall. Mrs. Fragnagle says she is sorry but our rent will be three dollars more every week for each of us, beginning as of now.

"You should be sittin' on a horse an' wearin' a mask and holdin' two horse pistols," Snooty protests. "We won't pay it and will see the mayor."

"If he's got an extra room, go ahead," the old babe says. "I have got eleven applications since an hour ago

for your room. And more coming."

"And I bet each one has a dozen legs," Snooty sniffs. "This flea trap has enough wild life in it already. We have to sleep crosswise of the bed, as it is listed to port, and the wall paper is peelin' like a doll who has spent three weeks on Revere Beach. Of all the lousy dumps—"

I step on Snooty's foot and thrust him aside. "We'll be glad to pay, Mrs. Fragnagle," I says sweetly. "We wouldn't think of goin' no place else."

"You're tellin' me?"

"Come on, Snooty," I hiss at him,

and pull him up the stairs quickly.

"It is a disgrace, Scoop, man's inhumanity to man," Snooty Piper says when we get to our hall room. "Nothin' good is comin' of the extortion goin' around. It could lead to murder, an' I feel halfway to the hot squat right now. Mrs. Fragnagle has asthma, an' they say if one gits a good whiff of ammonia when they have it, it means a new obit in the journals."

"Git hold of yourself," I snap at Snooty.

"Huh, why am I actin' up like this, Scoop? Life can be beautiful," the crackpot says. "Here I almost forgot I had a date tonight with a mouse who works in a beauty saloon. Isolde McGah. An' she says if I got a friend she has, too."

"Here we go ag'in," I sigh, and look disconsolately about the room. "Snooty, tonight I am game for anythin'."

We meet the dolls in the grog shop of the Avery. I have had two beers, but wish it had been twice that many zombies. Snooty's babe is not bad when you look straight at her, but her profile is something else again. She has too much nose and not enough chin. There is enough red goo on her kisser to paint a birdhouse. But the mouse I am supposed to convoy—she has flat-heeled shoes and wears a pair of cheaters with tortoise-shell rims, and she wears a Sunday school attendance button. Her name is Priscilla.

"What'll we do?" Isolde chirps after a healthy snort.

"My plans are quite complete," Priscilla says, after draining a hefty glass of root beer. "I have tickets to a lecture where a Harvard professor is to talk about the anatomical structure of the praying mantis and its nocturnal habits. I know Mr. Binney will love it. He seems to be the intellectual type."

I am trapped. I clutch at my throat and gasp for breath. "S-Snooty, quick—the digitalis. It is my ticker again.

Oh-h-h, I've overdone ag'in. Snooty —!"

"Wait here," Snooty Piper says to the mice. "Scoop, I'll have a stiff on my hands yet." He leads me to a drug-store. "Awright, scram, Scoop. I don't blame you this time."

I run up Tremont and duck into the Greek's, near Scollay Square. Nick's eyes pop. "Now what does it happen, Binney, hah?" he asks.

"I met Priscilla. Is John Alden's credit good here?" I pant.

**A**FTER some nerve stimulant I trudge to a movie, and after that I go back to Mrs. Fragnagle's and hit the sack. Snooty comes in around two A. M. and wakes me up.

"You look like you got hit with a pail of red lead," I sniff.

"She was quite a smoocher," Snooty says, and wipes off his pan. "Why do they go for me, Scoop?"

Sometimes you do not bother to answer Snooty Piper.

It is just seven in the A. M. when there comes a lusty hammering at our door. I shake the cobwebs out of my noggin and get up and slip on my robe and stagger to the shaking portal. The landlady says Snooty is wanted on the phone.

"I'll take it," I mumble. "By the time he is conscious, you will be equipped with radar."

I hello the citizen on the other end and right away a very excited voice yelps, "Piper, this is Willie Repp. Now look, I said I'd give you somethin' for coverin' that fire for me the night I got boiled. There is a murder out here—a cop called me into this house on Commonwealth as I was passin' by. Number 1476-12, Snooty. I bet I ain't a legman much longer after this. See you there, Snooty."

"Thanks," I says. I hang up and run back upstairs. "It is murder, Snooty! Get up!"

The crackpot leaves the sack like a carnival character leaving a cannon. "Where?" he yips, and grabs his

pants at the same time.

Twenty minutes later we leave a cab in front of a rooming house on Commonwealth, and there is a police jalopy already at the curb and helping get pulled clear of it by two husky gees is Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy.

"Wait, I'll get a tow car," Snooty calls out. "The city should provide a bus for that big slob!"

Iron Jaw is on the payroll the taxpayers have to ante up, as a detective, although he could not trace a drawing made by a six-year-old. If he fell into a blast furnace, he would have to look around for quite some time to see what was burning. Right now he really is burning, and he stands and slays Snooty with the dirtiest look I ever saw, including ones I've seen in coal mines.

"You! How in the aitch you get wise to this one? I'm beginnin' to think—"

"Anythin' I will believe but that," Snooty cracks. "How did I know? The wind was just right. Why, hello, Willie! A fine bad-weather friend you are. Was holdin' out on me, huh? Awright for you—"

"He called me, Snooty," I says. "I just didn't have the time to tell you. Let's go in, shall we?"

Iron Jaw tries to exclude us, but Snooty reminds him of a big war that was fought to preserve the four freedoms and says he will report the outrage to the UN and all veterans' organizations, so the big mental shortage relents.

The victim is reclining in a back parlor on the ground floor, and she is an old doll named Deborah Flabish. A cop says an early riser named Keech found the remains when he knocked on her door to pay her some scratch. The door swung in and he got a gander at her.

"I said it would happen to a landlady someday," Snooty says, and rubs the palms of his hands together.

"Have a little respect for the departed," I sniff.

"Do landlords when they evict citizens?"

"Now everybody git out of my way," Iron Jaw trumpets. "I want lots of room to work in."

"Better ask the rates first," Snooty keeps needling.

THE roomer named Keech is still sitting on a chair out in the hall. He is a timid-looking character who looks like he'd been born poring over a ledger, and he keeps clacking his store teeth. Iron Jaw yells for him to come in.

"It didn't kill her!" Keech squeaks.

"Now where have I heard that before?" Iron Jaw sneers. "Why was you up so early?"

"I work in a produce market," Keech says. "I start in at eight. I—"

A fat citizen arrives, carrying a black bag, and he is not there to read the gas meter, but to see how long Deborah's ticker has ceased to function. He examines the cadaver and then looks up at the cops. "Been dead at least seven hours. Hit on the head by a blunt instrument. *Rigor mortis* already's set in. Okay, O'Shaughnessy, you can have her." He snaps his bag shut.

"Okay, take some pitchers, boys!" Iron Jaw orders like he was a flatfoot in a B movie. "Dust everythin' for prints and look for the murder weapon."

"Can I go?" Keech asks humbly.

"Yeah," Iron Jaw roars. "But don't you leave town!"

We look at what is left of Deborah Flabish. She was not a bad-looking tomato for her age, and it is apparent that she recently had a fashionable hair-do.

"Was all dressed up like she was goin' out or expected a visitor," Snooty observes.

Iron Jaw and the cops go through everything in the room like flour going through a sieve, and one flatfoot howls suddenly, "The drawers of this desk have been ransacked. It was robbery!"

Then another gendarme comes up with a foot-high cast-iron model of the Empire State Building in New York. "Found it behind this wastebasket, O'Shaughnessy. It could of killed her."

"I would hate to of got hit by the Empire State Buildin' myself," Snooty sniffs. "Now we're gettin' somewhere. Of course the assassin's prints are on it."

"Handle that careful!" Iron Jaw yelps. He rushes at the cop holding the souvenir and grazes Snooty Piper, and that is like Snooty was side-swiped by a B-29. The crackpot lands on his face and skids into a corner and whangs his pate against a baseboard. He stays there for a while.

"It was robbery an' no mistake," Iron Jaw yips. "Wa'n't done by no perfessional killer as he would of never left the weapon. This killer was the nervous type, suffered remorse from his awful crime, an' his only thought was to git away from the scene of the cr—"

"Yeah, an' her handbag was open an' the stuff in it all mixed up," a cop says.

Snooty gets to his hands and knees. "I was just standin' there, mindin' my own business," he raves. "The movin' van must of had two wheels up on the curb an'—"

Iron Jaw looks at Snooty and laughs. I rush over to my pal when he falls prone once more. "It's awright, Scoop," he whispers as I bend over him. "I am only playin' possum."

"You can tell the boys out there they can remove the corpse," Iron Jaw says. "Soon as we git prints off the souvenir, we'll check up on every tenant in this joint."

**W**HEN they have taken Deborah Flabish to the edifice of no return, Snooty gets to his feet and massages his skull. All but one gendarme evacuates the rooming house, and he says, "If you lugs have took all your notes, beat it!"

We do. A few minutes later we are

in the Greek's and discussing Mrs. Flabish's demise, pro and con.

"Some citizen's way back in his rent," I offer. "What better place to get the moola than off the old doll, Snooty."

"That is too pat," Snooty mutters. "That is the first thing anybody would think of. Ha, imagine the guilty character leaving prints behind. Iron jaw should write his memories and call them Gullible's Travels. Ha-a-ah!"

"Nobody can be wrong all the time," I asserts.

"Iron Jaw has for many years, and he only has about thirty or forty left," Snooty counters. "As long as he dodges atomic bombs, he could stay on forever."

"We'll find out in a couple of hours," I says. "Nobody can be as lucky as you all the time, neither."

We arrive at headquarters an hour before lunchtime and loiter outside the police lab, and soon who comes out with a lab technician but Iron Jaw. The monstrosity is grinning like Gargantua sitting in a freight car full of bananas.

"Well," he says, espying us, "you will be the first to know! There was some nice prints on the model of the Empire State, Piper! They wasn't made by the old babe as we checked to make sure. I am even invitin' you to sit in when we brief all the roomers in that joint."

Snooty looks at me. "He just can't be right, Scoop."

At eight o'clock that night we are once more in the back parlor of the late Deborah Flabish's rooming house. Every tenant is accounted for, and they file in one by one, and get their prints taken. This goes on until a little babe of about sixty years, trying to look half that age and getting nowhere, drops a present right in Iron Jaw's lap.

"There was one person threatened Mrs. Flabish," the tenant says. "I heard him do it. I come down to pay my rent about a week ago an' waited

outside. She had a nice big room on the second floor front vacant, an' this man wanted it, only Mrs. Flabish wouldn't let him have it an' the dog he had with him, too. He carried on some-thin' awful, an' you know how desperate people are who are without a roof these days!

"Why, he said he had a good mind to kill her, an' poor Mrs. Flabish screamed. Then the man come runnin' out. He was of medium height and wore a dark double-breasted suit, is all I remember. Oh, wait, Mrs. Flabish showed me a card he left on her table. It must be around somewheres."

The cops find a little basket half filled with cards. "Just case the ones on top," Iron Jaw says.

"I would remember the name," the little babe says, "if I heard it. Mrs. Flabish told me about him an'—"

Iron Jaw reels off some names. "J. Roy Smearly . . . Alfred S. Schneck . . . Vernon F. Wattleby . . . Miss Chloe Younce . . . Egerton Dinsmore Feditch . . . Roland B. Spurge. Miss Iola—"

The tenant yelps, "That was it. Roland Spurge!"

"H'm-m," Iron Jaw reflects, then ogles the card. "Says here he is president of the Spurge Automatic Zipper Company, South Boston. Go get him boys! This is some detective work, if you ask me."

"Nobody did," Snooty scoffs.

"Don't be a poor loser," I throw at him.

"Everybody here cango," O'Shaughnessy says, puffing up like a pigeon loaded with poisoned oats. Only don't none of you leave this house, see?"

Iron Jaw's mood at the moment is quite as expansive as his bulk. "You can go along to headquarters with me, Piper. You too, Binney."

**WE DO.** We wait there for about an hour, and then two big flat-feet arrive with Roland Spurge in between them. Roland is quite indignant until they get his prints and

match them with the smears they took off the miniature Empire State Building. They were made by one and the same citizen, Roland Spurge.

"There's your murderer!" Iron Jaw says to the D. A.

"I can explain," Spurge sputters. "I admit threatening the old bag. She refuses to let me have a roof over my head because I own a great Dane. You would think a dog wa'n't man's best friend. Yeah, I got a temper. I picked up that thing you got the prints off, but changed my mind quick an' tossed it away. Then I scrambled."

"Who has been sleepin' in my bed, says the middle-sized bear," Iron Jaw jeers in an affected voice. "Awright let's stop kiddin', Spurge. Where was you at the time Deborah Flabish was rubbed out, between the hours of eleven P.M. and one A.M.?"

I was —er— it is none of your business!" Roland Spurge yips.

"Okay," Iron Jaw says triumphantly. "Lock him up, boys. What he says will be used against him. We got the motive. We got the murder weapon with this punk's prints on it. It is just as good as havin' the corpse brought back so's she could talk. How am I doin', Piper?"

Snooty shakes his head. "No comment. I am astounded, Iron Jaw."

"Nobody can say I ain't a sport," I says and offer Iron Jaw my hand, which was a mistake. Feeling comes back into the flipper by the time we reach the city room of Mr. Guppy's *Evening Star*. Snooty sits down and bangs out the story thus far, and I look over his shoulder and see where he has labeled the rub-out: *The Calling Card Murder Case*.

"I still say he didn't do it, Scoop," he says. "My heart isn't in this stint."

Dogface Woolsey, the city editor, sneaks up behind us. "Neither is your brains, Piper. That's the lousiest lead I ever saw. Refusing sanctuary to a man and his faithful dog, Mrs. Deborah Flabish paid with her life late last night. The alleged slayer, Ro-

land Spurge, was apprehended shortly before noon today and held for the grand jury. It was in the cards that he should not go free for the heinous crime—”

“I better finish it,” I says. “You are not yourself, Snooty.”

“The trouble is he is,” Dogface snaps. “I want that copy in just three minutes, Binney.”

“I have something to do at a drug-store,” Snooty says. “See you later, Scoop.”

“There is nothin’ I can do about it,” I retort.

That night in our room I suddenly think of something. “Snooty, what did you mean yesterday when you said you was playin’ possum?”

“Huh? Oh, I just found somethin’ on the floor when Iron Jaw knocked me there, Scoop. It could be somethin’ or nothin’.”

“That makes it clear to me, Snooty,” I snap at him.

“It will be developed by ten in the mornin’, Scoop. I wish you didn’t have such a negative personality.”

**N**ATURALLY I go to the drug-store on Portland Street with Snooty at ten A.M. A clerk hands Snooty a yellow envelope and collects thirty-five cents and then we go to the Greek’s. After a beer, Snooty takes two small prints from the envelope and peers at them closely. He gasps and clutches at his throat. His eyes bug out as if his thyroid had suddenly become superactive.

“It can’t be. I’m imaginin’ things, Scoop.”

“How can I tell if you don’t show me?” I says irritably.

He tosses the prints my way. The paper of both is mostly white. There is part of a photograph on each. It is a dame, and even to me she looks too familiar. I could swear that it was a profile of Isolde McGah.

“Snooty, it looks just like—”

“It is her, Scoop,” the crackpot chokes out. “I found a piece of a negative on the floor near the base-

board. I wondered why it wasn’t a whole one so sneaked it into my pocket. What was a thing like that doin’ in that roomin’ house? Is she a relation of the late Mrs. Flabish? This is fantastic!”

“I wonder,” I sigh. “Don’t forget you found it.”

“Yeah. That back parlor never got cleaned too often, Scoop. I guess you noticed, too. So if the model of the Empire State got tossed behind that basket, there is no sayin’ what day it was done, huh?”

I take a more complete gander at the fraction of a snapshot. Part of Isolde’s shoulders show and looks like she wore a negligee. There is something close to her kisser that could be the reproduction of a man’s ear. I mention all that to Snooty Piper.

“Yeah, it looks like somebody got snapped with her, Scoop,” Snooty bridles. “The two-timer! Well, we will go and call on that babe and make her sing.” He drains his beer glass, then hops to the Greek’s phone booth. He calls the dame.

When he comes back, he says Isolde can’t see him until around ten o’clock that night. She has three permanents and a henna pack to take care of between that hour and dinnertime.

“She lives at an apartment hotel on Newbury Street, Scoop. Do beauticianists make that kind of scratch?”

When we eat lunch sometime later in a grab-as-you-go beanery on School Street, we peruse the journals. We find that Roland Purge remains adamant as far as giving an alibi is concerned, even if he has one. Iron Jaw comes in for some praise on the editorial page of a tabloid, and on the photo page they use up four columns showing the readers a half-tone of what he looks like. Even then all of Iron Jaw doesn’t show.

“I think we’re bein’ silly,” I says. “Spurge did it. Isolde could have a double as everybody has accordin’ to—”

“There are not two schnozzes like hers in all the world, Scoop,” Snooty

insists, and I feel inclined to believe him. "Huh, I think I know where the connection might be."

He goes to the booth near the cashier's cage and ruffles the pages of the directory. He finally drops a nickel. He comes back five minutes later in a sweat.

"I called that beauty parlor ag'in, and got Madam LeFleur, the proprietor, Scoop. I ast her was Deborah Flabish a client, an' she said she was. Catch on?"

"Then the babe knew the old doll," I says.

"Scoop, I can't wait."

AT EXACTLY ten P.M. we ring the dame's bell, and she opens the door and lets us in. She wears a very alluring house coat which exhibits more curves than you'll see of an afternoon in Fenway Park when Joe Dobson is pitching. She has perfume on that never came in big bottles, and she has drinks ready.

"This is a wonderful surprise, Snooty," she says and waves us to a divan.

"Quite a snuggery here," Snooty exclaims and accepts a Martini. "I wish this was all the way a social call, sugar."

Isolde lifts a clipped eyebrow. "What else could it be?"

"You better take another belt," Snooty advises, and Isolde needs very little coaxing.

"You heard about an old babe named Flabish gettin' the permanent, huh?" Snooty asks Isolde.

"Of course. I read the papers. They have picked up the guilty man."

"Maybe," Snooty says. He produces the reproductions of the fragments of a negative and hands them to the babe.

She looks at them quick, bats both eyes, and steadies herself with the back of a chair. "Where did you get that?"

"On the floor in the Flabish pueblo, sugar." Snooty says. "You knew that

old dame. Why would I find a piece of a photo negative there?"

Isolde pours one out of a bottle and takes it neat. Then she gapes at Snooty Piper. Suddenly she snaps her fingers. "Well, I'm a monkey's niece!" she says. "Have I been a dumb broad!"

She goes into her boudoir, and we hear her rummaging around. A draw bangs shut, and out she comes. She has a snapshot about four by three and hands it to Snooty. He looks at it like a starving Greek would at a club sandwich with olives on the side. He can't believe it, so I lean over to see if I can. Brother!

It is a picture of Isolde in a lounging wrapper, and she is sitting on a middle-aged citizen's lap and seems to be promoting at least a diamond tiara. The goggle-eyed male's features are very plain.

"One day Mrs. Flabish calls me to her house to do a job on her," Isolde starts in. "She makes me a proposition, Snooty. There is five C notes in it. It seems her rooming house had a mortgage on it a derrick couldn't lift. Only the big boy you see there. She was way back on her interest and this guy, Smew, got a court order of some kind that let him grab the rents here.

"So the old doll hit on an idea to save her happy home, and that was for me to vamp the villain when she sent him to me personally to pick up the rent for a room I would only use for one night. It was a cinch. I turned on the woo, and he fell like a ton of bricks. The old babe got her a picture of the smooch."

"Blackmail!" Snooty yips.

"Sure. A couple of weeks after I said to myself, why don't I get some of that sucker's gold, too?" Isolde goes on. "So I go over to Mrs. Flabish's and demand one of the snaps. She gets a negative and is about to hand it to me when she changes her mind. I make a grab and only get a piece of it, and then I hear somebody coming so I take a powder. I toss the

piece of negative away as I don't see what good it is. Snooty, you think that Smew—"

"Who else?" Snooty says while I remain atomized. "He can't grab the Flabish joint with that frame hanging over his dome. Most likely he is happily married an' got weak just once, and has a wife who wouldn't even read a magazine with 'a man of distinction' ad in it."

"I sure have been dumb," Isolde says ruefully. "Why, I could have even blackmailed that old babe. Sure,

Nobody is goin' to prove it on me. I says to myself, that trick that helped frame me might have a picture, and I better make sure I covered up all around. Who are these bimbos?"

"We are newspapermen," I says, trying to keep my knees from knocking out a tune. "We are just here on a social call an'—"

"Nuts," Smew snarls. "Back up against the wall. Babe, hand over that picture you showed these guys. The cops have got a candidate for



Smew knocked her off to get those prints and the negatives. He—"

THE doorbell rings. Isolde hurries to get the door and says she is expectin' a friend named Heloise. When she opens it up, she lets out a screech that lifts me and Snooty right off the divan. She backs into the room as a big character comes in, a Roscoe in his fist.

