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# DETECTIVE ACES



**FIRST FIND THE BODY**  
*Gripping Detective Novelet*  
 BY H. Q. MASUR

**NIGHTMARE ISLAND**  
*Sensational Mystery Novelet*  
 BY NORMAN A. DANIELS  
 AND 8 OTHER  
 DETECTIVE  
 ACES

Saurat



# FREE TO MEN WHO WANT BOMBER POWER

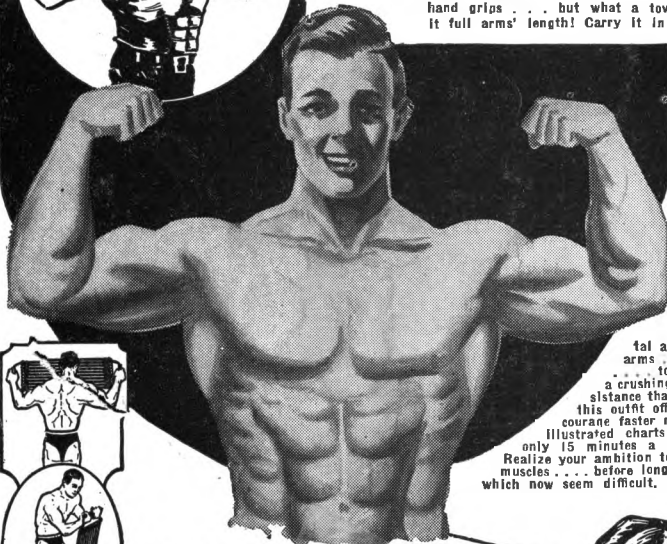


## HERE'S YOUR GIFT

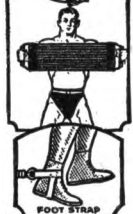
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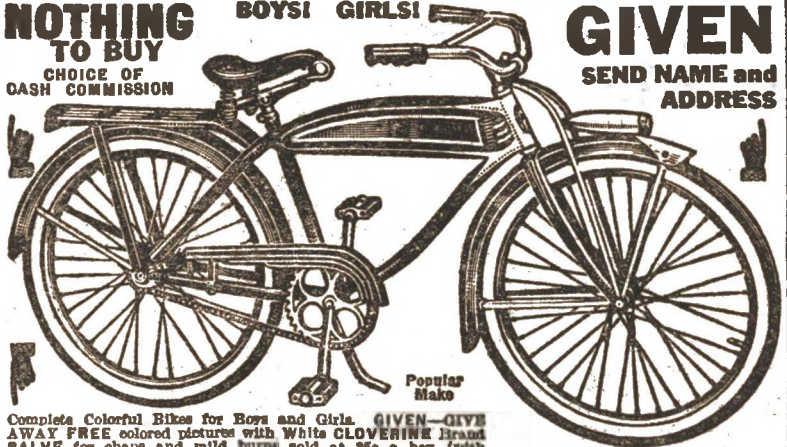
# NOTHING TO BUY

CHOICE OF CASH COMMISSION

BOYS! GIRLS!

# GIVEN

SEND NAME and ADDRESS



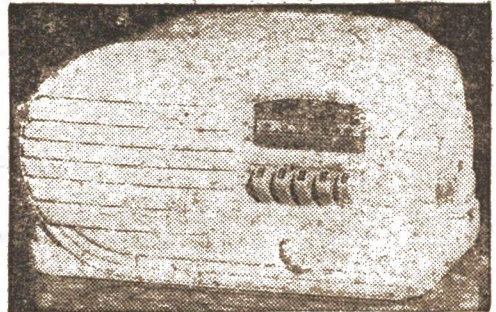
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NOTHING TO BUY



BE FIRST 47th YEAR

CHOICE OF CASH COMMISSION

Send Name and Address

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 Gentlemen! Please send me 12 beautiful art pictures with 12 boxes White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE to sell at 25c a box (giving picture FREE). I will remit within 30 days, send a premium or keep cash commission as per new premium plan mailing card with order. Postage paid.

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**PRINT YOUR LAST NAME ONLY IN SPACES BELOW**

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Paste coupon on postal card or mail in an envelope today.



# TEN



# DETECTIVE ACES

A. A. WYN  
Editor

MAURICE J. PHILLIPS  
Managing Editor



March, 1942

Vol. XLIV, No. 1

## ★ 10 New, Different Stories—No Serials ★

1. NIGHTMARE ISLAND (Novelet) . . . Norman A. Daniels 6  
*On that isle of disaster, a dead man's legacy bequeaths  
hate-spawned destruction.*
2. PROSECUTOR'S PAYOFF . . . . . D. L. Champion 26  
*Satan makes a special reservation at the morgue.*
3. TWICE-KILLED CORPSE . . . . . Fredric Brown 31  
*A bookworm sleuth becomes a stooge in a sinister setup.*
4. A NIGHT WITH JOHNNY JETHRO Charles Ingerman 42  
*Purchase of the bronze Buddha brings him under the spell of an  
erie Oriental wizardry.*
5. ALIBI FOR SALE . . . . . William Campbell Gault 51  
*A post-mortem debt demands payment in blood.*
6. FIRST FIND THE BODY (Novelet) . . . H. Q. Masur 58  
*The Casket Kid finds that someone has measured him for a  
wooden overcoat.*
7. DEATH IS A TRAITOR . . . . . Charles Larson 77  
*There is no detour to the Big House when homicide blazes the path.*
8. THE DEVIL'S HANDMAIDEN . . . . . S. J. Bailey 81  
*This detective team pulls a Bowery bum act for the benefit of a  
shakedown specialist.*
9. FRAME FOR THE PHONIES . . . . . Edward James 88  
*Barney Sutton locks horns with a hot-money mob.*
10. MURDER'S QUIZ BOOK . . . . . David M. Norman 99  
*Detective Brandon seeks information at a strange seance.*

Cover by Norm Saunders

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**Busy Radio Industry Increasing Demand For Radio Operators and Technicians**

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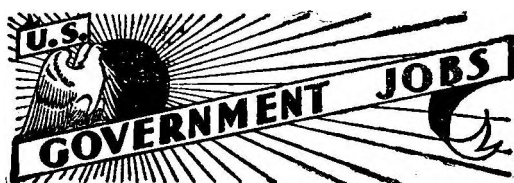
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APRIL

OUT FEB. 28



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 Send the **COMPLETE GUIDE TO BUST CULTURE** in plain package. On delivery I will pay you \$1.98 plus few cents postage. If not satisfied I may return it within ten days and my \$1.98 will be refunded.  
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 Address .....  
 **CHECK HERE** if you want to save postage. Enclose \$1.98 with coupon and we ship prepaid.

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|------------------------------|---------------------|
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| State Bureau of Maine        | Canton, Ohio        |
| State Bureau of Michigan     | Tulsa, Okla.        |
| State Bureau of New Mexico   | Mobile, Ala.        |
| State Bureau of Rhode Island | Phoenix, Ariz.      |
| State Bureau of Texas        | Los Angeles, Calif. |
| State Bureau of Utah         | Seattle, Wash.      |
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|                              | Miami, Florida      |
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# Nightmare Island

*Sensational  
Mystery  
Novelet*



*By Norman A Daniels*

## CHAPTER I

### THE DEAD AND THE LIVING

**T**HE house was immense, sprawling over a good part of the island. Once it had rung with laughter and music, but not since Jerome Jelm had taken it over. Now, even the very slight signs of living which he exhibited were gone.