"Been outside the door, baby," he says icily. "Lucky I come to call. Sure I could have knocked off that old

the hot seat, and I aim to see they stay satisfied with what they got. I got too much at stake to bungle things up now. My reputation, an' the house that used to belong to the old dame."

The character is desperate all right. "You can't git away with it," Snooty says. "We know all about it, no matter what you do to the doll here."

Smew grins like a jackal looking over the best part of a heap of carrion. "Nothin' will happen only a

double suicide and murder or vice versa, lemonhead." Isolde hands him the snapshot and then passes out.

"This is the way they'll figure it, boys," the real estate character says. "You two come here an' fought over the girl. One knocked her off in a fit of jealousy, killed her boy friend, then rubbed out himself. I read it in a detective story once. Sure, I'm a desperate man. I am Horace Smew of the real estate firm of Underhill and Smew. I am a civic leader in my community and a vestryman of the church. I can't take chances anybody is left holding a negative or a finished snapshot. When I leave, this gun will be in the hand of one of you two guys. My prints won't be on it."

"You are a fiend," I gulp.

"No, just an astute business man, my boy," Smew says. "Just sit down because we must wait until one of those big planes fly over again. They make a lot of noise, huh?"

"You think of everythin', don't you?" Snooty says.

"I am a successful business man, if that is what you mean," Smew says, and waves Snooty into a chair.

The dame stirs and gets to her hands and knees and mumbles like a prospector caught in the desert without a hat. She looks up at Smew and is about to cut loose with a scream once more, and he points the Roscoe at her. She swoons an encore.

"Ha," Smew says. "They got the murder weapon at headquarters. I brought my own persuader, gentlemen, a nice sashweight, and it is now on the bottom the Charles River. Cops as dumb as we got should not worry anybody if he has brains."

**I** SWEAT ice cubes. I am sure I hear the faraway sound of a transport plane. I look at Snooty Piper beseechingly, but you would think the gland case was watching a strip act at the Old Howard. He is sitting on the edge of the divan next

to the wall, tossing a quarter up and down in his hand. The coin falls to the carpet, and Snooty leans over to pick it up. Then he makes a quick grab at something else and yells, "Duck, Scoop!" as the room plunges into darkness.

Smew fires. Something tugs at my ear, but it is not Isolde. The airplane is closer and making a lot of noise. I fall over something in the dark, and Isolde McGah lets out a blood-curdling scream. Smew fires again and misses me not by much, and his mistake was forgetting Snooty. I hear him grunt with much distress as I slide headlong into Isolde's boudoir.

I get quite a lesson in astronomy when I come to a stop. When my dome clear, I hear sounds out in the living room like two water buffaloes were arguing over riparian rights. I get to my feet and weave my way out, a good-sized bottle of bath salts balanced in my hand.

"Hurry, Binney, he is killin' him," Isolde screeches.

"Who is—to who?" I says a little irrationally, then see a target and let it go.

Bath salts go all over the place just as the door bursts open and admits two big cops and a dozen frightened and outraged tenants. All have a weapon of some kind. The light from the hall comes in and plays on the upright figure of Horace Smew who has the Roscoe in his hand once more.

"It is not possible!" I choke out. "That bottle of stuff weighed ten pounds if it—"

"You ain't exaggeratin', Scoop!" Snooty says, just as a cop's billy club flattens the real estate market. "You conked me!" He staggers toward me minus one pant's leg and his necktie turned completely around and pulled as tight as it can go around his neck. His face is turning blue and when I grab at him, pieces of crockery come out of his corn-colored locks.

"Awright!" a big cop says when

the lights are turned on. "Somebody better talk."

"First let us show you a snapshot," Snooty says. "It should be on the person of that citizen on the canvas. After that I'll tell you a long-after-bedtime story which should only happen on the radio. The culprit there is Horace Smew, and he knocked off a roominghouse keeper named Deborah Flabish."

The cops laughed sneeringly. "We know who done that already"

"No kiddin'?" Isolde McGah says and frisks the person of the addled Horace Smew herself. "Take a squint at this, Buster."

The cop does. "Why, that's you," he says to Isolde. *Tsk-tsk.*"

"And the party of the second part is what you crocked with the baby flagpole," Isolde yelps. "I ought to know why Smew knocked off Mrs. Flabish as I helped her frame the—what am I sayin'?"

**N**OT being a habitual criminal, Mr. Smew does not know all the angles or the whereabouts of loop-holes, and when he is lifted to his feet he is a very scared realtor and admits right away he eased the old dame off. He is very contrite over it all and even weeps, but needless to say me and Snooty Piper are not touched.

After the D.A. has heard all he needs to know and a stenog closes up her book, we go out in the corridor where Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy is counting his fingers. "A negative—I was so positive—Piper has a doll—she knew Mrs. Flabish an' Smew

wanted to foreclose on the Empire State B—no, I'll start over. The man had a dog—man's best fr—"

"I'd leave him be," Snooty suggests compassionately. "Look, there is Roland Spurge with his lawyer."

We hurry after the released suspect. "I—er—beg your pardon, Mr. Spurge," Snooty says. "I am only the gent who saved you from a scorchin'. Tell me—why didn't you give an alibi if you had one, huh? I'll never sleep nights ag'in if I don't find out."

Spurge scowls. "Awright, but if you breathe a word, I'll hunt you down an' kill you slow with a knife. The time Mrs. Flabish was murdered. I am dickerin' with a guy who will soon give up an apartment—as soon as he divorces his wife. If that got out a hundred guys besides me would nail him and most likely offer him twice what I could pay. What would you have done, huh?"

"I see what you mean," Snooty says. "Isn't this housing situation gettin' critical, Scoop?"

"Someday somebody will do somethin' about it, even a senator or the equivalent," I says. "It is too bad about Isolde, though. She could get quite a stretch, Snooty."

"Never waste no sympathy on criminals of any shape or kind, Scoop," the mental deficient tells me. "They should expect to pay for breakin' the law. I got no sympathy with that mouse. If she'd been smart she could of hooked Smew for a hundred grand and what lawyer couldn't of got her off for half of it."

Sometimes I do not believe Snooty Piper has a soul.



# Homicide at



*Thrill-Packed Novelet*

By Robert M. Hodges

## CHAPTER I

**Y**ES, we have no house party, Paul Oldham told himself. Instead we have the great-grandpappy of all hurricanes warming up outside—and inside, in this house, a collection of people who distrust and dislike each other to the point of—

*Murder?* A ridiculous word in such surroundings. You said, "Oh, brother, that's murder," when taken at gin rummy. There was a game called "Murder," too. Also, there was—murder.

Why had the word popped into his

mind, here among old friends—or some old friends? Paul took a long pull on his highball, trying to dispel the awareness of tension and strain that sifted through the Miller summer home, like unseen yet smothering fog.

"It's like old times having you back with us, Paul." Steele Miller, the host, did his best to speak warmly, but his heart didn't seem to be in it. "Sorry about the weather. We were told we were out of the hurricane path. Must have veered suddenly."

A 30-year-old giant, usually so confident and even arrogant in his as-

# Hurricane Manor

*Aghast, Paul knelt down beside the huge, forever stilled body.*



*The hurricane outside was as nothing compared to the tempest of intrigue and hate that raged at the house party. And when the storm and strife ended, seven unlucky people were marooned with a corpse.*

urance of more strength and health and money than most men ever possess, Steele looked wary now, a little uncertain, and a great deal older than his years. But he wasn't the only one. All the Millers had

changed subtly—for the worse.

Steele's gaze sought out Norma, his wife. She was huddled in one of the room's big easy chairs, and her face, unguarded now, was haggard with some hidden strain. She seemed

to sense her husband's glance on her, and she flicked her eyes to his. They looked at each other for a moment in a way husbands and wives do not generally look at each other, and then both looked quickly away.

"My sentiments exactly, Paul! It is good to have you with us again." Larry Miller, Steele's uncle who was almost as young as Steele himself, clapped Paul roundly on the shoulder. A romantic, a sentimentalist, Larry had the reputation of a man who had always savored life to the full. But even his joviality seemed forced, his manner feverishly jumpy. "Going to hang out your shingle again, after your years with the Army? What is postwar Germany like, anyway?"

Paul shrugged off the questions. "And am I glad to see you, Larry!" He smiled. "Alive and kicking again. We had you ticketed as a dead pigeon after the Battle of the Bulge. Even a crack photographer for *New* magazine can't push his luck too far."

Warmth washed out of Larry's blue eyes, and they became pale marbles of memory. "Very grim, that. The prison camp — ugh! I guess I did my part in the battle of the Millers to help save America." He made a visible effort to snap back to normal, but it took a curious turn. "Oh, well, back out of that frying pan only to find myself in the fire — in the good old U.S.A."

**PAUL** looked inquisitive, but no one else spoke, and Larry seemed suddenly deaf. He made an earnest pass at his drink. When Norma at last spoke, her voice sounded lost in the room's vacuum of silence, competing against the outside noises of the storm that raged to come in.

"Larry thinks he was poisoned last night," she said.

Larry raised his eyebrows at his niece-in-law. "So I think I was poisoned? Listen, if I hadn't kept my

head and acted mighty fast—" He shrugged off the rest.

"You were one sick man for a while." Steele's voice sounded dead. "But poison—well . . ." He shook his head. Lines deeper than age grooved his tired face.

"With my throat and stomach suddenly on fire?" Larry seemed almost indignant. "Uncontrollable sickness? Fierce cramps in my legs? There's only one answer, Steele. But I'm certainly thankful you heard me and were Johnny on the spot to help."

Larry left it at that, and for a long moment nobody said a word. Paul studied Larry's face. Its remembered fullness had shrunk to near gauntness. Rich coloring had faded to a pallor almost waxen. But there was still something of the old-remembered confidence, the heartiness of manner.

Paul dragged his drink over with him to a sofa and sat down beside Julia Miller. He looked at her directly as though she had the answer to his sense of bafflement. She responded immediately to his searching quest and gave him a quick little smile of welcome, but it was hard for him to return the smile with the same warmth and intimacy.

He was gravely concerned over Julia. His first glimpse of her after his three years' absence had given him the shock of his life. So pale she was, so frail, so lifeless—she who had once been flashing with health and bounce. She had intimated nothing of failing health in her frequent letters to him. But in recent months, just before his return from London, she had implied that things weren't going well with the Millers. Mysterious and evasive, these references—yet hinting that something was wrong, terribly wrong. And they had dated back to the death of Ned, her and Steele's brother.

After all, Paul reflected, Julia and I are going to be married. And if something is troubling her . . . He drew a deep breath.

"Steele," he said firmly, "What was the truth about Ned's death? I was overseas, heard only the vaguest details. What happened?"

Julia stiffened, and Norma gave a little gasp. There were three other guests—Zena and Monroe Jamison, and Fred Deering. They all stared with shocked disapproval. But both Steele and Larry avoided his gaze and said nothing.

"All right," Paul insisted stubbornly, "maybe I'm putting my foot in it. But what's the mystery? I've a right to know."

"Yes." Norma Miller spoke suddenly, with a sort of desperation. "You should know—you'll soon be one of the family." It sounded more like a warning than congratulations. "We were all up in the Smokies on a fishing trip. Larry, Steele, Julia and I—and Ned."

"Don't forget the Jamisons," Zena said wearily.

Norma's lips compressed. "No. We never forget the Jamisons. The Jamisons were along, too."

"I don't like the way you said that, Norma." Monroe Jamison, a man almost as big as Steele, seemed to be speaking idly, but his voice was like the honing of a razor.

It was too much for anybody, and Paul looked for the flare-tempered Steele to settle Jamison's hash pronto. But Steele still wasn't talking. He drained his highball, the ice rattling emptily against his teeth.

"And I don't like the way you said *that!*" Larry made as though to lunge from his chair, his prematurely gray head outthrust, his fists clenched.

"And just who are you," inquired Jamison coolly, "to object to anything? Or anybody?"

Larry put his glass down slowly, the bone-white of his knuckles spreading. But Steele, vitalized, was quicker. "Cut it, Larry! You forget yourself. And so, I think, does Mr. Jamison."

LARRY looked at Jamison, and his eyes were emotionless. Jamison looked back at him, hard, his mouth assuming a twisted, ugly shape as though he were about to speak. But then his lips firmed into a thin line of silence.

The atmosphere was deadly. Paul said quickly, "So you were all at this camp in the Great Smokies and—"

"And Ned died," finished Norma, her voice low and weary. "He was found dead in his smashed car at the bottom of a cliff. It happened in the middle of the night. Nobody seems to have heard Ned leave, or why he should leave at such a time, or where he was going. He hadn't been himself. The war, you know. He was shot down twice and finally invalidated out. A smashed bottle was found in the ruins of the car."

"An accident?" Paul mused. "I always thought of Ned as an alert citizen, not the kind who'd let himself in for that."

"Ned was never much of a drinker." Larry Miller brooded. "That's why we were all so surprised to hear of the—evidence. But it made the case look open-and-shut. There was no autopsy."

Steele Miller got up suddenly. Weaving slightly, he poured himself a double bourbon, took it at a gulp. He didn't ask anyone else to have one. Then he sat down.

"I suggest," he said thickly, "we skip the whole subject."

In the silence that followed, they all became aware of the storm's rising fury. The wind's shrill scream was endless, and it hammered maniacally at the house as though to rend it board from board. Lashing rain drilled the windows like buckshot. The house, on high ground but like most beach dwellings not too soundly constructed, shuddered.

"A hurricane, and how!" Larry grimaced. "Worst in years."

"Which means we're same as marooned here for the week end," Jami-

son muttered. "We can't leave, nor can anybody else reach us."

Paul wondered why the man's casual words should sound so sinister. Damn this place, anyway. It was making him jumpy. He was for taking Julia and getting her far, far away. Somewhere new and clean and bright.

Steele suddenly got to his feet. He stood there swaying for a minute before he could make his way to the stairs. Norma looked up at him. In her shadowed eyes lay unreadable thoughts. She got up and started toward Steele as though to help him, but he thrust her savagely aside. She waited till he was up the stairs; then, with a white, set face, she said, "Good night, all," and went up to her own room.

The rest of them began rising, with puzzled, averted faces.

"Here," boomed Larry, as though in apology for the host's conduct. "Certainly we can all have a night-cap first."

The women declined, but the men looked relieved. Julia kissed Paul fleetingly and clasped his arm with a tremulous strength. Then she and Zena left them and went upstairs.

The men were drinking in silence when Steele's blurred voice boomed down from above. "Bring me a drink on your way up, will you?"

Paul frowned. "He's had enough." But Jamison shrugged and said, "You know how it is. The way he's been acting lately, it'll be better to take him some and let him go to sleep and forget it."

There was a good four fingers left in a bottle of bourbon. Paul picked it up. "Okay. I'll drop this by his room."

## CHAPTER II

**P**AUL found Steele already in pajamas, squatting on his bed and staring at the rattling, rain-slithering oblong of a window. He was in better control of himself. "It's you, eh, Paul? Good old Doc Oldham, just

the man I need. You're about the only person left I feel I can trust—you and Julia."

"Don't be a fool!" Paul spoke with a physician's professional brusqueness toward a difficult patient. "You're a lucky guy, Steele. Money, position, security, a beautiful wife—"

Steele's animal-like snarl interrupted. "Yes," he said. "Norma, the beautiful Norma." He got up, his body bulking hugely. "Listen, pal—Paul. Well, you're both. You're Paul and a pal. Let me show you something."

He stepped carefully over to a small chest and rooted deep among tossed clothing. He dug out a collection of letters which he thrust into Paul's hand.

They were pretty terrible, in the classic mold of anonymous letters. On ordinary white paper, addressed and mailed in stamped envelopes purchasable at any post office, they were done entirely in laborious block lettering. In essence, all six said the same thing. Norma was having an affair with an unnamed man. She was going to quit Steele Miller. She was going to run away with her lover.

"Filthy," Paul said. "Filthy. The mind of some lunatic. I'm surprised you take such trash seriously."

Steele stared groggily at the floor. At last he said, "I didn't at first, Paul. I reacted as you just did. But they kept coming. That way, you see, they set up an idea in my mind, and the idea won't die. It grows. I—finally I asked Norma. She denied the whole business, of course. I haven't confided in anybody else."

Paul was silent. Finally he said: "Tell me about the people on this party. I know Larry, of course, and am glad to see him back with his photography safe and sound again." He stopped abruptly, remembering Larry's poisoning tale of the night before. "But Jamison—and Deering?"

Steele seemed reluctant to talk.

"Jamison—well, his case was famous," he said at last. "He was assistant cashier at our bank. Examiners found his books short—the usual thing, you know. Something like \$35,000 gone without a trace. He denied it all, claimed a frame-up. We rather hated to prosecute, but the insurance people insisted.

"Jamison was convicted. Shortly after he was imprisoned, another fellow—Smithers, who'd worked with Jamison—was found shot to death, a gun beside him, a note saying he'd done it. The money was all gone and he couldn't take his guilt any more.

"Jamison was freed, of course. The newspapers raised a big fuss about it—innocent man railroaded and so on. Jamison was pretty bitter about the whole thing. He played around for a while with one of those crackpot organizations that spring up even now—you know, the type that announces the late A. Hitler wasn't such a bad guy, after all, and maybe this country could use some like him. There are such, even at this late post-war date."

STEELE gave a gusty sigh. He was under the influence and in a morbid, reckless mood, yet his words weren't missing a beat.

"Ned and I felt pretty badly about it, and tried to get him back on the right track. We engineered him into a little business of his own, and even gave him a little cottage at the other end of the island. I've tried to be as decent as possible. He takes advantage of it sometimes. You saw a sample of his arrogance tonight. He and Zena have an uncanny knack of showing up where they're not wanted, as on that trip to the Smokies and now here, tonight.

"They barged in before you got here and asked if we could put 'em up as their cottage was in danger from the storm. They could have gone to the mainland, of course—you got here all right. But oh, hell, I feel sorry for him, with all his brass.

He's hard to shake. Sometimes it looks as though he's trying to haunt us all."

"Quite a yarn," Paul commented thoughtfully. "And Deering?"

"Deering?" Steele didn't look at Paul. "Deering is a distant cousin of Norma's. I believe they felt rather romantically inclined years ago. But that faded. Deering was with the M. G.—the Military Government—in Germany. I—uh—understand he's back in this country now, probably for good."

Steele stared again at the window, that throbbed to the gathering hurricane force of the winds relentlessly assailing it. "Deering's okay, Paul. Don't get any ideas about him and Norma."

Paul didn't have any such ideas. But he saw that Steele did, deep within him, and he felt troubled for his friend's pitiful vulnerability. The big man was twisted and sick inside.

"Well, Steele," he said rather helplessly, "how about letting me keep those poison-pen letters for a while? I've had some experience with freaks of the sort who send such things. Maybe we can get to the bottom of the mess."

"Keep 'em and welcome," said Steele dully. He was sprawled across the bed, smoking a cigarette. The bottle rested on the table beside him just as Paul had brought it, the four fingers of liquor untouched. "If you can just ease my mind, that's all I ask."

Steele Miller got his wish that night.

"Paul . . . Paul . . . PAUL!"

His name, followed by a confusion of bumps and thumpings against his door, tore Paul from sleep. He struggled out of bed and jerked open his door.

Julia stood there, looking as though she was about to faint. Behind her in strangely rigid poses stood Norma, Larry, the Jamisons, and Deering. Julia suddenly put one arm about Norma.

"Paul!" It was like a hushed scream. "Paul—Steele's dead."

Paul grabbed her free hand, held it tightly. His eyes fought against the drug of sleep, mastered it, and then his gaze combed the huddled party in his door with a new sharpness. Only Deering seemed untouched by hysteria, though he looked shocked enough.

Paul stared straight at the man and said, "What's the score, Deering?"

Deering returned the probing stare unwaveringly. "I was awakened by someone trying to get into my room, less than half an hour ago. I jumped up, snapped on the light. The door was half open, and I saw somebody slumped across the threshold. It was Steele. He gasped out, 'I've been poisoned.' He died as I was trying to save him."

He added as an afterthought, "It certainly was a job waking you up. Didn't you hear the commotion?"

Paul's voice was icy, in instant reaction to the implied accusation. "I did not. I hope you don't mean anything by that?"

THERE was no answer, and Paul knelt down beside the huge, now forever still figure of Steele Miller, a man whose strength and security had not been enough to guard him against enemies from without and something stronger than himself within. Looking at the drawn, agonized face, Paul considered the possibility of suicide. Then he dismissed the thought. Not Steele, worried and harassed though he might have been. And suddenly the word that had crept into his mind when he had first surveyed this circle came back, unbidden. Murder.

Poison was usually thought of as a woman's weapon. There were three women with possible opportunity. Norma. Zena Jamison. And Julia. Even as the third name came to mind, Paul thrust it aside. He got up like an old man, his gaze fleetingly taking in the stunned horror of Norma's

ghastly face, the anguish of Julia's, and the incredulity and fright of Zena's.

"Larry," he suggested gently, "how about seeing the women to their rooms, or at least getting them away from this. Maybe some coffee, brandy—anything at all will help."

Larry's eyes locked coolly with Paul's. "And just who," he asked, "appointed you the supreme authority around here?"

"Just what I was going to ask," blustered Jamison. But even as he spoke, his eyes fell on the body at their feet. He seemed to shrink within himself, the bluster pricked from his bulbous frame as though from a balloon.

"Larry!" Norma's tones almost broke, and as she spoke, Julia, too, turned imploring eyes on her uncle. "I can't stand any more. Somebody—somebody's got to do something. We just can't leave him *there*."

A ragged sob tore from her throat, and she ran into her room, locking the door behind her. The other women looked doubtfully after her, then went to her room. Even Larry's poise seemed shaken.

"I'm going downstairs," he announced abruptly, "to see what can be done about picking up contact with the mainland."

"Brother," spoke up Deering in his curiously flat, positive voice, "there'll be no contact with the mainland for a while. Not the way this storm's still raging."

They knew he was right. Dawn had crept bleakly in, sullen and sodden, as though the house that had so sturdily withstood the storm's battering assaults were its only refuge against the unabated fury of the wind and rain that even now seethed from all corners of the immediate world without. It was anybody's guess what the ocean was like between the island and the main coast, and nobody cared to guess just now.

Paul recalled Jamison's words of the night before about their being

marooned on the island. Now they were really marooned—and with a corpse. Also, he was convinced, with a murderer.

Would a murderer betray himself at touching his freshly slaughtered victim this soon, before witnesses? Paul wondered. In harshly commanding tones, he barked:

"Come on, Deering, Jamison. We've got to get the body back into the bedroom."

Deering's voice was as mild as his face was hard. "Seems to me I've heard that police and coroners don't like the body to be touched before they reach the scene."

"He's not going to stay here," Paul insisted. "Will you help?"

Both men hung back, then reluctantly moved forward to help. Deering's face showed distaste, and Jamison looked as though he might throw up at any second. Still, that proved nothing. Paul felt as if he might, too, at any second, used as he was to seeing death.

WHEN they had deposited the big man's already stiffening body on the bed, Paul took a quick glance around the room. The bottle he had brought up to Steele the night before was not on the bedside table. It was not under the bed, where it might have rolled when Steele, poisoned, dropped it. It was nowhere in the room.

"What're you looking for?" It was Deering.

"The bottle," said Paul. "There was a partially filled bottle on the table when I left Steele last night. I brought it up and placed it there myself, after he yelled downstairs for a nightcap."

Paul slowly became aware of speculative, even hostile looks, trained on him like a battery.

"Yeah," said Jamison at last. "I remember. I guess all of us do. Steele asked for it, and you insisted on taking it up to him—alone."

In the silence that followed, the

slowly abating wrath of the storm seemed to surge up with renewed violence. And as the meaning implied in Jamison's words knifed through to Paul's mind, he felt the color sluice from his face. He looked steadily at one grim face and then the other. He had to fight to keep self-control.

"So that's the score, is it?" His voice was firm. "I brought up the bottle, Steele died—poisoned. The bottle vanished, so I was the one who killed him. Bumped off an old friend I hadn't seen in three years, a man whose sister I'm going to marry, a man I had no possible reason to hate, let alone murder. Yes, Mr. Jamison and Mr. Deering, an airtight case." He lit a cigarette with thoughtful deliberation. "I may have had no reason to kill Steele, but I can't say the same for some others around here. Shall I list some possible motives behind Steele's death? Shall I name some names?"

"Wise guy, huh?" Jamison sputtered. "Why don't we look for the bottle? Start with my room. It's the nearest."

"If your room is the nearest one," asked Paul, "then why didn't Steele bang on your door first to tell you he'd been poisoned? Why did he fight his way down the corridor to Deering's room instead?"

Paul hoped to get a rise out of the man. But Jamison just sat there and said nothing, clenching and unclenching his fists. As his heavy, florid face grew darker, his half-shuttered eyes seemed to be measuring Paul's ability to withstand a sudden physical onslaught. But then he seemed to think better of it.

Deering said tightly, "It happened just the way I told you."

"I don't doubt it," Paul said. "After all, that's where we found him—across your threshold."

They began their search, starting with Jamison's room. Paul and Deering did most of the searching as Jamison stood idly by, an expression of lofty disdain concealing whatever

concern he might have been feeling. The room yielded nothing incriminating.

"And now," Jamison said unpleasantly, "shall we take Deering's room next? Or yours, Sherlock?" His glance riddled Paul.

"Oh, hell." Deering shrugged. "Take mine next. The only thing is"—he hesitated—"I do have some private papers and other things in there. They're locked in a special bag, and the bag's flat and couldn't hide a squat thing like a whisky bottle. You're welcome to look anywhere else you choose. But I'll not open the bag."

### CHAPTER III

**I**N HIS room Deering pointed out a large briefcase, bulky with mysterious contents yet obviously not swollen with a bottle, which would have distorted the bag into immediate disclosure of its contents. The bag was zippered tight and locked with an intricate arrangement of padlocks, coupled with an attached arm-chain. It appeared to bristle with sinister secrets.

Now it was Deering who lounged idly in the background as Paul and Jamison combed his room. "Need any help?" he jeered mildly.

Nobody answered just then. But suddenly Jamison's hoarse voice, curiously muffled, rumbled from the closet. "We might need some help at that," he said.

Triumphantly he emerged, brandishing an empty fifth. One glance told Paul it was the same brand he had taken up to Steele's room the night before.

Deering was lighting a cigarette, the picture of indifference—until he turned and saw the bottle. His tight grin wavered, collapsed. His eyes dilated, and he sucked in air in a sharp intake. Impulsively he grabbed for the bottle, but Paul deftly plucked it from Jamison's hand first.

"What's this all about?" Distrust

but not fear chiseled Deering's face into taut, watchful lines. His voice was suddenly hollow with uncertainty.

"This," Paul said, "is either the bottle I left with Steele during the night, or else a damned reasonable facsimile of same. He hadn't touched it when I left him. Now it's not only empty, but it's also been thoroughly washed out." He sniffed at the unstoppered neck. "Clean as a whistle. If there was poison in it before, nobody would ever be able to prove it now."

"So now I'm guilty," murmured Deering. Something of his old, dry confidence seemed to return. "I slipped into Steele's room during the night, put poison in his eye-opener, lifted the bottle afterward, washed out all the evidence, and left the cursed thing where even a blind man could find it and pin it on me. Dumb, that's me."

"Or smart," Paul said. "Leaving it here in your room just concealed enough for it to be found—so it would look like an obvious plant to throw suspicion on you."

"Yeah," Jamison added, "a smart operator. He had all the motive he needed, too." Jamison turned to Paul, almost offensively eager to line up forces with him now. "Maybe you didn't know it, Oldham, but Deering—is it still Major Deering?" He bowed ironically toward the silent Deering. "Deering's name was once linked with that of our charming hostess, the so recently widowed Norma."

Deering, not a large man, looked lost beside the unwieldy bulk of Jamison. But apparently he never realized it. Ramlike he sprang, and almost in the same motion his fist half buried itself in Jamison's grapefruit-bulging jowls. The sound of the blow, too, was that which an over-ripe grapefruit might make if dropped from a great height into the room.

In split seconds Deering followed

up his attack, hammering three pistonlike short-arm jabs home to face and belly. Then before the floundering Jamison could recover, Deering was on his back, one arm garroting the big man's billowing neck, the other expertly twist-locking his right arm behind him.

JAMISON was a madman. He heaved and thrashed wildly about the room. He was a mastiff trying to shake off a relentless terrier. Pressure tightened against his flesh-swathed Adam's apple, and a human vise forced his imprisoned forearm upward—upward—in an arc of excruciating torture.

"You were saying?" prompted Deering softly.

The big man's popping eyes and slackly working, saliva-filmed lips were not pleasant things to see.

"You were saying?" Deering repeated silkily.

"No—*nothing!*" Jamison blurted out the apology in a frantic gurgle that was almost a scream.

Deering released his victim and bounded lithely back, alert for further trouble. But Jamison was fighting only for breath now. He stood there, a shaken and shamed figure, gulping air in great, shuddering gasps, his moon-like face a slowly fading blob of neon purple.

When at last he could speak, his tones had some of their usual bluster. "Your number's up now—but good!" He faced Deering, and the rage in his glazed eyes was deadly. But he made no move toward the smaller man. More threats forced their way through his raw vocal chords. "I'll tell everything I know now — and more."

"Well!" said a new voice.

The three men whirled to see Larry, in rain-streaming slicker and boots, standing in the doorway. "More threats? Never a dull moment what with the storm and—other things. Did I miss out on something?"

Paul broke in sharply. "Any chance of getting outside help?"

"Our chances are exactly zero until the storm breaks," Larry answered coolly. "There's not much left of the cruiser itself, to say nothing of its ship-to-shore phone. And any other means of communication just isn't."

He hesitated, looking curiously at the battered and bleeding Jamison. Again Paul blocked further questions. "Come on, we've got to eat something whether we want to or not."

Some time later Julia and Zena got hot coffee and toast together. The maid, terrified, had taken to her bed with an illness either bogus or real. The grim little group breakfasted dispiritedly, listening trance-like to the lunatic ravings of the storm, which didn't sound at all as though it were giving up.

"So we're stuck!" Zena Jamison's voice was suddenly shrill. Her gaze rested fearfully upon her husband's battered face, but apparently she didn't dare ask questions of him. "Stuck here on this lousy island, with Steele murdered and his body upstairs. I'm not going through another night of it, I tell you. Wondering who'll be next and—"

"Shut up, Zena. 'Murder.' A foolish word." Monroe Jamison's voice was even-tempered. It got results. His wife subsided. A cringing, almost animal look of terror streaked into her eyes. It was not a pleasant breakfast.

THE two women quickly cleaned up the table and went upstairs to their rooms. The men drifted into the great living room, where they stared out, as individuals, at the primal forces of wind and rain. They acted like complete strangers, rarely avoiding each other as though each were buried in his own secret thoughts. Paul tried to sidle out of the room without being noticed, and the next moment he was upstairs.

He took one swift glance up and

down the upstairs corridor, then stepped into Steele's room, closing the door lightly behind him. Trying not to look at the blanket-shrouded huddle on the bed, he went quickly to the chest from which Steele had extricated the anonymous letters the night before.

With methodical intentness he began pawing through the disordered clothing. At first his search yielded nothing beyond a few business letters, some bills, and a check-book, all routine. Few men kept important or secret papers in a summer retreat. Paul was about to despair of finding anything relevant to the case when, in rifling through some some blank sheets of stationery, he saw a ripped-open envelope. He pounced on it eagerly and was thumbing out the letter when he heard a slight noise at the door.

He pivoted about, seeking concealment. In two bounds he reached the closet, stepped inside, and closed the door on his pitch-black cell. Inside he was so completely insulated from Steele's room that he heard no sound until the closet key he had neglected to remove made a slight scratching sound in the lock. There was the unmistakable *snick* of the lock turning.

Paul reflected bitterly on his predicament. And as though being locked in weren't bad enough, he heard the drumming sound of knuckles beating a mocking staccato on the door. No voice, no footsteps were audible. Was it a man or a woman?

Paul knew it would be easy to pick the lock and free himself. Yet he hesitated. His nameless jailer might be waiting for that, ready to ambush him. It was more likely, though, that the nameless one preferred to remain undisturbed while cleaning up his unfinished business in Steele's room.

He kept his ear glued to the door, and at last heard the faintest click of a door closing. Seconds later he was free. With swift cautiousness, he finished his exploration of Steele's

personal papers. Too late, of course. The intruder—the *other* intruder, he thought grimly—had done a thorough job of searching, too.

Back in his own room Paul examined the letter he had plucked from his dead friend's possessions. It had a Washington return address, and the name above it was a bold scrawl—*Deering*. It was a brief, cryptic note:

*Dear Steele:*

I think your suspicions are unfounded. In any case, I'd prefer not to see you, either on the Island or in the city. I've never forgotten what a ridiculous issue you made of Norma's and my one-time association, and if that's still lurking in your mind then it would certainly be better that I not see either of you again.

FRED DEERING

"Well!" Paul spoke aloud. Here was a blunt refusal that somewhere along the line had turned into acceptance. What had changed Deering's mind about meeting the Millers again? Could Norma have changed it for him? In the light of the past unpleasantness, why should either of the Millers have wished Deering as a guest?

Paul reached in his suitcase to hide the Deering letter together with the poison-pen letters Steele had given him. Then he jerked his hand back as if stung. His suitcase was a jumbled mass of clothing—and the letters were gone.

*One hell of a detective I am*, he thought ruefully.

He reached for a cigarette and sat there smoking thoughtfully for a few minutes. Then he got up, went to the door, and listened. He heard distant voices downstairs—Larry, Norma, Deering, the Jamisons.

He snuffed out his cigarette and slipped from the room, then drifted noiselessly down the corridor.

A SHORT time later, Paul went to Julia's room. The door was closed, but at his knock it opened almost instantly. Julia stood there, in

gray slacks and a blue pull-over, both of which seemed to swallow her too slender frame.

"May I come in?"

"Well, if I were Grandmother Julianne Mueller, strait-laced and proper, instead of the very modern-minded Julia Miller—"

Paul closed the door behind him. His face showed he was not amused. Julia looked at him closely, then put her hand on his arm.

"What is it, Paul? What's it all about?"

Paul's voice was metallic. "I don't know yet. But I intend to find out. Julia," he went on bluntly, "when did you begin losing weight and getting yourself all run down like this?"

She looked at him in hurt astonishment that he should have mentioned such a thing. Seeing the pain in her eyes, Paul rushed on, keeping his voice low: "I mean it, Julia. I've got to know. I'm positive it has some bearing on—on what happened to Steele and Ned. An attempt has now been made on Larry's life, too. It puts you in line—"

He broke off, cursing himself for his clumsiness.

"Paul!" She sank down in a chair, her face tallow-hued and drawn with sudden fear. "You mean that I—that whoever killed Steele is after me, too?"

He signaled silence. Then, "Keep your voice low. But talk, Julia," he urged her gently. "Talk. It'll do you good."

After a moment she began to speak falteringly. "I—I don't know, Paul, when it started. It must have been some time ago. I began feeling tired and listless, unlike myself, losing weight, no interest in anything."

"But you wouldn't go to a doctor?"

"Well—no," she confessed. "You know, I was always so healthy before, and I—just didn't. I thought maybe it was temporary shock and grief over Ned's death."

"Did it start about the time that Ned was—that Ned died?"

She pondered. "Yes, it all seemed to start about that time. We'd planned such a wonderful get-together in the mountains. Steele home from Washington at last, where he'd been working with the government on the war. Ned back from France, and Larry back from that awful prison camp. Of course, he had lost his wife, too."

"Larry? Married? I didn't know."

"We don't talk about it, because she died in the Nazi bombing of Noirmont. Larry talked and talked incessantly about it. He was very bitter against the Nazis at all times, but after that—well, she was a Swiss girl, and I think he almost went crazy after that. The Hun, he would say, bombing Noirmont, and killing his innocent wife."

"He said that? Poor fellow. I didn't know."

"Anyway, Paul, there were all of us together again—except for you. I missed you, Paul, and wished terribly that you'd get back in time for the reunion. Then, of course, the Jamisons somehow found out about it and made it a point to show up, too. So we—well, they became members of the party, too, in a sense."

"Julia." Paul's voice held a compelling urgency. "Last night Norma named over all the people who were along on that party—exactly the ones you've just named. Was there anyone else, even briefly? Someone you may have forgotten to mention? Think hard!"

"Oh, no, no one else was there. Except"—suddenly her eyes widened—"but he wasn't really a member of the party. He just stopped by the first night we were there, and the way Steele immediately took him up to his own room made me decide the two of them had an appointment. He pretended not to see Norma or me when he came in."

"None of the others knew him then, except Steele and Norma and me. Then, later, Steele joined us all downstairs alone in the lobby of this

little mountain camp or inn, or whatever you want to call it, where we were staying. So I knew he, the other man, must have left."

"Who?" hammered Paul, in a low, tense voice. "What other man?"

"Fred Deering," said Julia guiltily.

**PAUL** made a thorough business of lighting a cigarette. "And that was the same week end that poor Ned got it," he reflected. And since that time someone's tried to get Larry and did get Steele. And you—well—" His mouth made a bitter and dangerous flat line. "There's no doubt about it. Someone's out to eliminate the Millers, one by one." Suddenly he reached in his pocket and said abruptly, "Did you ever see one of these things before?"

He showed her a scrap of paper on which was drawn a black hood—nothing more. A monk's cowl, it might have been, or an inky KKK covering for the face.

She said nothing for a long time, but when she spoke she was even whiter and more distracted than she had been. "It seems so silly. Ridiculous, really. But when Steele and Larry and the others went out with the state patrolmen and found Ned's body—well, in the smashed ruins they found a thing that looked like that."

"I found this in Steele's room," Paul said somberly. "It wasn't there before. I don't intend to find one in your room."

"Paul!" She said it chokingly. "That's horrible! There are Millers left. There's Larry, there's me, there's Norma—"

Paul evaded her eyes. "Yes," he said, "Norma's a Miller, too—by marriage." He went on uncomfortably. "Maybe I'm a heel, Julia. Still I've got to show you something I found in the room of someone very close to you, someone you like and admire and trust."

Very carefully he pulled a small,

round object from his pocket. It was wrapped loosely in a handkerchief, and he removed the cloth to reveal an ordinary blue-white medicine bottle, the sort that could be bought by the hundreds in any drugstore. It was about two-thirds full of a crystalline powder.

"What is it, Paul?"

"Arsenic. Don't touch the bottle."

"Where did you find it?"

Again he avoided her eyes. "Nasty business, this snooping—prying through the rooms and personal possessions of close friends. But murder's even nastier."

"Where did you find that bottle?"

"In Norma's room."

Behind Paul the door was wrenched violently open. He swiveled around to find himself face to face with a grim-jawed and implacable Fred Deering. Without a word, the intruder made a grab for the arsenic jar, but Paul thrust himself between Deering and the table, and in the same motion slipped the handkerchief about the bottle and slid it into his pocket.

#### CHAPTER IV

**DEERING'S** icy control had slipped badly. Glaring, he stood there inches from Paul, his body tautly poised and his fists clenched.

"Damn you, Oldham!" Rage curdled his tones. "Who do you think you are—snooping all over the place like this, invading people's rooms, recklessly accusing friends behind their backs of murder!"

Paul's gaze flicked down to the other's sneaker-shod feet. "You seem prepared to do a little prowling yourself, major."

Deering looked as though he had been slapped, and his tight muscles bunched still more, telegraphing a punch.

"Hold it!" Paul rapped out the command. "Weren't you listening at the door?"

"I—" Suddenly the man's angry

tension dissolved into confusion. "I was simply going to check on Julia, to see if she was all right. Norma missed her, and naturally she's worried sick just now, and she asked me to see if everything was okay upstairs. I was just going to knock when I heard your voice"—anger again thickened his tones—"just in time to hear the latest of your accusations of murder, this time against your hostess."

"I accused no one of murder," Paul said stonily. "I was simply detailing the latest bit of evidence uncovered and where uncovered. I didn't accuse you when I found, or we found, the poison bottle in your room—evidence definitely tampered with and devoid of all traces of poison or fingerprints. If there are prints on this evidence, I'm going to see that the right authorities get them intact."

"But, Paul," wailed Julia, "you can't believe that Norma—"

"It's evidence," Paul insisted stubbornly.

"Evidence," said Deering. "Who's to say what it is? The way you've been making yourself at home in people's rooms around here, you could have planted this in Norma's room just as you—or somebody—planted that blasted bottle in mine."

"So you insist that it was planted?" Paul went on softly.

"Of course!" But it was as though Deering saw a caution signal ahead, and his words came with a wary restraint. "It wouldn't be the first time somebody has tried to frame me."

He turned irresolutely to leave. "I'd advise you not to throw your weight around too much, Oldham. You have no authority here."

"Perhaps," prodded Paul, "you have the authority, major. Such an investigation should be right in your line. You served with the Military Government in Germany, didn't you? Ever have anything to do with

the CIC, the Counter-Intelligence Corps?"

Deering's words came in a measured monotone. "Whatever I may have been—or whatever I may have done—is all behind me, my inquisitive medical friend. I am a civilian, just as you are. I am here as a guest, just as you are."

"Remember a case about one of the Americans with the MG, major—a certain Captain Bartholomew? He went Nazi on the boys. Remember? Oh, it was hushed up, never made the papers. But . . . ." Paul let his words die.

NOW again tension was in the room—invisible, yet thick, almost stifling. Both men seemed to have forgotten Julia, who watched them with a mute yet fascinated sense of dread. Again Deering turned to go. He was reaching for the door-knob when Paul spoke again.

"Ever hear of the *Feme*, major?"

Deering didn't move. His hand remained outstretched for the door without touching it, like a man about to shake hands with a phantom. He kept the strained, frozen pose for some seconds before he seemed able to shake himself back to reality.

There was a knock on the door. "Julia, you all right?" It was Larry. "Deering? Paul?"

So tense was the atmosphere in Julia's room that no one seemed to hear the interruption. Deering turned back, his face a neutral mask. He did not look directly at Paul.

"Perhaps you believe in ghosts, witches, and vampires, too. Maybe even in werewolves." His voice was even, unemotional, as though kept that way by a firm effort of will. "You look too intelligent to rant about such childish nonsense, doctor."

"I think I am reasonably intelligent, major. And I have heard of the *Feme* and I believe it exists. So do you."

Without another word. Deering

opened the door and left the room, brushing by Larry, standing on the threshold, as though he didn't exist.

"What's all this?" Larry spoke rather breathlessly. "You three been hatching a plot or something?" He tried to say it jokingly, but his voice was sharp with suspicion.

"It's nothing, Larry!" Paul's voice was sharp, too. "Seems we all became worried about Julia at the same time. First me. Then Deering. Then you. Everything's okay."

"Everything okay—in this madhouse? Don't you believe it! We'd all better keep a weather eye on each other. I know I am doing same." He drifted away.

"You and I certainly draw the audiences," Paul said grimly. "But Larry's right, Julia. Listen, be careful—very careful—of what you eat and drink from now on. Until—well, until!"

A barely perceptible spasm of trembling seized her. "Until," she repeated, "until it's all over."

Suddenly they heard a new step in the corridor, not stealthy, not loud. They looked up and caught one glimpse of Jamison's face, a pale blur in the darkened corridor. It was turned full toward them as the man walked by on his way downstairs.

"But, Paul, please!" Julia clutched his arm as he turned to go. "What is that absurd word that upset Fred so? What does it mean—that word *Feme*?"

"Absurd?" Paul paused. "Yes, you're right, Julia. It is an absurd word. To you, to me, to all sane people. The trouble is, there are still some minds left in the world that believe in the word and are using it to their own murderous ends. Insane minds, in a way — yet powerful and dangerous minds, too." He patted her arm. "I hate to be so mysterious, but it just has to be that way now. If I'm right, then you'll know the whole story later—and there won't be any more Miller murders."

He kissed her reassuringly and

returned to his room, where he locked the door, pulled some assorted papers and his kit together on a table. For an hour, two hours, he threw himself into a furious concentration of reading and writing, while outside the storm slowly spent itself. The wind and the rain lessened, and the endless, mountainous waves began to slacken.

**P**AUL knew that something had to break quickly now. The killer had teamed with night and darkness before; chances were, the killer would again. And *tonight*—for time was running out. By tomorrow help would get through to them to end their isolation and throw the spotlight on murder.

When at last he went downstairs to join the others, Paul saw that the maid had managed to scrape up a meal of sorts. It seemed to him that fear and strain drew up a chair with everyone at the table. There was little conversation. They all stared at the food before them without touching it. Finally Paul spoke, his voice deliberately harsh.

"Don't let's be ridiculous! Certainly we can't suspect the maid." He grimaced toward the kitchen. "And since the rest of us are here, except Julia, who's ill and will eat later if she feels like it, it should be perfectly safe. Here, I'll be the guinea pig."

He took a healthy bite, chewed, swallowed. Another, and another. One by one, other forks rose falteringly around the table.

After the dreary meal, no one seemed anxious to linger in the living room. They might all have been a dispirited band of utter strangers, with their tired, sleep-demanding faces. Quickly they drifted upstairs—Norma first, the Jamisons, then Larry. Finally Deering started toward the stairs. Then he paused and turned back to Paul. He cleared his throat.

"Forget something?" asked Paul.

The two men stared at each other with a bleak yet probing intensity. Something of the storm's aftermath—its unseasonably chilling rawness—seemed to roll through the house. Paul gave a little involuntary shiver and wished he hadn't, for he knew the other man had seen it.

"Ah — a cigarette?" Deering slapped aimlessly at his pockets. Paul knew the man had cigarettes, but he produced a package.

"Here. Take several."

"Thanks," mumbled Deering. He took three and returned the package. "Pleasant — uh, nightmares to you."

Then Paul was alone, as he wanted to be. He smoked once, and then again. Then he went to his room. His step sounded loud in the hush, which lay through the place like soundproofing.

When he closed the door, his glance dropped automatically to the lock. It had held a key before dinner. It didn't now. A grin pulled at Paul's lips—not pleasantly. He took off his shoes.

He manipulated pillows and blankets with a sort of slapdash artistry on his bed. He raised a window a respectable ventilation's gap from the sill. He snapped off the light. When his eyes had conditioned themselves to the darkness, he studied the vague sprawl on the bed.

He didn't touch the bed again. He slipped over to the closed door without sound. He stationed himself beside it but not in its direct path. He plucked a flashlight from one pocket of his blouse and placed it within easy reach. From the other pocket he very carefully pulled an object wrapped in chamois. He extracted the object. It was long, cold, hard, thin, cylindrical, and it came to an extraordinarily fine point. He continued to hold this object in his hand, his fingers sensitively avoiding its cactus, spinelike point.

He cursed the cold numbly. He

wished it wasn't such hard work being a detective. He wished he could smoke.

He waited. And he waited.

## CHAPTER V

PAUL'S visitor was skillful. The stealthiest of sounds, which no unsuspecting sleeper would have heard, whispered that the door was opening. Then the door whispered shut again.

No mouse could have crept to the bed as noiselessly as the stockings' feet that slid by Paul. There was a sudden whistling intake of breath, then a sound that might have been a lunge or a thrust; finally, a grunt.

Paul's flash beam lanced out. The intruder, pinned beside the bed, stared slack-jawed and maniac-eyed into the blinding glare. Paul struck with the heavy flash-light, hard across the temple. He struck to stun, not to kill. The jarred flashlight winked out, fell to the floor.

Paul flung himself on the bed across his toppled victim, ripping open pajama top until he felt the bicep of one bare arm. He pinched up a walnut-sized bit of flesh; then, feeling carefully in the darkness, he plunged into the skin the pointed, cylindrical object he had nursed in his hand during the entire vigil.

A repeated low, urgent tap on the door pulled him away at last. He opened the door.

"Oldham?" It was Deering's voice in the darkness. "You okay? Thought I heard a noise. Didn't want to wake the house. Everybody's so jittery, you know."

"It's all over, man. Come in." He snapped on his bedroom light.

Deering saw the huddled body. He stiffened, took a few tentative steps into the room. When he saw the face of the now dazedly stirring, moaning figure on the bed, he stopped dead.

"You were right," he said in a shocked whisper. "And Steele, poor

old Steele, was right." He glanced again at the bed, at the misshapen huddle under the bedclothes that had been a dummy and from which, now, the haft of an ordinary kitchen knife protruded. "You thought he might come after you, and you caught him with a schoolboy trick in attempted murder—a dummy in bed."

"Worked, didn't it?" Paul said curtly. "He wasn't so smart, or else he was getting panicky." He flung a hypodermic needle on a table, ignoring the new question that leapt into Deering's eyes. "Listen to me. Go waken the others, but tell 'em they must stay in their rooms and remain quiet. Tell 'em we've got the killer and will get a confession, but that any move or excitement can tear the whole show. Then come back here, sit in a far corner and take down everything—*everything*—you hear? Got it?"

Deering nodded and slipped away. When he returned a hectic fifteen minutes later, he drifted inside and sank down in a far corner with the soundlessness of a yogi. Except for a modest cone of light from a bedside lamp, the room was in darkness.

Paul Oldham was addressing the figure on the bed. His tones, free of emotion, had the low yet compelling intensity of the physician.

"All the way back, Herr Mueller—to zero. Surely a man of your superior attainments can do that!"

**W**ORDS came haltingly from Larry Miller, as though he were a child in the midst of a difficult recitation, speaking in a man's strained voice.

"Fourteen . . . thirteen . . . twelve . . . eleven . . . twenty—" A pause. "Twenty-one . . . twenty-two . . ."

Oldham's words were like a brother's caress of pity, of sympathy. "They killed her, didn't they? Your beautiful, so intelligent wife. At Noirmont, in Switzerland—the Nazis did, in an aid raid."

"Fool! Not the Nazis!" Abruptly

Larry Miller thrust himself up on a trembling arm. His eyes were the blank amber of fog lights, but his face twitched and his voice almost screamed its rage. "It was the Yankee airmen—*Amerikaner Schweinhunden*. Death in a little town in Switzerland. Elsa was safe there. No one knew of her — activities. But the Americans murdered her — by accident." A spasm of anguish and hatred contorted his features.

"But you carried on after that," prodded Paul. "The way *she* had taught you. The way *they* had coached you. Even though your family—loyal Americans even to their name—were fighting against the Fatherland, you could still fight for it, in your way. And you could punish them — your family — for their presumption later."

Horrid triumph flashed into the vindictive face. "And did!" came the shout. "Ah, it took time. When the Allies began breaking through, and we saw it was all over for now, I had the Herr General put me in a prison camp to be 'rescued' by my American comrades." A chuckle. "I had been ill, devilishly ill, and I could pass as a prisoner transferred at the last minute from another camp.

"Oh, the conquerors took care of me. A long mend in the hospital, then back again to the homeland of our past generations of Muellers—back as a roving photographer and correspondent trusted by the conquerors."

Another chuckle. "It was easy to pick up as planned. Our elements were scattered but not disorganized, not destroyed. Easy to pick up the pieces and begin again." For a moment it became a chant, a phonograph needle stuck in a groove. "To begin again, begin again, begin again . . ." Slowly it died.

"To begin again," Paul echoed soothingly. "Not only to organize slowly and secretly, but to strike, too, for vengeance. To restore to life the institution that judged German

enemies of Germany in the past—*geheime Volksjustiz*—the people's justice, the secret court." Paul's voice rang. "The *Feme* of retribution!"

Larry Miller's eyes remained glazed, but his voice snapped with authority. "Don't speak that word! Even now news of it gets about—one of our closest secrets." Suddenly a grin of crafty gloating stretched his lips tautly back.

"Yes, I was assigned to the job I could do best—to the Millers, so-called, who only three generations removed from the Fatherland, poured energy, money, even blood into warring on their own people—for all they knew into the killing of their own people, the Muellers. A proud family name, that, supremely Nordic. But they changed it when they became Americans years and years ago." Even in his trance, the man almost spat out his venom.

"And Ned, of course, was first on your list," purred Paul. "Ned, who even dared to wear the hated American uniform and drop the hated bombs."

"Ned," repeated Larry Miller vaguely. The drug's powerful stimulus seemed to be lessening, and Paul studied the man anxiously. "Easy, that one. A ruse to get him away from the others—a tap on the head—plant whisky in the car—then over into the canyon. *Kaput*."

THE dull voice labored now. "After that, Julia. The arsenic she's absorbing in increasing doses—doses too strong for any building up of immunity to it—that'll fix her. Taking my time now—my time—my own good time. Steele's gone now. It's easy to kill." A wolfish flick of a grin. "The letters to him—about Norma. They were splitting those two—could see it. Heard he changed his will. She won't get much—now." A fresh spark charged the dying emotional battery for a moment. "But I will—all that's left. It's mine anyway, all that beautiful Miller gold.

And what uses I can put it to!"

Paul stood up abruptly, swaying with fatigue. His body was one solid ache. His red-rimmed eyes were slits of revulsion.

"Got it all?" he demanded of Deering. The man in the corner nodded woodenly.

Paul leaned across the bed. Three times, just as hard as he could strike, he brought his open right palm across the twitching, jerking, faintly drooling face of Larry Miller—who preferred to be known as Herr Mueller in some circles.

It was unsportsmanlike of the doctor. It was unscientific of the doctor. And it was just what the doctor ordered—for himself.

"Well," said Paul, when Deering had finished before their silent, visibly shaken audience, "so it was Larry. Romantic and laughing Larry, who hated to grow old and worshiped youth and power and always harbored Nazi ideas. Of German heritage as all the Muellers—or Millers as you've long called yourselves—he was a throwback.

"With his entrance to circles abroad through his unsuspecting sponsors, he could work plenty of mischief. I suspect the woman he married was a Nazi spy operating out of Switzerland. The pronounced anti-Axis activities of his own family here in America had him wild, but he didn't dare reveal his true sympathies. Then when his wife was killed by American bombs—"

"American?" Julia looked incredulous. "But he always maintained it was the Nazis—"

"At Noirmont? Oh, no. He implied it was Nazi bombs, to put on a show of rage against his pals. He may have been showing his fanatic's contempt for what his crowd called American ignorance, too. American planes bombed Noirmont by mistake in October, 1944, and later paid the town an indemnity. That must have fed

added fuel to his hatred of Germany's enemies."

"But that poisoning try on Larry?" It was Jamison, utterly humbled now.

"A phony, of course. Oh, he made himself sick, no doubt, to make his yarn plausible and to duck any possible suspicion for Steele's death later that he was even then plotting. But the way he rattled off that list of symptoms—unusual for a layman. He listed them in the same order, the same words, that you'll find in the Encyclopedia under 'Arsenic.'

"And as for arsenic—who'd be most likely to have access to it here? A photographer, of course. Poisons are standard equipment in their developing work. Naturally, that arsenic I found in Norma's room was planted—just as was the whisky bottle we found in Deering's room. Oh, the man got around, all right, like the—" He was going to say "the rat that he was," but didn't.

"The *Feme*," mused Deering. "He heard you mention it through the door of Julia's room and decided then he'd have to get you. That ridiculous hooded design that some of the Underground fanatics scatter around. Larry gloated so over his 'revenge,' that he just had to leave that mysterious trademark to mystify us. I'd heard some of the diehards had resurrected such a movement—it dates back to medieval times—and when you buttonholed me with it, it had me worried.

"You see, I was here at Steele's request. I'd had a conference or two earlier with him. Somehow Steele's suspicions of Larry had been aroused. He wanted an undercover government checkup to confirm or deny. That's why I was here, and maybe that explains all the secret papers in my room. But it was you who finally nailed him."

**P**AUL said nothing. He hadn't been certain up to the last minute. It might have been Jamison, with

a revenge motive and a past record of shady, secret organization activity. Or it might have been Deering. But Paul knew Fred Deering better now.

"It was you, I suppose, who locked me in—uh, Steele's rooms?" Paul wanted to know.

Deering looked embarrassed. "I was prowling, too. I got the letters from your bag." He didn't say what letters—the anonymous letters. "Destroyed 'em. Nothing to do with the case now."

Norma, pale but calm, said: "And you got the whole story out of him before he—"

"Yes," Paul said quickly. "With truth serum, which is really an injection of sodium pentothol or sodium amytol. It's often been used in psychiatry and came in to prominence during the war in treating twisted, battle-shocked minds. You can't be sure it'll always work, but it did this time.

"His mind was perfect for it—warped and hopeless with his terrible story crying to come out. A little preliminary, such as getting him to count back from a hundred—then, a sympathetic word, a suggestion here and there of what's locked in his tortured mind. And under the influence, out it comes—the whole works! I've made a study of the subject. I had brought along notes and material to work on during part of my planned week's stay here with you." He added grimly, "Didn't know I'd get a chance to put it to such a gruesome test."

When he stood up, he almost fell. "And now," he said, "to bed. Everybody. It's all over—the whole hideous nightmare. We can all sleep in peace and fearlessly eat what we please from now on."

He put his arms around Julia. Soon she would be her vivid, flowerlike self again. Her smile, tired but serene and with the haunting shadows lifted, was his assurance.

# Goldbrick Solitaire

By C. M. Kornbluth

*Cronshaw wanted his victim to finish that card game. Yet when the ace of spades turned up, Cronshaw knew his hour had struck.*



**C**RONSHAW, waiting to rob and possibly kill an elderly gentleman, was very well pleased with himself. It was stuffy in the hotel room closet, but he could stand a bit of bad air for an hour or two. He worked his fingers as if they were already sliding over the soft, buttery surface of the Kohler Ingot.

The sales talk was already composing itself in his mind. He would sell it to a Californian, some new-rich Angeleno eager for a background. Cronshaw would display the little oblong of gold on black velvet, with the assay stamp up—*F. D. Kohler, state assayer, Sac: Cal: 1850, 42 dwt 12 grs: \$36.55.*

"A precious relic, Mr. Whosis, of your state's vigorous youth, when commercial growth outstripped the minting facilities available. Naturally these are now fantastically rare—"  
Naturally.

It was stuffy. Cronshaw began to wonder if the hard, wise-eyed bellboy had hidden him in the right room. Old Mr. Winger, for that matter, might have missed his connection in Chicago. Cronshaw had gathered, in the course of their mail transactions, that Winger was on his last legs. Winger's mind must be slipping, too, Cronshaw thought, to have fallen hook, line, and sinker for the little deal that Cronshaw had proposed as a matter of course, hardly hoping that the old fool would—

The door clicked. Cronshaw put his eye to the nearest of the observation holes he had drilled with a tiny auger and saw the lights snap on.

The bellboy's hard voice said, "It's right in here, sir."

A harsh old voice answered, "I can find a door, damn it! Here's a 1928 quarter for you. Now run along."

The door closed and Cronshaw saw Mr. Winger for the first time in their three years of dealing. It was an ancient, battered face, horsey and lined. Winger took off a black felt hat and Cronshaw saw that he was bald.

Winger opened the suitcase resting on the luggage rack at the foot of the bed, and took out a handkerchief and two boxes. He blew his nose loudly, sat on the bed, and opened one of the boxes.

Cronshaw suppressed a gasp. He was looking at seven thousand, five hundred dollars' worth of unrecorded, highly negotiable, rare currency substitute. It was the Kohler Ingot Winger had found in a junkshop. It was the Kohler Ingot he thought he was going to sell to Cronshaw. It was the Kohler Ingot he was going to be robbed of as soon as he went to sleep.

The coin dealer hugged himself. It was like winning a lottery, he thought, as he saw Winger trail his fingertips over the oblong of gold. It was like winning a lottery less than like winning the jackpot on a seven-wheel slot machine.

The first bar that had to come up was Winger finding the ingot. The second, Winger needing money. The third, Winger contacting him for the

sale. The fourth, Winger believing him when he'd urged secrecy throughout the deal. The fifth was just now clicking into view behind the window. He and Winger were alone together, and Winger didn't know it.

The sixth and seventh were, respectively, the actual theft and the escape from the hotel. They were routine. His luck couldn't break now.

**W**INGER had closed the box and put it away in the suitcase. He began dealing himself a hand of solitaire on the bed, with thick, dirty cards from the second box.

The old fool! Why didn't he go to sleep?

He didn't even play as if he knew the game. He kept touching the cards on the layout uncertainly and fingering the cards in the deck. After what seemed like an eternity in the closet the game was over.

And so to bed? No, one more game.

Winger shuffled clumsily and dealt himself another layout. He did pretty well on that one. After fifteen minutes he had hearts to the five, spades to the three, clubs to the ace, and diamonds to the eight.

Cronshaw, not exactly panicky, began to realize that his time was running out. The closet was becoming very stuffy indeed.

He would let Winger play one more hand. If he didn't go to sleep after that he would snatch the ingot, with whatever violence to the old man was indicated, and leave. He tied a handkerchief over his face and put his eye to the auger hole.

Winger was playing out the hand, slowly and clumsily, stopping often to touch the cards of the layout. He did

badly, getting out only the ace of spades.

Very appropriate, thought Cronshaw, taking out a length of rubber hose packed with lead-sheathed cable.

Winger shuffled clumsily and began to lay out another hand.

Cronshaw snapped the door open, hurled across the room, and dashed the lamp to the floor.

"Who's there?" rasped Winger. "What's going on?"

Cronshaw didn't waste time in talk. His fingers were already closing around the box containing the precious ingot.

"Speak up, why don't you?" snarled Winger.

Cronshaw had the box and was tiptoeing for the door. He heard Winger fumbling with something—for the light, of course, a frightened old man.

His own heart was pounding, he thought, inching for the door, but otherwise he was making no noise. And who could possibly hear his heart?

His heart gave one more tremendous pound as he heard a small clicking noise which he recognized, and then his heart stopped because there were three .44 caliber bullets lodged in it. He fell.

Winger, old and irritable, cursed as he holstered his gun.

Somebody could come and see what the noise was if they wanted to, he thought angrily. None of his damned business if prowlers—

Without bothering to snap on the light he felt for his solitaire deck and shuffled it. His sensitive fingers, the sensitive fingers of the blind, dealt the layout with the Braille deck.

The first card up was the ace of spades again.



*Johnny Eaton, amateur photographer, had arisen before dawn to film a certain scenic effect for the camera club exhibit. But Johnny's shot in the dark turned out to be a . . .*

# Photo of a Kill



*The blow sent Johnny reeling against the wall.*

By Norman A. Daniels

**T**HE State Police car was moving fast with its siren screaming. Johnny Eaton, who had been seated on the farmhouse porch steps, raced out to the highway and waved the car down. Johnny Eaton was twenty-four, serious-faced, but lanky and springy. There was a leather-encased minicamera slung over one shoulder.

The police car shot past him,

braked, and backed up. A man in civilian clothes got out and walked up to Johnny Eaton.

"I'm Lieutenant Steve Barnes, Homicide Division. Are you the man who phoned in about a murder?"

"Yes, sir, I'm Johnny Eaton," Johnny said eagerly. "The body is about three miles from here, near the foot of Eagle Mountain. Somebody bashed in Mr. Holden's skull

with a rock. I touched nothing."

Lieutenant Barnes said, "So—you even know the dead man. Are you from around here?"

"Oh, no, sir. I'm from the city. My car is down the road a bit. Take me there, and I'll lead the way to where it happened and explain things while we're riding."

Johnny Eaton got into the police car and was whisked to where his own cheap and ancient coupé was still parked. He and Lieutenant Barnes got in. Johnny headed down the highway toward the cutoff which would take them to the foot of the mountain.

Johnny explained, "You see, lieutenant, I'm an amateur photographer. I belong to one of the big clubs in town. We're having an exhibition in a couple of days, and I wanted a certain shot to hang. This Eagle Mountain has been a challenge to our club for years.

"At a certain time, just after dawn, the combination of light and shadow throws the startlingly plain silhouette of a giant eagle upon the side of the mountain. It takes place over a period of seconds, and then is gone. You have to be on your toes to get that shot, and very few people ever have."

"You came all the way out here, in the middle of the night, to get a picture of a shadow on a mountainside," Lieutenant Barnes sighed, as if mentally forgiving a crackpot. "All right—what's the rest of the story?"

"Well, I got here in plenty of time and took up a good position. It was dawn, but the sun wasn't up yet. I got my camera all set and sat down in some deep brush to wait. About the time the shadow began advancing over the mountain, I heard voices. I didn't pay much attention because I was watching the shadow and getting ready."

"Look," Barnes broke in, "before we go deeply into this—did you see the murderer?"

"Yes, but I didn't know who he

was. I was too far away. I trained my camera and squinted through the finder. I saw these two men. One walked behind the other. Then the second man picked up a big rock, ran close, and smashed it down on the other man's head. I took my picture then. Afterward the murderer picked up the rock once more and dropped it on his victim's head a second time. I started running toward the scene, but the killer just disappeared."

"Did he see you?"

"I don't think so. I was standing in the sun, and it was pretty strong. I found Mr. Holden dead so I ran to the farmhouse and phoned you."

"Tell me," Barnes asked, "how it happens you knew the dead man?"

"He's Carl Holden, a member of the photo club to which I belong. He's a rich and very important man."

**B**ARNES exhaled sharply. "You mean it's the Carl Holden who runs the Holden Enterprises? I'll say he's important. Johnny, you took your picture about the time of the murder. Do you think you got the murder scene as well as the side of the mountain?"

"I think so. It won't do you much good, though. The two men were too far away."

Barnes pondered that for a couple of minutes. "Maybe it will be of some good even if we can't identify either figure. We'll see."

Johnny Eaton had little to do for the next few hours. Lieutenant Barnes sent for the county coroner, police photographers, and fingerprint men. Finally he came over to the rock on which Johnny sat. Barnes ranged himself alongside him.

Johnny Eaton had little to do for a vicious, cold-blooded murder. Holden came 'way out here for the same reason you did—to get a picture of that shadow on the mountainside. Now it stands to reason that the killer who came with him gave the same reason for accompanying Hol-

den. That is, the killer may also be a member of your photo club, or at least actively interested in photography."

"I thought of that, lieutenant. It makes sense. I wish I'd been a little closer so I might have recognized him."

"You did pretty well as it is," Barnes acknowledged. "Now about that idea I had a little while ago. Suppose you develop your film, print the picture, and see what it amounts to. If, as you suspect, it's of little use to us, would it be possible to enlarge the part of the photo showing the two men? Then maybe you could superimpose this upon a partially blown-up shot of the mountainside. Get what I mean?"

Johnny nodded slowly. "I think so. You want me to make a picture that would indicate I was a lot closer to the murder than I really was. But you know the blow-ups of the two men will be fogged. So will the final print where I've superimposed. I doubt it would fool anybody who was very familiar with photography."

"But it might, and we have to take our chances," Barnes said. "Do as I suggested and then hang the finished picture in your exhibit. If the murderer sees it, he'll be half convinced you know his identity, but for reasons of your own, you are saying nothing. I'll see to it that you don't enter the case at all. It'll be as if you got away from the scene as fast as you could and someone else stumbled across the corpse."

"Of course I'll do it," Johnny agreed. "Mr. Holden was a nice man. He gave a lot of money to the club and took a big interest in it. Whoever killed him ought to pay for it. I'll be glad to help."

"Fine," Barnes approved. "I, or one of my men, will be close by you at all times just in case the killer decides to get rid of you, too. Ride me back to town. I want to see what you got on that film. Anyway, the motive

for this murder originated in the city, and it's there I've got to work."

**B**Y LATE afternoon Johnny had his first print. It showed the two men but very, very faintly. There was absolutely no way of identifying them, and blowing up that section of the picture did no good because they were not in perfect focus anyway.

Lieutenant Barnes went off to conduct his investigation and Johnny started work on the montage shot. It was hard going, but by ten o'clock he had a finished product. It showed the two men much closer, but fogged beyond hope of identification. It was an odd shot, looking much as if the forms and features of the two men had been deliberately clouded.

Furthermore the picture gave no indication that a murder was either in process or contemplated. It was just a picture of two men, one slightly ahead of the other. Lieutenant Barnes thought the job was perfect when he studied it around midnight.

"How did you make out?" Johnny asked.

Barnes shook his head. "Holden had a few bitter enemies, a few people close to him who will profit by his death. It becomes a question of checking alibis, and that takes time. Maybe with this picture we can hurry things along. Can you have it hung in time for the opening of the exhibit tomorrow night?"

"Sure, I already arranged for it. After all, I did get the shadow shot, too. First time anyone captured it in years. I'm half hoping to win a prize."

Early the following evening, Johnny entered the exhibit rooms. There were several hundred pictures up for prizes, and his occupied a very prominent spot. It was drawing plenty of attention, too.

Lieutenant Barnes was there, successfully posing as a photo enthusi-

ast. Johnny lined up beside him in front of a large color shot.

"I was thinking and thinking last night," Johnny said, "trying to find something that might help you. The only thing that came to my mind was the fact that the murderer got very excited after he struck down Mr. Holden. He let go of the rock and started scrambling around, looking for another to finish him off with. Then he recalled the one he'd used and had to make several attempts to seize it before he lifted it off the ground. After that he just cut loose and ran as fast as he could—until I lost sight of him."

Barnes said, "Not much to help us, Johnny, but little things sometimes count. I've had a good look at your entry. It's pretty darn good. You'd swear you really took a clear shot of that pair and then purposefully fogged them up. If the killer comes here and sees it, we'll find action all right."

Johnny nodded and moved away. Now and then he glanced in the direction of his entry. There was always a crowd in front of it, intent upon the shadow of the eagle and hardly noticing the two men at all. Nothing happened. At eleven, attendants began to get ready to close up. Barnes went out alone. Johnny felt the whole thing was a bust, but he had another look at his entry and thought he might win a prize anyway. This was his first entry, and he secretly gloated over having his name neatly printed below the shot.

**B**ARNES was outside waiting for him. He said, "Don't look so downcast, Johnny. If the murderer did spot that picture, he'll need time to mull it over and come to some decision. From here on, watch yourself. Be on your toes. If you think someone is following you, pay no attention. It will be one of my men. Good night—and let's both of us wish for a lot of luck."

"Didn't you find out anything

about Mr. Holden or why somebody would have wanted to kill him?" Johnny asked quickly.

"Trouble is," Barnes replied, "we found too many people who hated Holden. He was a nice fellow personally, but in business he was a bit too shrewd. His specialty was buying up patents and commercializing them. Some of the people who sold him their rights think they were cheated. We're investigating these people now."

Barnes went to his car and drove off. Johnny walked home. Several times he tried to ascertain whether or not he was being trailed, but there seemed to be no one. Then he noticed a heavy car that was being operated very slowly so that it stayed behind him most of the time. The driver appeared to time things so every traffic light stopped him. Johnny grinned. That would be Lieutenant Barnes's man doing his shadowing in comfort.

Johnny waited at the next corner for the traffic light to change in his favor. As he did, the heavy car came to a slow stop. Johnny stepped off the curb and was halfway across the street when he heard the car motor roar. He turned quickly. The car was bearing down on him and picking up speed with every turn of the wheels.

Johnny gave a leap forward. The car veered and came at him again. Johnny started to run as fast as his legs would move, but the street was very wide, and the driver of the car knew how to handle it. Something brushed against him, and Johnny rotated in a crazy spin before he went flying into a sprawled-out position close to the gutter. The car gathered more speed and took the next corner.

A man came running to help Johnny—a man with the quiet efficiency Lieutenant Barnes would demand of his assistants. He brought Johnny to the sidewalk.

"I'm a trooper," he said softly. "The lieutenant said things might pop

any time, and he wasn't fooling. I stayed too far behind you to be of any good, but that certainly was an attempt on your life. I didn't even get the numbers on the car because the driver killed his lights."

Johany gave a tremulous laugh. "I—I thought it was a trooper in the car," he explained. "I wasn't looking for trouble so soon. I—I guess the murderer saw my picture all right."

"Bank on that," the trooper said. "Okay, start for home now, and this time I'm staying very close with a hand on my gun butt."

Johnny reached home without any further trouble. He said nothing to his widowed mother. She worried far too much, so he merely told her about the exhibit and went upstairs to retire. The phone rang while he brushed his teeth. It was for him, and he hurried downstairs.

**T**HE voice was high, nasal, and sounded as if it might be disguised by the simple expedient of the caller's holding his nose. There was a highly sarcastic quality to it also.

"Eaton, how did you like your brush with sudden death tonight? Don't bother to answer. Just keep listening. I could have killed you very easily then. You're a smart boy. You fogged that picture purposely, so I'd see it and be forced to come to you. Well, how much do you want for the negative that shows me as your exhibit shot should?"

Johnny gulped. "Fifty thousand dollars," he said.

The man laughed harshly. "Fifty grand? You're no piker, Eaton. You do have the negative?"

"Of course," Johnny said.

"Fifty thousand—a lot of money. Not to be raised quickly. I'll need time, do you understand? But tomorrow night, at the exhibit, walk through Exit 54. It leads into a corridor. Proceed along this to the end and make a right turn. You'll find a closed door. Open it, go inside, and

wait. If I have the cash, I'll be there. Otherwise repeat the performance the following night. Is that clear?"

"I'll be there," Johnny said shakily. "You'd better show up, too."

The phone banged in his ear as if the caller was venting his rage that way. Johnny was glad that his mother had overheard none of his end of the conversation. He intimated it was merely a call about the exhibit and went back upstairs to bed.

There was no sleep in him. He was still shaken from that close call with death, and the telephone conversation didn't soothe his nerves any. Each normal creak in the old house took on undertones that were sinister and weird. Each passing auto seemed to slow up close by, as if the driver would get out to make a frontal attack. Once a breeze from the window closed his bedroom door with a very gentle sound. It made him sit bolt upright in a cold sweat.

By dawn the terror had left him, and he was getting mad. After all, his enemy was a murderer who must be even more afraid than he at the moment. It was his duty, as a citizen, to hunt down this killer. Therefore he had to take the role of the hunter, but be on guard lest he be the hunted. At six o'clock he fell asleep, and the alarm awakened him at seven.

He went to work red-eyed and a little shaky, but as the day progressed, he secured a firmer grip on his nerves. Lieutenant Barnes was waiting outside when he went to lunch, and Johnny told him about the phone call.

Barnes was delighted. "It's working better than I hoped for. But next time you're contacted, let me know right away. I heard about that narrow escape you had last night. From the way my trooper described it, the killer was trying to soften you up by throwing a scare into you."

"If that's what he tried to do, he certainly succeeded," Johnny said wryly. "What will I do from here on?"

"Exactly as he told you. It's risky, I'll grant, except for one thing. If an attempt was going to be made on your life, the rendezvous wouldn't be in a building crowded with people. Not even a remote part of such a building. I really believe he'll make contact and try to pay you off with some far more insignificant sum than that you mentioned. Nice work, Johnny. We'll bag our man if things go right."

**A**T EIGHT-THIRTY, Johnny was at the exhibit. He had an hour before his appointment with the killer and he decided to spend it in the vicinity of his exhibit. Two men came over to study the shot. One of them was Mark Lundy, a medium-sized person with a shock of gray hair, bright blue eyes, and an incredibly suave manner. Johnny didn't know the man who was with him.

Lundy said, "Hello there, Johnny. I see you captured that shadow of the eagle. Mighty nice work. If I were a judge, I'd hand you one of the best prizes. What time was it when you shot that picture?"

"Why—I don't know exactly, Mr. Lundy. Right after dawn, I guess."

"What shutter speed?" Lundy demanded. "I don't know," Johnny confessed. "I was so excited I didn't pay much attention. Medium speed, I suppose."

The other man chuckled. "Young man, don't let the judges hear you make such an admission. To win one of these prizes, a photographer is supposed to know every last detail of his work."

Lundy made a casual introduction. "This is William Christie, Johnny. He's one of our more prominent manufacturers. Bill, meet Johnny Eaton who lives, breathes, and eats photography. Like me."

Johnny shook hands with Christie. "I'll be glad to show you around, if you like, Mr. Christie. I've studied the best of the exhibits."

"Thank you," Christie said earnest-

ly. "Any other time I would be glad to accept, but—well, my brother died night before last, and I'm only stopping by here for a moment or two. Gets my mind off things. Some other time."

Johnny murmured sympathies and spotted Lieutenant Barnes in the crowd. He excused himself and went over to meet him. The exhibit was thickly crowded tonight. There was a dense throng waiting at the entrance, but they were being admitted slowly.

Barnes said, "That man who approached you—Mark Lundy, I mean—what did he want?"

"He merely talked about my picture. Why?"

"Lundy is one of the boys whom Carl Holden is supposed to have cheated, and Lundy has borne a grudge against him for months. He's a good bet for our man, Johnny. Who was the other fellow?"

"His name is William Christie. I never saw him before."

"Oh, yes—Christie. I thought he looked familiar. Big shot, Johnny, but we watch 'em all. Did he show any signs of exceptional interest?"

"No, sir. Lundy asked me what time I made the shot. He was interested all right."

"Maybe with reason," Barnes commented. "I'm going into the background now. It's almost time for you to keep that appointment. Good luck—and I'll be close by. Remember that."

Johnny stalled around until it was time and then walked resolutely over to Exit 54. He pushed the door open and found himself in a corridor just as the caller had stated. He walked down it, made a right turn, and faced the closed door.

He took a long breath, waited a few seconds to give Barnes time to get into motion, and then walked into a darkened room. The corridor light was feeble and did little to break the darkness.

THERE was a rush of feet. Someone hit Johnny a blow that must have come from a straight-arm jab. It sent him reeling to one side. He hit a wall, bounced off it, and saw a form heading toward the door. Johnny darted toward him, grabbed at a coattail, and pulled the man back. As the attacker spun around, Johnny had a vague glimpse of a harsh, cruel face—the features of a total stranger.

Johnny got in one good punch, but he was hardly a match for this desperate man. A fist collided with his jaw, sent him backward again, and the door slammed. Johnny started for it, tripped, and fell heavily. His feet were still entangled in the object which had felled him. He disengaged himself and reached out with both hands. It was a human form lying there in the darkness. Johnny almost screamed.

The door opened, light filtered in weakly, and then a flash cut away most of the darkness. Lieutenant Barnes hurried over beside Johnny. He trained the flash beam on the prostrate man at Johnny's feet. There was blood oozing out of a scalp wound. Recognition came quickly to both Johnny and Barnes. The injured man was William Christie whom Mark Lundy had introduced a few moments before.

Christie groaned, moved a little, and suddenly sat up. He let out a yell and made a weak pass at Lieutenant Barnes. The trooper pinned him down.

"Take it easy, Mr. Christie. I'm an officer. This man with me is Johnny Eaton. We found you here. What happened?"

Christie didn't answer right away. Barnes took Johnny aside. "Was Christie here waiting for you?" he asked.

"I don't think so," Johnny whispered. "There was another man. He walloped me twice. I got a good look at him. He was a complete stranger, and he looked like a gangster to me."

Barnes went back and helped Christie to his feet.

Christie said, "You asked me what happened. I really don't know. I wanted to go home, but there was such a crowd at the door that I decided to hunt a back way. I landed here and thought the door might lead to an alley. When I opened it, a man came at me in the darkness. I honestly think he meant to kill me? But why? I wasn't even robbed."

"We know why," Barnes said. "Unfortunately, and by sheer accident, you blundered into a situation that was meant to react against Johnny here. The man who attacked you was waiting for him. Now we know our murderer doesn't mean to pay off, but to silence the only man who knows his identity. Or who he thinks knows it."

Christie mopped blood off his forehead. "I don't pretend to know what you're talking about, officer, but if my blundering saved this young man's life, I'm very glad it happened. Tell me—is this serious? Is someone really trying to kill you, Johnny?"

"Looks like it, Mr. Christie. You see, I witnessed a murder the other day, and the murderer knows I did. So he's after me."

CHRISTIE shook his head slowly, as if it still ached. He flashed a half-angry glance at Barnes. "Officer, are you deliberately using this young man as bait, then?"

Barnes nodded. "Exactly, but with his full permission. Frankly, I doubted things would become as serious as this. I figured the killer would believe Johnny was out to blackmail him and simply make attempts to pay him off. It seems now that he intends to murder him."

"Then you'd better give him ample protection. More than you have shown so far," Christie said.

"I'll do all I can. Trouble is, the killer knows Johnny and we don't exactly know the killer. He can strike

at any time. Johnny, I'm not sure but you should be locked up for safe-keeping."

Johnny protested quickly, "I'm not afraid and there is no other way to catch the man. I'll be okay."

Barnes didn't agree. "I'm afraid you're wrong. We can't let you go around completely exposed to whatever scheme the murderer will think of next. He knows where you live. He can set any sort of a trap and spring it at his convenience."

Christie broke in. "I've something of a claim to settle with this man, too. Johnny, you could come home with me. We have no connection, and the killer can't possibly guess you were staying with me. There's only one hitch. I have a corpse at my home. My brother, whom I think I told you about."

"I don't mind," Johnny said. "And I guess I'd better accept your offer, Mr. Christie. That is, if Lieutenant Barnes says it's okay."

"I think the idea is good," Barnes approved. "Where do you live, Mr. Christie?"

"Lakeland Drive," Christie mumbled. "Oh, my head! I've got to go home. My car is outside. Can you drive me, Johnny?"

Johnny could and did, ending up before a large and imposing residence in one of the better outlying parts of the city. There was a wreath on the door and several people were inside.

Christie said, "It's best no one observes you. I'll go in the front door. You enter the rear, pass through the kitchen, and look for a stairway to the second floor. A servant's stairway. Go up it and wait for me. I'll be along presently."

Johnny made his way to the kitchen door, crossed the ultra-modern room, and was faced with two closed doors. He selected the one to the right, but the stairs went down instead of up. He wondered if they'd lead him to other stairs and proceeded to descend them. He found a

light switch, snapped it on, and saw that he was halfway down to a spacious cellar which looked very much like a miniature workshop. There were lathes and drill presses, a long bench equipped with all sorts of tools and light machinery.

JOHNNY went back to the kitchen and opened the other door. This brought him to stairs going up, and he was soon on the second floor. He could hear soft voices downstairs, but Christie seemed to be taking his time. Johnny entered what he believed to be a study. The room was provided with a large blond-wood desk, yellow leather chairs, and a deep, light-colored rug. Christie lived in luxury all right.

There were some pictures on the walls. Photos, mostly, and Johnny was automatically attracted to them. He thought the photography was very bad. There were four, and each one depicted a smiling man who resembled Bill Christie, standing outside the door of a small building. Two of the buildings had signs on them. One read: *Patents Pending, Inc.* The other sign read: *Martin Christie, Inventions.*

Johnny walked over and sat down behind the big blond desk. For some reason he didn't feel safe here in this house. Maybe it was the fact that a dead man reposed downstairs. Or that his nerves were on edge. He thought back to the man who had first attacked Christie and then turned on him. The man who must be the killer. Johnny recalled his face. He hadn't seen the murderer's face, but his build indicated he'd been of medium height and weight while the attacking man at the exhibit had been definitely heavy-set.

Johnny's mind started from the beginning of the case, progressed down through the facts Lieutenant Barnes had told him. That Holden dealt with inventors, buying their inventions and turning them into cash. Such a man was bound to be

regarded as a cheat by some of the inventors who sold him their products.

Inventors! The word had a certain significance. Johnny jumped to his feet and hurried over to the photos on the wall. The names on those signs were probably fictitious, but they indicated that the building housed an inventor's workshop. Downstairs in the cellar of this house was another workshop.

Johnny gasped. Bill Christie's brother Martin had been an inventor! Johnny went back to the desk and pulled out the large middle drawer. A blue-black automatic lay there, fully exposed. He picked up the gun and put it in his lap. Then he investigated some of the papers in the desk.

Finding several bearing the signature of Carl Holden, he read them quickly. They seemed to be articles of sales between Holden and Martin Christie for some kind of new process for modeling cold plastics. The sum involved was ten thousand dollars.

Johnny heard the downstairs door close, and then feet pounded up the stairs. He hoped he didn't look as scared as he felt when Bill Christie came into the room. Christie gave him a wan smile and sat down.

"Stay where you are, Johnny," he said. "Funerals are trying things. My brother died of heart failure night before last. It wasn't unexpected, but a shock nevertheless. He became ill early in the evening. I stayed with him until around nine in the morning. I thought he was asleep, but he died during the night."

"It must have been a horrible shock," Johnny said. He was undergoing a shock himself. The papers he'd examined were lying in full view on top of the desk, and they belonged in the drawer. Christie didn't seem to notice.

He said, "Tell me, Johnny, did you actually identify the man who murdered Carl Holden? Certainly the picture you took didn't turn out

plain enough for identification purposes."

"Maybe I fogged the picture on purpose," Johnny said. "Maybe I wanted to make some money out of it."

CHRISTIE clucked his tongue. "But fifty thousand dollars, my boy. A blackmailer with a hold like that on a man should start small and raise the ante—make a good thing out of it, not demand such a sum in a lump payment."

"Then it was you?" Johnny wondered if he said those words. The voice which spoke them didn't sound familiar.

"Oh, yes." Christie nodded. "It was I. You proved it to your own satisfaction when you read those papers in my desk. That was foolish of me, to leave them around, but my brother's death kept me on the jump so much I didn't have time to carry out any plans I laid. Yes, I killed Holden. You saw me do it, unfortunately. You were after money. You fooled that dumb State Police lieutenant very neatly, but you never fooled me."

Johnny suddenly brought up the automatic which had been on his lap. He pointed it at Christie.

"Don't move, Mr. Christie. I know about guns, and I can shoot pretty good. Well enough to stop you. Put both hands on the arms of that chair and stay very quiet."

"My gun," Christie groaned. "I must be losing my mind. Johnny, did you actually identify me that morning?"

"No, I was too far away. It was all a trick suggested by the lieutenant. He thought the killer was interested in photography because he'd been with Holden to get that unique shot. He figured the killer would see my picture and think I knew who he was, and I'd be looking for blackmail money. It worked that way, too. I'm calling the police, Mr. Christie."

Christie laughed. "Why don't you just shoot me, Johnny? Go ahead. Pull

the trigger and put me out of my misery."

"I will if you move an inch," Johnny warned, and his hand started toward the telephone.

Christie arose deliberately, reached into his pocket and drew a nickel-plated revolver. Johnny pulled the trigger fast. The automatic made a metallic, clicking sound. Christie laughed.

"Now, Johnny, do you think I was fool enough to leave a loaded gun where you could lay your hands on it? The gun is empty. I merely wanted you to feel confident enough to reveal the truth. Now I know that you couldn't have identified me to Lieutenant Barnes, and he is quite in the dark as to who the killer is. Sit down, Johnny, and I'll tell you why I killed Holden. You can throw the gun away."

**J**OHNNY dropped the gun on top of the desk, sat down heavily, and let his arms slide off the edge of the desk. He almost carried those papers with him.

Christie was completely relaxed. "There's no one in the house but you and me. Barnes thinks I am protecting you. Neat, wasn't it? The way I hired a thick-skulled mug to strike me over the head and then attack you. That was to back up my story and get Barnes to tell me yours. Then it would seem quite natural if I invited you to stay with me as a safeguard."

"Why did you kill Holden?" Johnny asked. "Did he cheat you out of some money as a lot of other inventors believed he'd cheated them?"

"My brother was the inventor," Christie explained smoothly. "Holden operated in a legal manner. If he took over inventions and commercialized them for profit, that was his business and the inventors' loss. My brother concocted a scheme which looked fairly good, but we didn't know how good. Holden did. He bought the process that's described

in those papers under your arm. He paid ten thousand dollars for those papers, and the deal was signed and sealed.

"Then my brother and I discovered the process was worth a million or more. Holden may or may not have known this, but the deal was completed and we were stuck. It affected my brother to such an extent that he had a heart attack. He died early in the evening. I knew I'd have to look out for myself then as I was his heir and this process became mine.

"So I visited Holden and had a talk with him. He refused to sell me back the rights to the process, and I decided to kill him. Once he was dead and I had his papers, no one would know anything about the deal. He never used lawyers to draw up his papers. Holden told me he was going to photograph that mountain, and I offered to go along. I thought no one was within miles of us when I killed him.

"I hurried back, got his papers easily, and went home. Then I phoned our doctor and told him my brother was dead and I'd been at home all night and never realized it. I had an abili. Your Lieutenant Barnes can try to break it if he likes. He'll get nowhere."

"You're going to kill me," Johnny said slowly. "That's what you're leading up to. That's why you don't mind telling me all this."

"I'm afraid you are right," Christie admitted. "I'll say you came home with me, didn't like the idea of staying in a house with a corpse, and left. I don't know what happened to you after that, though obviously the unknown killer took care of you. It will work. I'm not in the least suspected, but I had to know whether or not you actually did recognize me and perhaps left some sort of a message disclosing my identity. Now I know you did not."

Johnny gulped. His mind was working as fast as possible. He could only hope that Lieutenant Barnes

might appear. There was no other chance unless he made one himself. Through his mind flashed the memory that Christie had been greatly excited when he killed Holden, and directly afterward. The man seemed calm enough, but he was really a bundle of nerves. Perhaps he could capitalize on that, but he needed time. Time to think and act.

Johnny said, "Of course you'll have an easy time explaining why two bodies happen to be in a house where they should be only one."

CHRISTIE approached the desk, gun steady. Johnny braced himself, but Christie only helped himself to a cigarette, snapped on a desk lighter, and applied the flame. He never took his eyes off Johnny for a second.

He sat down again, "Sorry, Johnny, but there will be only one corpse here. The coffin downstairs is sealed. Just before the people appear for the funeral, I shall open the casket, remove my brother's body, and put yours in its place. Later I shall dispose of my brother's corpse somehow. At any rate, nobody will be looking for his body. It's a trifle hard-hearted, but then Martin is dead. Burying you in his place won't harm him. You see, I've thought of everything."

Johnny leaned across the desk. "I—I guess you have. I'm going to reach for a cigarette. Please don't shoot. Maybe we can work something out."

"Help yourself," Christie said. "But there can be no deal. I'm sorry. My own life is in danger, and I'm very selfish where my welfare is concerned."

Johnny put a cigarette between his lips, but it wouldn't stay there. His lips were too dry. He passed his tongue over them and tried again. Then he reached for the desk lighter, took a long puff, and leaned back. He still held the lighter and carried

it below the edge of the desk out of sight.

Johnny said, "This process your brother invented must be really something—to make you turn into a murderer. And on these papers is everything he learned. They're valuable, of course."

"I told you they were worth a million. Johnny, it's useless to delay this. A few minutes one way or another make no difference to a dying man, and I might unexpectedly have a visitor. Again, I say that I am very sorry, but you shouldn't have played it so smart."

Johnny snapped on the lighter, brought the flame up and touched it to the edge of the papers on the desk. The flame spread very rapidly. Christie let out a wild yell and charged across the room, every part of him intent upon saving the things he had killed for.

Johnny was banking on the fact that Christie would become too excited to think straight. He'd been that way at the murder of Holden. What happened here should make him even more excited.

Christie took his eyes off Johnny as he rounded the desk. Johnny's right hand scooped up the automatic. He hurled it at Christie's face, and from a distance of three feet he couldn't miss.

The heavy gun struck Christie just above the eyes. His revolver went off, the result of an instinctive act of pulling the trigger. The bullet missed Johnny by a yard. He moved closer, before Christie could raise the gun. In his other hand Johnny still held the heavy desk lighter, which he crashed down on the killer's skull. Then he pounced on Christie's gunhand, twisted it savagely, and the weapon fell to the floor. He kicked it away, backed up a pace, and swung a right at the dazed killer's jaw.

Nothing further was necessary. Johnny tied him up with parts of his

*(Continued on page 76)*

# The Hammerless Heater

By Rodney Worth

*The gun artist had cased the job, checked the time, and loaded his new rod. But he'd forgotten something about the sapper that the cops knew all about.*



**K**NUCKLES stood by the window, nervously swishing the remains of his beer around in the glass in his hand. Well, he thought as he looked out at the dark street, at least they were out of stir. The break had been tough, but he and Joe had made it. Now all they needed was some ready cash, and then they'd be on their way for Mexico before the dicks could get wise.

They had a job all lined up, too. Joe had cased it before they had spent a full week hiding out in the old boardinghouse. The only thing left was a pair of rods, and Joe was taking care of that right now.

Knuckles caught the sound of footsteps on the creaking stairs. He quickly shifted his stocky body away from the window to the door. If it was Joe, why hadn't he seen him come up the street from the window? His hand reached for the homemade sapper lying in his pocket.

Someone knocked on the door: two short, one long, then two short.

"Yeah?" he said questioningly.

"It's okay," a muffled voice replied. "It's me—Joe."

Knuckles reached out and slid back the bolt. The door opened and Joe slipped inside, closing it behind him. Knuckles slid the bolt back into place. Joe walked over to the table and poured himself a glass of beer from the opened bottle.

"Did you get 'em?" Knuckles asked anxiously.

Joe took the glass from his mouth and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "Sure. The jerk over in that pawnshop let me have them 'on credit.'"

He dug his hand into his coat pocket and brought out two identical automatics. "Look at them," he said, holding them up in his hand. "Ain't they beauties?"

Knuckles walked over and took one of them from Joe's hand. He turned it over curiously in his hands. "I ain't never seen a rod like this before," he said.

Joe looked at the one still in his hand. "They're German. I guess the hocker got them from some vet."

Knuckles stared at the name etched in the grip. Slowly he spelled it out: "S-a-u-e-r. Uh, yeh they must be German." Suddenly he looked up. "Say, what kind of fodder do they use?"

"Don't worry," Joe replied. "They take a regular .32." His hand went back into his pocket. "Look, I even got a whole box of bullets."

**J**OE pushed a lever on the top of the handle and withdrew the magazine from the bottom of the butt with his other hand. He opened the fresh box of .32's and began to slip bullets into the magazine.

Knuckles watched him for a minute, then looked down again at the other gun in his hand. "There ain't no hammer on it," he said as he slipped his thumb over the sleek end of the gun's receiver.

"Ya don't need one," Joe said, concentrating on loading his gun. "Come on, we only got a little while before

that joker with the roll takes his walk. Get your rod loaded."

Knuckles fumbled with the lever on the handle. Joe slipped the magazine back into his gun and then impatiently took the other one out of Knuckles' hand.

"Here, let me do it, stupid."

He repeated the loading procedure with Knuckles' gun, then tossed it back to him. He shoved the half-empty box of cartridges back into his pocket. He looked again at his gun.

"Boy, ain't they beauties," he repeated.

Suddenly the night quiet was broken by the distant chiming of a clock.

"Jeez, eleven o'clock already," Joe snapped. "We better get going." He hastily glanced around the bare room. "Did you get rid of everything like I told you?" he asked.

Knuckles nodded. Joe went over to the door and slid the bolt back. He turned back to Knuckles who stood hesitantly looking at the gun in his hand.

"What's the matter now?" he snapped.

Knuckles looked up. "I don't know. There's something bothering me."

"Well, forget it and come on." Joe went out, leaving Knuckles to close the door after them. Together they hurried down the creaking stairs. At the door to the street Joe laughed and said quietly, "This is the second place we've left recently without paying any rent."

Knuckles nodded, his brow wrinkled. He knew he had forgotten something, but he just couldn't put his finger on it.

Twenty minutes later they stood together, huddled in a darkened doorway. Joe took a cigarette from his mouth, shielding its glowing end from the street with his hand.

"Now there's the doorway he'll come out of," he said, pointing to the side entrance of the movie house across the street. "He always comes out just after eleven-thirty with the

night's take. He puts it in the night deposit-box right around the corner. When he walks by us, I'll pull the match gag. You let him have it on the head. Then we head for the bus terminal. You got it straight?"

Knuckles nodded. He got that straight, but there was still something bothering him. If only he could remember what it was. Suddenly he felt Joe's hand on his arm. The door had opened and a figure was coming out. Framed as he was in the lighted doorway, Knuckles could see the bag he held in one hand. Joe hastily put out his cigarette and struck a fresh one in his mouth. Then he slipped out of the doorway. Knuckles shrank back into the darkness.

AS THE figure crossed the street and came toward Joe, Knuckles reached into his pocket for his gun. Joe stepped toward the curb to meet the other man as he came across the street.

"Got a match, Mister?" he asked.

The man reached quickly toward the bulge under his arm. Knuckles savagely brought the butt of his gun down on his head. The man crumpled soundlessly to the ground. Joe bent over him hastily, reaching for the bag.

Suddenly a police whistle screamed in the dark. Footsteps pounded down the street toward them. Joe leaped to his feet.

"Cops," he snarled. "I got the dough—beat it."

Knuckles turned and ran. Joe was only a few steps behind him, the bag clutched under one arm.

A gun barked, a bullet whined over their heads. Knuckles doubled his speed. Again a gun spit its lethal message. Joe cursed, then toppled to the ground. Knuckles stopped only long enough to grab up the bag before he was on his way again. Behind him he could hear more cops joining in the chase.

Another bullet whipped past him. He turned and darted into an alleyway. Down its dark length he raced,

only to be halted by a high wall at its end. Wildly he glanced around. He looked up and cursed happily when he saw the end of a fire-escape ladder just a few inches above him. He jumped onto it. He raced to the other side. The next building was fifteen feet away. He was trapped!

He ducked behind a chimney and waited for the cops to reach the roof. At least they wouldn't take him alive, back to rot in stir. He dug his gun out and waited. Slowly the seconds ticked by. His mind flashed back to that something that elusively escaped his memory. No time to worry about that now, he told himself.

A shadowy figure appeared, outlined against the sky. And then another. He raised his gun. *Shoot*, he told himself. *Shoot!*

But his finger halted on the trigger. That was it. Joe hadn't told him how to cock the gun! Frantically his thumb

searched for a hammer that wasn't there. He yelled a curse and threw the useless weapon at one of the figures. Flame stabbed out in the night, and Knuckles doubled over. Another, and then another bullet smashed into his body. Seconds later he was dead.

At the station house the desk sergeant studied the gun the cops had found on the roof.

"I wonder why he didn't shoot," he said to the policeman standing next to the desk. "His gun was fully loaded and all set to go."

"That's a nice-looking gun," the other cop said, taking it from the sergeant's hands.

"Yeh," continued the sergeant, "those German Sauers are nice little rods. You know, they're just like a revolver, you don't have to cock them at all. All you have to do is load them and pull the trigger. They cock automatically, even on the first shot."

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## Photo of a Kill

By Norman A. Daniels

(Continued from page 73)

own clothing. He contacted the police and had them reach Lieutenant Barnes. Christie was moaning. Johnny gulped and felt his knees grow rubbery. He sat down fast.

Barnes and a horde of police arrived in quick time. Johnny explained it all, showed the incriminating papers, and grinned at the congratulations that came his way.

Lieutenant Barnes said, "I've some more news for you, Johnny. After you left with Christie, your photo was given second prize. But that's

nothing compared to the way you handled this situation. No one could have done better. You were completely on your own and you came through very neatly indeed. Wait until you read tomorrow's newspapers. They're going to make a hero out of you."

Johnny's eyes were slightly glazed. "Second prize. I was second. Boy, oh boy, is that something. From all those hundreds of shots, mine was the second best. I'll get a blue ribbon. Boy!"

# Killer with a Conscience

By  
Neil Moran



*Because Luke Grudgins had murder on his mind, he fashioned his own death trap.*

**S**TEPPING out of the room and closing the door softly behind him, Luke Grudgins tried to get a grip on himself. He succeeded remarkably well, for he had just killed a man whose body was in that other room.

Luke hadn't wanted to kill him, but in a blinding rage he had picked up the wrench and brought it down on Judson's head.

As he moved across the room, Luke told himself that Judson shouldn't

have provoked him, that Judson shouldn't have been stealing money from the till, and that Judson shouldn't have called him an old skin-flint.

He was trying to make excuses for his act, trying to justify it, but he knew that he had done something that up to a few minutes ago he believed he never could have done. He had killed a man.

Still shaking, he stepped behind the counter and looked out through

the window onto Main Street. Well, it was a terrible situation he was in, and while he fully realized it, he hadn't reached the stage where he might collapse. Something was holding him up, the tension, the fear, the reaction that made him taut and as cunning as a fox.

Already his mind was working on ways and means to extricate himself from this precarious position, but the more he thought of it, the less chance he saw. The only thing in his favor perhaps, was that no one had been in the store nor in the apartment upstairs. No one had heard the argument, and no one had heard the body fall.

But any second now he could expect some of the natives to drop in to make purchases, and as he looked up, Mrs. Wenly entered, a smile on her face.

Luke looked at her and tried to be his old self.

"Nice day," he said.

"Oh, a lovely day. I want some butter, Mr. Grudgins, and eggs, and sugar—here, I have the list." She took it out of her bag and handed it over. Luke took it with fingers that shook "Where's Judson?" she said.

"Oh, Jud? He's around. Went on an errand."

"Nice boy. Well, there's the list, Mr. Grudgins, and you can send it up."

She went out. Luke breathed easier and looked at that door. Behind it was a dead body, that of the nice boy, and if something weren't done with it—

Luke began to walk around. It was getting to him now, the utter futility of what he was facing. Perhaps he should call the police—tell them that he hadn't meant to kill Jud. But that wouldn't exonerate him. He'd be arrested, brought to trial. He could imagine what the townspeople would say. "Why, who would have thought of it? Mr. Grudgins killed Judson Blake. And with a wrench!"

With a wrench! Luke shook as he opened the door. Yes, the body was there, slumped against the wall.

**L**UKE shut the door just in time, as he heard the street door opening. Another customer. But it was no customer who walked across the floor quickly, looked at Luke, and pointed the gun in his hand.

"Get into that back room," he said, "and keep your mouth shut."

Luke stared at him.

"Do you hear me?" said the man. "This is a stickup—in case I'd have to write you a letter about it."

Luke, his amazement growing, head swirling, opened the door and almost toppled into the room. The man was right behind him.

"What's this?" he said. "Somebody on the floor! What is that guy? Dead? Wait a minute! That's blood! What's going on here?"

Luke stood there shivering, knowing that the hand of fate, or whatever it was, was dealing a very extraordinary card.

"He fell down," he said. "Hurt himself."

"Yeah? What's that wrench doing with blood on it! That kid is dead!" The man leaned over and picked the wrench up. He ran his hand over Jud's body. "He's dead, all right. And you killed him!"

"I didn't mean to do it," Luke whimpered. "You see—"

"Listen—I ain't got time to listen to that. Funny, though. I step in to stick up the place, and I find a murder. Well, that's your problem, brother. I got a pal waitin' in a car. Just give me what dough you have, and I'll beat it. And hurry. Someone might come in."

Someone did come in, and the man grabbed Luke and told him to go out and wait on the customer.

"And remember, I'll be right behind here with this gun. But you ain't talkin', boy! No, you ain't talkin'."

Luke stepped out, like a man walk-

ing in his sleep. He tried to smile, but kept on shaking.

"Hello, Mr. Grudgins," Mrs. Maley said. "Was that Judson you were talking to?"

"Yes, Jud," said Luke.

"Nice boy. Everybody likes him. Well, I'd like a jar of that marmalade. The kind I got last week. Remember?"

Luke didn't remember. But he reached for a jar of marmalade.

"That's the kind," said Mrs. Maley. "Oh, look. I have to do some other shopping. Suppose I come back for this."

Luke was only too glad to get rid of her. She went out, and he turned. He saw a pair of eyes peering out at him from behind the door that was ajar and got a glimpse of the gun that was pointed.

"Get the dough," said the man. "And give me what you've got in your pockets. Dough, you understand? No marmalade."

Luke went to the cash register and began to take out the money. His knees were knocking together. He reached down into his pocket and brought up a roll of bills. The man, watching, decided that he had seen enough to take and would make his getaway.

He stepped out of the room, slipping the gun into his pocket, grabbed the money, and raised a warning finger.

"Don't try to come after me," he said. "But then you'd be crazy to do it. Bumping a guy off, eh? Boy, what you're in for!"

He went as swiftly and silently as he had come. Looking through the window, Luke saw him springing into a car. It was then that Luke acted. He rushed to the door and cried:

"Police! Robber! Murder!" And a crowd collected.

**O**RDINARILY, Folsom Hollows was a quiet town, but on this afternoon it knew excitement. Main Street was suddenly turned into a

scene of activity, and Luke, in the midst of it, was explaining, "This fellow came in. He had a gun. He ordered Jud and me into the back room. Jud protested, and he hit him over the head with the gun. Then he robbed me. You all saw him, the way he rushed out and pumped into that car."

"Yes, I noticed that car," said Silas Stevens. "Saw one fellow sitting in it. Knew he was a stranger. Saw the other fellow run out. How is Jud? He didn't kill him, did he?"

It appeared later, that the man had killed Jud. In the meantime, Luke hid the wrench, and when the police came, he had his story. It was simply repeating what the police had already heard.

"Well, we'll send out a general alarm for them, Luke," Chef Charleson said. "And you give me a description of this fellow. To think that a thing like that would happen in this town! And Jud! He was such a nice boy!"

"He sure was," said Luke. "I loved him!"

That night natives stood on street corners talking about the holdup and the killing. Everywhere in town, in fact, it was discussed. There had never been anything like it in Folsom Hollows. Obviously, the men were strangers who had stopped in the car, and state troopers and other police were on the alert.

Luke, not knowing just what to make of it, sat in his apartment later, trying to figure everything out. Well, one thing was certain: No one suspected him. But if these two fellows were caught, what would one of them say? Luke stroked his chin. A satisfied expression came into his crafty eyes, for he knew that if accused, as he would be, he could easily refute it. It would be his word against the robber's. And who would be believed? He would, of course.

Everybody would believe that the man was trying to blame Luke for the killing. It was absurd.

But one thing Luke didn't count on was a visit from the man. It was a week later, when everything had calmed down, and the police had failed to apprehend the two criminals, that Luke looked up to see a familiar face outside the store window.

It was late, late for Folsom Hollows, late for Luke, who sat in the store, going over his books. It was ten o'clock, and he had locked the door, and everybody knew that there was no more business for the day. But there stood the man!

Luke got up, tiptoed toward the door, unlocked it, and the man entered.

"What do you want?" said Luke.

"I want to have a talk with you."

"I suppose you know I could have you arrested."

"Mister," said the man, "I got you where I want you. And you know it."

"All right," said Luke. "What do you want?"

"Well, to begin with," said the man, pushing his hat back on his head, "I read in the papers that I was supposed to have murdered that guy. You know that isn't so. It was swell of you not to give my right description."

"You know why I did it," said Luke.

"And I guess you know why I came back."

"To blackmail me."

"That's the idea. Now, look, I don't want to leave you without a cent. But I understand you're worth quite a lot of money. You see, I'm playing a bold hand. I blew in tonight by train. I had something to eat in that restaurant near the station. They're still talkin' about the holdup and the murder. They said you offered a thousand dollars reward for the arrest and conviction of the murderer."

"That's right," said Luke. "You know why I did it."

THE man laughed, walked across the room, and picked up an apple. "You're a foxy guy. Don't mind if I swipe this, do you?" he said. "I always liked apples."

"I wish you'd get out of here," said Luke. "You're driving me crazy."

"All right. Then why not let's keep you sailing? I could turn you in and collect the reward. What a laugh that would be!"

"No one would believe you. You'd give yourself away."

"That's it. It's a funny situation that I don't want to meddle with. But suppose you give me a thousand dollars, and I won't see you again."

Luke looked at him. Maybe now, Luke had it within his power to make a masterstroke!

"I haven't got a thousand dollars with me," he said. "I don't keep that much money on hand."

"When can you get it?"

"Tomorrow," said Luke, "when I go to the bank."

"O. K. Suppose you get the money tomorrow and meet me tomorrow night."

"If you'll come here," said Luke, "I'll be waiting."

The man smiled.

"Still the foxy guy, aren't you? And you'd have the police here and say that I came back with a concocted story. That I said I'd tip off the police and make it appear that you murdered that kid and make a lot of trouble for you, unless you gave me a thousand. Then they grab me. And pin this on me. Oh, no, brother. We don't do it that way."

"Well, how do you want to do it?" said Luke.

"You drive to a spot that I'll designate and leave the money under a tree. Then I'll get it. But if you think you can let the police in on it, then you're playing with fire."

"How?"

"If anything happens to me, there's another guy who'll be paying

you a visit. And you know what happened to that kid."

Luke knew that he was boxed up, any way he looked at it. If he didn't pay the money and keep his mouth shut, his life would be in danger. So he agreed to do it. The man gave him full instructions, picked up another apple, and started toward the door. He went as silently and swiftly as he had come the last time, and Luke stood there staring after him.

But after Luke went upstairs, he wondered if there were not some way that he could outwit this fellow. It wasn't only the thousand dollars, although that, to Luke, meant much, but it was also being driven into this. That, really, was what hurt. But the more Luke thought of it, the less chance he saw of trapping that man. Of course, he could trap him. But there was that threat.

So Luke tossed and turned in his bed, and toward morning fell into a troubled sleep. He dreamed that everybody in town was telling him that Judson was a nice boy.

The following night Luke set out to put the money under that tree. It was the way to do it, and then try to get the whole thing out of his mind.

But he knew as he drove his car toward the designated place that he would never get what was torturing him out of his mind. He had killed Jud. He had discovered, too, that Jud hadn't been robbing him. He had gone over the cash, the sales. He had unjustly accused a boy, and then in a rage had killed him!

**I**T SEEMED to Luke that the only way to make some atonement was to confess. But the thought of arrest, and what would follow, were more than he could bear. No, he could still play the game. A dangerous game. But on the other hand, a safe one.

He was approaching the spot when the car suddenly stopped. He had run out of gas. It seemed that something was always happening to him,

something in this situation that seemed to have no end.

He got out and looked up and down the road. If he hadn't been in such a disturbed frame of mind, he would have made sure that he had had enough gas. But he wasn't himself. That was it. Hadn't been himself ever since.

Suddenly, he made up his mind. He'd confess. Yes, he'd confess. At least, this criminal wouldn't go free. He had held up the store. Probably was wanted for other robberies. There was only one way to do this: Give himself up, but drag the other men in with him.

He began to walk. In a daze, he walked. The night was starry, but otherwise dark. Here he was on a lonely country road, with a thousand dollars in his pocket, and he wanted to reach the nearest store, the nearest to call the chief of police of Folsom Hollows and say, "Hello, Tom? Luke Grudgins. Tom, I got a shock for you. I—"

A car behind him suddenly stopped, and he heard a familiar voice. "Is that you, Luke?"

He turned, and as incredible as it was, there sat Chief Charleson in his car.

"Why, yes," he said.

"Well, man, what are you doing walking along this road alone?"

"I was driving," said Luke. "Ran out of gas. You're just the man I—"

No, now the chief was there, he couldn't do it. Confess? Why, if he confessed—

"Well, hop in," said the chief. "Where did you leave your car? I'll give you a lift, Luke. No word yet of those two fellows—"

Luke was stepping into the car and the chief grabbed him.

"You seem groggy, Luke."

"Haven't felt well, Tom. Ever since that holdup—"

"Oh, well, it was lucky you weren't killed. It was just what you went through. Seeing Jud struck down that way."

"Most awful thing," said Luke.

"Nice boy, too," said the chief.

"Everybody liked him."

Luke was shivering. This was adding to his torture. Yes, everybody had liked Jud. Even Luke.

The car started, and the chief said, "Well, where do you want to go? Back to town? That's the way I was going."

"Yes, I left my car on that back road. I suppose I can have it picked up."

"Well, we'll go along here and take the short cut back to Folsom Hollows."

"Why not straight ahead?"

The chief looked at him. "Well, why not this way? It's shorter."

"All right," said Luke. But he was thinking, *We'll pass the spot where I was to leave the money. And if that fellow is hiding somewhere. . .*

**T**HAT fellow was hiding somewhere. Two fellows were hiding somewhere. They saw the car coming along, and under a street lamp recognized that Luke was not alone.

"You know who's with him," said one of the men. "That guy's the chief of police. He's giving us the double-cross, Jimmy. They're not stopping."

"No, they're being foxy. There, the car's turning off on that road. It'll stop now, and he'll get out with the money. But we ain't falling for the trick. Come on. Let's go."

When Luke reached the house, he felt so weak that he had difficulty going up the stairs. The chief had left him at the door and had told him he would send Sam Turner, the garage man, to pick up the car.

Time and again, Luke had been on the verge of confessing, but he just couldn't do it. He reached his room and flung himself wearily upon the bed, wondering what the man thought when he didn't show up. It seemed that this was becoming more and more complicated, but it couldn't reach a climax. And dawn found him,

stretched out, fully dressed upon the bed, his face ashen.

At nine o'clock he was down in the store, trying to carry on. Natives came in and noticed the change.

"He's a sick man," one woman said. "You know, I don't think he ever got over the shock of that hold-up."

"It wasn't only that. It was seeing Jud killed that way."

"That's what I mean."

The days went on, and Luke didn't hear from his tormentor. Then one night the door opened and the chief walked in.

"Luke," he said, "they caught those two fellows."

Luke looked up. The hour had come now, and he didn't have the heart to play the game longer. At least, he could confess. It would remove this great weight from his mind. He had gone through too much, and he knew that the chief had him. The fox had suddenly become very old. Not so old in years, but old from what he had gone through.

"And I know what they told you," he said. "What one of them told you. Well, Tom, I can't fight it out. I suppose I would if I thought I had a chance. But it's done something to me—I'm not myself."

"Yes, I know you're not," said the chief.

"You know I killed Jud. What's the sense of denying it?"

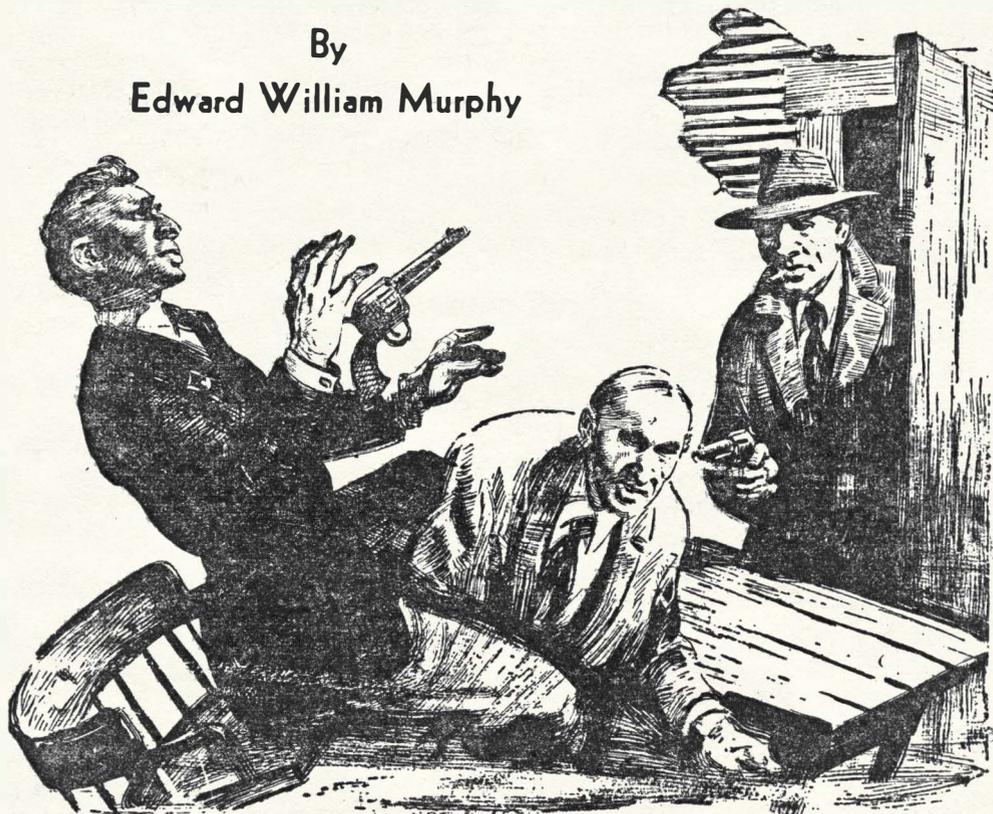
The chief stared at him. "No, I didn't know it, Luke," he said. "I came to tell you that they got those two fellows, but they killed them in a gun battle. One of them, before he died, mumbled that he had held up your store."

Luke looked at him with his mouth open. He would never have been incriminated, never suspected, if he hadn't—It was the last straw. He put a hand up to his head and staggered across the floor. The chief looked at him in amazement. He, Luke, had killed Jud! A body, unable to keep its balance, dropped to the floor.

*Stan Tremaine, postal dick, had another one of his hunches about the mail truck shipment. He'd figured skulduggery of some kind, but he hadn't counted on his own . . .*

# Dispatch to Doom

By  
Edward William Murphy



**T**HE black passenger car slid to a halt at the curb in front of the post office. Arlen, the guard on duty, snapped:

"Hey! Beat it! You can't park there!" He started over toward the car. Suddenly his eyes went wide, and with swift fingers he clawed at the flap of the holster at his hip.

Before he got the .45 out of the leather holster, a soft bloop sounded in the car. Arlen coughed and pitched forward to the pavement.

The car door swung open, and a man wearing a uniform exactly like the dead Arlen's climbed out. Quickly,

he scooped the dead guard up and pitched him into the back of the car.

In a moment the car was rolling across Pearl Street, leaving the uniformed man behind.

Hardly had the car slid into the shadows of the steel-elevated structure when a heavy armored mail truck turned into Pine Street. The driver jumped the curb deftly and brought the truck to a halt close to the red brick side of the post-office building. He opened the door and jumped out of the cab, saying to a guard as he did so:

"Well, here we are, right on time! Sav—"

Whatever the driver meant to say was cut off by a swiftly swinging gun butt. The driver went slack without so much as a groan. He collapsed into an unused doorway.

The gun swinger clambered into the truck where an armed guard was shifting registered mail sacks to the rear of the boxlike truck body. Again the gun traveled in a short arc. The armed guard groaned. The gun butt thumped once more.

Within a space of seconds the truck rumbled away from the post office and disappeared under the sprawling steel skeleton of the el.

**I**NSIDE the post office Postmaster Regan wiped at his thinning brown hair, through which the pink scalp shone under the unshaded bulb. He glanced at the clock on the wall.

"Right on the button," he said as he noted it was midnight. "Mike, Paul, get that hand truck out there," he said to two waiting clerks. He looked skeptically at the lean hungry-looking man who was sitting on his desk swinging long legs to and fro. "Well, Tremaine, for once your hunch has been wrong."

Stan Tremaine grinned. The postmaster didn't see the grin because it only showed in the crinkles around Tremaine's green eyes. Tremaine's face looked as though it had been hammered out of wrought iron. It was dark and angular. There were tiny white scars around his stiffened mouth. A vertical crease between his eyes looked as though it had been chiseled there.

He waved a long, bony-looking hand at Regan. "You can't always hit them right," he said.

At that instant the truck outside roared away!

Tremaine, face set, jumped down from the desk, ran across the table-littered room and out the door that led to Pine Street. He was just in time to see the mail truck disappear.

Regan and the two clerks were right

behind the lean detective. "Where's Arlen?" Regan snapped. "I'll have his job for this!" he muttered.

Tremaine produced a pocket flash and sent the beam circling on the concrete sidewalk. "Here, look!" he snapped as he knelt down near some gleaming spots on the dark pavement. "Blood!"

He jumped up and sent his light beam along the building. The shoes of the fallen driver projected from the dark doorway. Tremaine ran over and examined the man.

"Well, he's just out!" he exclaimed. "Here, one of you men give me a hand with him. Regan, you call the police and get in touch with our people, and the F. B. I., too!"

They carried the unconscious truck driver into the post office where Regan was already putting through the calls to the police.

"What'll we do now?" Regan demanded when he finished his calls.

Tremaine said to the truck driver, "You'll be okay—just a whack on the skull!" Then he turned to Regan. "I've got a hunch they won't go far with the truck. We'll wait here!" he whistled a few notes. "A hundred and twenty grand. I had a hunch somebody would get ideas about it!"

From the police radio on Centre Street, staccato alarms pulsated to roving patrol cars. Keen-eyed cops edged forward on their seats and watched the night traffic move closely. Patrol Car 63 rolled swiftly along South Street.

"Look—what's that?" the driver asked his partner.

A massive truck shot out of a dark street three blocks ahead and streaked across the wide avenue toward the river. The patrol car rocketed forward as the gas pedal was stamped upon.

**T**HE truck thundered over the planking of the pier that jutted into the black lustrous river. With a tremendous crash and a geyser of splinters, it smashed through the mas-

sive stringer that guarded the edge of the pier. The truck somersaulted through the air and hit the water with a terrific splash.

The patrol car screamed to a stop on the pier. "Truck just went over the Wall Street pier . . . send Emergency Squad!" the policeman barked into his microphone. . . .

Stan Tremaine pulled his battered brown hat down with a jerk. "Let's go!" he snapped when he heard the call come over the short-wave radio. "This is it. I've got a hunch!"

The Emergency Squad truck arrived at the pier seconds after Tremaine and the federal men. "There's a man in that truck," Tremaine told the sergeant in charge of the emergency wagon. He flashed his credentials. "I'm Tremaine of the Post Office Department!" he said.

The sergeant gave swift orders. Then he turned to Tremaine. "Tremaine, huh?" he asked. "You the guy that gets the hunches?"

"That's right." Tremaine nodded.

"I've heard about you," the sergeant said. "We'll do what we can. Hey, Nick, get in touch with Sanitation. We're gonna need their derrick, I think," he called to one of his men.

In an agony of impatience, the men on the pier watched the diver sink into the searchlight-flooded water. Seconds crept into minutes before the copper helmet broke the water on its way up.

"Hoist away on that cable!" the Emergency Squad sergeant signalled.

The Sanitation Department derrick whined as the steel cable the driver had fastened to the sunken truck grew taut.

The river boiled and churned. The square green truck erupted from the river, shedding tons of white water. It rose high in the air and settled to the pier under the deft fingers of the derrick operator.

"There's a man in there all right!" the sergeant snapped. "Get a torch over here! And get that oxygen tank

ready. We may be able to save him yet!"

The blue pencil of the acetylene torch lit up the faces of the waiting men with a weird ghoulish glow. The flaming finger of the torch bit deeply into the steel of the door, cutting a semicircle around the lock. The section of steel dropped to the wet pier with a mad hiss.

"Watch it—that door's hot!" the sergeant warned.

Unmindful of burnt fingers, the lean detective pulled open the steel door. Water flushed out of the truck, wetting his long legs. He pulled the body out of the truck.

"This is Arlen!" he called. Handing the dead man over to the men behind him, Tremaine clambered into the truck. It was empty!

"There was a guard in this truck—a man named Finch. He's gone now, and so is the mail!" He jumped out of the truck. "Search the neighborhood!" he commanded. "They must have dumped Finch somewhere nearby. I don't think they'd take him with them!" He looked down at the body of Arlen, the guard. "We'll even the score for you, Arlen," he said softly. "You were a good guy."

"Say, who's that giving all the orders, Sarge?" one of the emergency men asked the sergeant.

"Feller named Tremaine—he's the top dick in the Post Office Department. I heard about him before. Funny thing, he claims he always gets hunches about things. He cracks plenty of cases, I understand, so maybe he does get hunches. I don't know, but I'd hate to have him after me. Or any of those Postal Joes, come to think of it. They don't let up till they've nailed their man. They're a smart crew. C'mon, pack up that stuff and let's get out of here!" he added impatiently.

A police whistle shrilled in the silent streets, shrilled again, and still a third time.

"Somebody's found something,"

Stan Tremaine said to the worried-looking Regan. "Let's go!"

**A** FEW men were gathered around a set of dirty stairs that led to the cellar of one of the ancient buildings on Front Street. Tremaine and Regan hurried over to them. "What is it?" Regan asked.

He pushed his way through the men. At the bottom of the steps, a man was bent over a crumpled body. A flashlight beam sprayed over them.

"He's knocked cold," the man at the bottom of the steps called, "but his pulse is strong. Let's get him up out of here."

Willing hands quickly lifted the unconscious man from the stairway and laid him on the street.

"That's Finch!" Regan exclaimed.

Running gentle fingers over the blood-clotted hair, Tremaine said, "Somebody was mighty free with his gun butt tonight!" Systematically, he searched the unconscious man. Tremaine's face was hard and masklike as he worked.

Finch groaned. His eyes fluttered open and screwed shut when the light hit them:

"Shine that light away from his eyes," Tremaine directed crisply. "You're all right, Finch," he said to the prostrate guard.

"I—I feel like my head is split," Finch said weakly.

"What happened, man, what happened?" Regan, the postmaster, asked feverishly.

"What did happen?" Finch looked perplexed.

"You were slugged, and the truck was stolen," Tremaine said. His green eyes flashed like jewels in the light.

Finch touched his head and groaned, "We pulled up to the door of the post office same as usual. Then—wham! Next thing, you guys are working over me. Whew!" He fingered the lump on his head and groaned again.

"Get him to the hospital," Tremaine

said. "Get that head X-rayed. You can never tell about a whack from a gun butt." He rubbed a long finger over his scarred lips reflectively. "I'm going to run up and see the chief."

Ralph Kincaid, Chief Postal Inspector for the New York area, rumped his white hair. "One man dead and two sapped, you say, Stan?" he asked.

Tremaine nodded. His scarred lips tightened. "And four registered mail sacks worth one hundred and twenty thousand gone!" he added.

Kincaid tugged at the tab of his collar. "Bad!" he said. "Any clues?"

"Not yet," Tremaine said. "I checked with the police on my way up here. There isn't even a fingerprint on the truck! Those lads worked it smooth. They had everything timed to the second. I've got a hunch somebody in the department tipped them off. That shipment was an unusual one. The truck driver says that the man who slugged him looked like Arlen. But we know Arlen was murdered before the truck got there. The tire rolled over one of the blood spots, leaving a print. Now that shows that they had this job well spotted in advance.

"This phony guard must have been waiting only a few moments when the truck got there. Within five minutes the mail sacks were transferred from the truck, Arlen was pushed into the driver's seat, and the truck was hurtling over the pier into the river! Timing like that doesn't just happen. That was well planned. And somebody in the department flashed the go-ahead signal." Tremaine's masklike face was seamed with a deeply bitten frown.

**K**INCAID tugged at his collar again and sighed heavily. "I hope you're wrong," he said, "but I'm afraid you're right. I'll have everyone who knew about the shipment checked." He eyed the lean Tremaine. "Any hunches, Stan?" he asked.

He knew from long experience that Tremaine's hunches were based on an almost phenomenal insight into the criminal mind. Tremaine had grown up in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge. He knew why men went bad, and the forces that drove men to crime. He also understood the weak spots at which criminals were likely to strike. His hunches were based on that deep-seated knowledge.

"Not yet," he said to the chief inspector, "but I'm working on one." He flexed his long fingers thoughtfully. "I'm working on one," he said again.

The great clock bell boomed three times, sending great circles of sound washing over the silent city. Stan Tremaine thrust his hands deep into his pockets. The mild day had given way to a sharp chilly night. "Should have worn a topcoat," Tremaine reflected as he turned his collar up about his muscle-corded neck.

Near the doorway in which he was standing a door opened, spilling a fan of orange light into the deserted street. Two girls came out through the open door.

"Say, are my arches killin' me," one said. "It ain't no cinch peddling cigarettes, I'm tellin' yuh!"

"Maybe yuh think I got it easy in that little closet," the other retorted. "Nuthin' but 'Check your hat, sir?' all night long. An' then the Parson grabs all the tips!" The girl who was speaking broke off when she saw Stan Tremaine lounging in the doorway. Their eyes held for an instant. The girl said, ostensibly to her friend, "Say, I could go a hamburger right now!" She slackened her stride.

Tremaine didn't move.

With a slight founce, the girl walked on. "On secon' thought, I think I'll pass up the hamburger," she said peevishly. They walked on, with high heels drumming on the sidewalk.

The door opened again. A tall man, taller even than Stan, ducked his head slightly as he stepped into the street.

His shadow in the glow from the door was long and thin. He wore dark clothes and a black Homburg hat. In one hand, he carried an umbrella. He looked like the comic figure the cartoonists formerly used for prohibition. His face was pink and unlined.

"Hello, Parson," Stan Tremaine said.

The gaunt man turned quickly. "Bless my soul, Stan Tremaine!" he said. His voice was deep and resonant. "Well met, well met," he beamed at Tremaine. "I'm just locking up for the night," he said. He produced a well-filled key ring and switched off the light in the hall behind the door. Three locks fastened the door to the Parson's Night Club. Tremaine waited while the Parson deliberately chose the proper keys and threw the bolts.

"Now, Stan, my boy," the Parson said, "we must enjoy a little chat together." He sounded like a benevolent old clergyman. Tremaine knew that the name the "Parson" was singularly deceptive. Stan was not deceived by Kurt Raymond, better known as the "Parson." He knew the man was a cold, deadly killer beneath his smooth mask.

The Parson took Stan's arm. "Shall we wend our weary way homeward?" he asked.

"How'd you do tonight, Parson?" Steve asked. His eyes were as hard as jade.

THE Parson didn't answer for a moment. Their footfalls rang in the silent street. "Why do you ask, Stanley, my lad?" the Parson asked. "Surely you haven't decided to aid your confreres in the Treasury Department, have you?" He waggled a playful finger at Tremaine.

"Nothing like that," Tremaine said crisply. "One of our trucks was knocked over. I thought some of the stuff might have found its way to you."

The footfalls rang on for a long

moment. Finally the Parson said, "Go on."

"There isn't anything more to tell," Tremaine said. "The truck was knocked over at twelve tonight."

"It's three now," the Parson said. "Really Stan, the hours you have to work. Why don't you accept my standing offer to join my enterprises. I could use a man like you."

Tremaine said, "What about the mail truck job?"

"Well, since you've put it so bluntly, what about it lad, what about it?" the Parson asked innocently.

On the corner, under a light standard, a taxi cab wailed. "Can I drop you anywhere, Stan?" the Parson asked.

"No, I'm going to hop the subway," Tremaine said. "I want to check with Homicide before I shoot home. Since you won't talk, I'll give it up as a bad job!"

"Stanley," the Parson exclaimed, a happy smile on his benign face, "one of your hunches has misfired. Lo, did I ever think I'd see this day!" The tall, black-clad figure struck his umbrella against the pavement.

Tremaine said, "You can't always be right, I guess. Good night, Parson."

The taxi roared away into the night. Tremaine watched it go and shook his head. With his hands thrust deeply into his pockets, he walked toward the subway station three blocks south. His mind was churning with thoughts. One of his hunches had misfired, even as the Parson had said.

The platform was deserted, except for a sleeping drunk, when Tremaine descended the stairs from the street. Stan looked incuriously at the sleeper as he went by. The man's hat was pulled down over his face. Blubbery snores came from the under the hat. The reek of cheap whisky hung like a visible fog around him. A bottle had slipped from one limp hand to the platform.

Nagging at the back of the postal man's mind was the thought that his

only clue had fizzled out. The case was still up in the air.

Endless minutes dragged by. Deep in the heart of the tunnels, a murmur started. It grew in volume, became a roar, then a thunder. Tremaine watched the swiftly growing headlights appear in the distance.

"Hey! Wake up!" He shook the drunk. "Here's the train."

Rousing, the drunk growled, "Awright, I'm comin', I'm comin'—lemme 'lone."

**S**ATISFIED that he had done all he could, the lean detective walked toward the edge of the platform. Rocketing out of the dark tunnel into the station, the train thundered into the lighted platform area.

Suddenly Tremaine received a violent blow in the back. He staggered, fought wildly for his balance with arms windmilling, and plunged to the tracks!

Frantically, the train motorman rammed home his brake lever. Fountains of yellow sparks gushed from the wheels where the brake shoes clamped on the steel. Metal screamed. Blue balls of fire exploded on the third rail where the train contacts slid. The air filled with the odors of hot, tortured metal, ozone, and grease. The train jolted to a halt.

White-faced, the motorman joined the conductor. "I got him," he gasped. "The brakes wouldn't catch in time—they wouldn't catch!"

Together, they jumped down from the platform to the tracks and flashed a light under the train. The motor-man's breathing was harsh. His face had a greasy greenish sheen on it.

"This is the first time I ever had any trouble," he said. "I hope he ain't too bad!"

"It wasn't your fault," the conductor said. "I saw it all. This guy was pushed over the track!"

"I feel all churny inside," the motorman said. He leaned against one of the steel girders that supported the

roof of the subway and vomited.

The conductor moved along the tracks, flashing his light under the train. "Hey, here he is!" he called.

"Sure," Stan Tremaine said. "You didn't think I'd leave, did you?"

The conductor's eyes bulged. "You're alive!" he exclaimed.

"Well, I'm not a talking ghost, I can assure you," Tremaine said sardonically. "Hold your light so I can get out of here."

The conductor held the light steady. "Watch that third rail," he cautioned. "It's hot."

Carefully, Tremaine slithered his body out from under the train. "Lucky I wiggled into that trough between the rails," he said, "or you boys would be collecting with me with a strainer now!"

The conductor giggled hysterically.

The motorman hurried over. "Whew, Mister," he said, "you gave me a scare. That gent that pushed you over in front of me sure wasn't a friend of yours."

Making their way to the front of the train the three men climbed to the platform where a few late riders waited curiously.

Tremaine wiped some of the black grease and mud from his suit. He ignored the people on the platform. "Wait a minute, will you?" he asked the motorman.

The motorman glanced at his watch. "We're behind schedule now, but a few minutes more won't hurt."

Tremaine went over to the bench on which the drunk had been sitting. The empty bottle still lay where it had when he first passed the drunk. Tremaine used a handkerchief when he delicately picked the bottle up.

**T**HE label was a standard one, Tremaine noticed. He turned the bottle around. A small sticker was pasted on the back. *Tryon Liquor Store, Washington Square*, it read. Tremaine's green eyes lit up.

He wrapped the handkerchief

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around the bottle and slid it into his coat pocket. Then he turned to the change agent who had left his little booth to learn what was wrong.

"Did you see a man leave in a hurry a few minutes ago?" Tremaine asked.

"I sure did," the agent said. "Funny thing, he came down here just a few seconds before you did. Business is pretty slack at this time of night, so I noticed both of you. He left in a hurry just as I heard the squeal of the brakes."

"You say you saw him pretty well? Can you give me a description?"

"Sure—he came over to me for change. He was stocky, weighed maybe one-eighty or so, about medium height. He's got a nose that you can't miss. It's got a twist in it. Looked like he had been hit by a pile driver."

"Thanks," Tremaine said. "You remember what you've seen. We may need your testimony." He turned and entered the train. His face was set in hard lines, making it look more than ever like a wrought-iron mask. His lean jaw was clamped tightly. So they wanted to play rough. Well, they had chosen the right man!

Washington Square was silent and deserted at four in the morning. Even the pigeons were roosting in the great arch that dominates the north end of the park. Tremaine's cab rustled under the arch, wound its way through the park, and stopped at the other end.

"This is it," the driver said.

"Fine, wait here. I'll be back," Tremaine said. He had changed his clothes and washed the grease and mud of the subway off his face and hands.

He climbed out of the cab and walked over to the steel grill that protected the show windows of the Tryon Liquor Store. A set of stone steps led up to an ornate wooden door. Tremaine climbed up to the door and found it open. He entered a small vestibule and scanned the bank of push buttons. Finding one reading *Tryon*, he jabbed on it with a long, bony

finger. Deep within the building, he could hear a faint insistent ring. He held his finger in place.

The lock on the inner door buzzed. Tremaine passed through it into a long narrow corridor, broken by painted wooden doors. One of the doors was opened a few inches. A steel chain kept it from opening farther.

"What do you want?" a querulous voice asked. "The store is closed. You can't get any whisky here."

Tremaine flashed his wallet at the pajama-clad, sleepy-eyed man. "I'm a federal man," he said.

Tryon hastily unhooked the chain. "Sorry, Mister," he said. "So many drunks come by this time of night—you understand."

Tremaine nodded. He produced the bottle and asked, "This may have been purchased in your store today. Do you remember who bought it?"

Tryon looked at the bottle. "Wait till I get my glasses," he said. As he walked into the next room, he said over his shoulder, "I don't know as how I can help you. We sell to so many different people."

**T**RYON returned in a moment, wearing black horn-rimmed glasses. "Now, let's see," he said, reaching for the bottle. "Say, this is an easy one," he said. He sniffed at the open end of the bottle and wrinkled his nose distastefully. "Cheap spirits!" he muttered. "Every day for months a man would come into the shop. Always it was 'One Pint of Old Eagle'—never anything else.

"Then, suddenly, he didn't come in any more until yesterday. Yesterday, in he comes. 'One pint of Old Eagle,' he says. I gave him the bottle. 'You know,' he says to me, 'this is the only place in the city I can get this brand in pints. I want you to send me a pint a day.' The queer thing is he's out of this neighborhood entirely. Well, I'm not one to discourage trade—"

Impatiently, Tremaine broke in.



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"What is the address to which you delivered this stuff?"

"It's written down. Wait a minute, and I'll get it for you," Tryon said, hurrying away. He returned with a small slip of paper in his hand.

Taking the paper, Tremaine read the address. His eyes crinkled. The green depths sparkled. Tremaine was grinning to himself.

"This clears up everything!" he said. "Thanks!"

The cab roared uptown. As he passed the subway station on which he had almost met his death, Tremaine tipped his hat and smiled bleakly. A block from the station, the cab stopped.

"If I'm not out in five minutes," Tremaine told the driver, "call this number, and tell the man who answers to get down here in a hurry and bring plenty of friends with him." He kneaded his knuckles for a second.

"Got you," the cabby said.

The building had once been yellow brick. But time and dirt had turned it into a muddy brown. A street light splashed against the front of the building, revealing an untidy, rusty fire escape crawling up its face.

Climbing upon a garbage can that stood in front of the building, the tall postal dick balanced himself for a moment. With a heave of powerful leg muscles, he propelled himself upward. His lean fingers fastened on the lower rung of the iron ladder leading down from the fire escape. Pulling himself up to the platform, he quietly began to ascend the iron steps.

Working with infinite caution, he inched a window up and slid into a room. In the darkness he spotted a streak of light, marking the location of a door. Silently, he drifted over to the light and applied his ear to the door.

Low voices mumbled in the room beyond. Tremaine got his .38 out of its holster. He pulled open the door and said, "Hello, boys!" in a flat, mocking voice.

The two men in the room leaped from the chairs on which they had been seated, dropping sheafs of green paper. One, a squat, solid man with a broken nose squealed:

"It's him! I killed him, but he's here!"

**T**HE other man, a tall, powerfully built man who still wore a postal guard's uniform, went for the automatic that was strapped to his hip.

Tremaine's .38 spit orange flame. The tall man yelled hoarsely. His sleeve blossomed red over his forearm.

"Face the wall!" Tremaine commanded. He deftly frisked the two, taking their guns. Turning, he surveyed the room. On a circular table under an unshaded lamp, a heap of crisp money was stacked. Empty registered mail sacks were thrown in one corner.

"Nice haul," Tremaine said. "Too bad you won't get to enjoy it."

"And why not, pray tell?" a deep voice asked from the doorway.

Spinning on his heel, Tremaine saw the funeral figure of the Parson. A big automatic was pointed at the detective's middle. Tremaine let his guns drop to the bare floor and raised his hands.

"I suspected the worst, my dear lad," the Parson said, "when I made inquiries as to a man who had been killed in the subway and learned that you escaped without so much as a scratch."

Turning, the Parson said to the squat man, "Bind Larry's arm, Jake. We don't want the boy bleeding to death, do we?" His tone was grave and concerned.

The broken-nosed man, named Jake, asked, "We gonna rub this guy after I do?"

"Why not?" the Parson asked suavely. "Really Stanley, my boy," he said to Tremaine, "you've had a charmed life so far. You gave me quite a start tonight when you came

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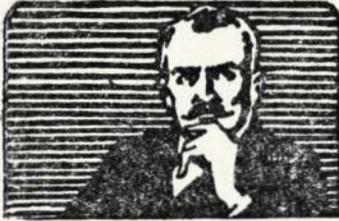


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to me. Your hunches are so often correct that I was worried. I had to have you removed." The black-clad Parson shook his thin head. "Unfortunately I chose this bungler to do the job. Naturally, in the limited time I had at my disposal, no other choice was feasible.

"As soon as I learned the job had been bungled, I knew that you'd be on my trail. I give you credit for great natural sagacity, Stanley. I came here to tell these fools to go under cover, and lo, here you are, gun in hand, running things to suit yourself. You are even better than I thought."

Tremaine's green eyes narrowed. "Killing me won't do you much good, Parson. Finch talked!"

The Parson's narrow face hardened. "You're lying, Tremaine!" he snapped.

"Maybe," Tremaine agreed amiably, "but I guarantee you that you and the boys here will sizzle for this stunt." The detective's eyes crinkled.

The broken-nosed Jake snapped, "I tole ya we shoul'da blasted that punk."

"Shut up!" the Parson snapped. His black eyes blazed.

Tremaine turned and took a step backward, placing himself between the Parson and his two henchmen.

The Parson cocked his gun. "One more step, boy, and you'll get a slug in your heart!" he said flatly.

Tremaine said, "Okay, Parson." Both feet were on the wire that connected the lamp to the socket in the baseboard of the wall. He began to flex his long fingers.

"Stop that!" the Parson said irritably.

**S**WIFTLY, Tremaine kicked his left foot. With a flare of blue sparks, the plug pulled out of its socket. The room went dark.

A drum roll of heavy gunfire churned in the room. A man screamed hoarsely and then went silent.

In the dark stillness, a liquid dripping could be heard.

"Nice try, Parson," Stan Tremaine

said. "You've killed one of your own men!"

Once again, shots blasted in the room, pounding eardrums unmercifully.

"Larry?" the Parson whispered. "Jake?"

No one answered. "Jack—Larry! Answer me!" the Parson shouted.

"They're both dead, Parson," Tremaine mocked, "and I'm coming to get you!" He chuckled as he heard a faint sound.

A gun clicked.

"No use, Parson. I counted, and you've used up all your slugs!" Tremaine said.

Scuffling sounds rose in the black room. "You can't get away, Parson!" Tremaine mocked. "You haven't a chance now!"

Laughing derisively, the Parson asked, "Can't I?" Opening the door, he bolted down the stairs.

Tremaine lit a match and casually examined the two dead men. He could hear the sound of the Parson's footsteps clattering down the linoleum-covered stairs. Deliberately, he inserted the light plug into its socket.

From below, two shots echoed. Tremaine cocked his head. His green eyes crinkled. His hunch was correct!

Kincaid, white-haired Chief of Postal Inspectors, burst into the room. "Stan? Boy, am I glad to see you alive! When we heard those shots, I thought sure they had gotten you."

"He just killed a few cronies. I'm too tough for them!" Tremaine said lightly. He waved his hand at the mass of money and securities on the table.

"There's the loot!" he said. "You'd better have Finch picked up. He's the one who tipped the Parson off about the shipment."

"That a hunch of yours?" Kincaid asked.

"Well, it was, but the Parson backed it up when he blew his top. You see, when we found Finch alive, I couldn't understand why they hadn't killed him

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just as they had killed Arlen. Leaving the driver live, I could understand, but not Finch. I frisked him when we were working over him and found a match folder from the Parson's Club. It still wasn't anything concrete, but I decided to check it by contacting the Parson.

"That gent, thinking I was onto him, set his killers on me. This is the result!" He waved a muscular hand about the room and let a rare smile pull at the corners of his scarred mouth.

## The Black Friar Murders

By Joseph Commings

*(Continued from page 17)*

was in the iron-bound chest and confronted Carrie. He came into the barred cell through the door, of course. After stabbing her, he ducked out, barring the door again. He hid the knife and robe in one of the unlimited hiding places in the cloister—and became Pam once more. A knife wound doesn't always kill you right off. You noticed that was the case with Ponzi. Carrie lived for some minutes after Bayne left the cell.

"In the meantime he had joined forces with Sherry. Sherry gave him her flashlight to hold while she unbarred the cell door. Bayne continued to hold the flashlight as they nosed in. He had his tiny cardboard figger palmed in his other hand. Sherry didn't see him slip the figger in front of the flashlight lens. It instantly threw a man-sized silhouette on the wall eight feet away. Bayne slid the shadow-figger across the front of the flashlight. They saw the Black Friar glide to the side wall. Bayne pulled the image off the light and the Black Friar vanished."

# MONEY ISN'T EVERYTHING

(OR IS IT?)



BY GROUCHO MARX

WHAT do you want to save up a lot of money for? You'll never need the stuff.

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On second thought, you'd better keep on saving, chum. Otherwise you're licked.

— For instance, how are you ever going to build



that Little Dream House, without a trunk full of moolah? You think the carpenters are going to work free? Or the plumbers? Or the architects? Not those lads. They've been around. They're no dopes.

And how are you going to send that kid of yours to college, without the folding stuff?

Maybe you think he can work his way through by playing the flute.

If so, you're crazy. (Only three students have ever worked their way through college by playing the flute. And they had to stop eating for four years.)

And how are you going to do that wonderful traveling you've always wanted to do? Maybe you think you can stoke your way across, or scrub decks. Well, that's no good. I've tried it. It interferes with shipboard romances.

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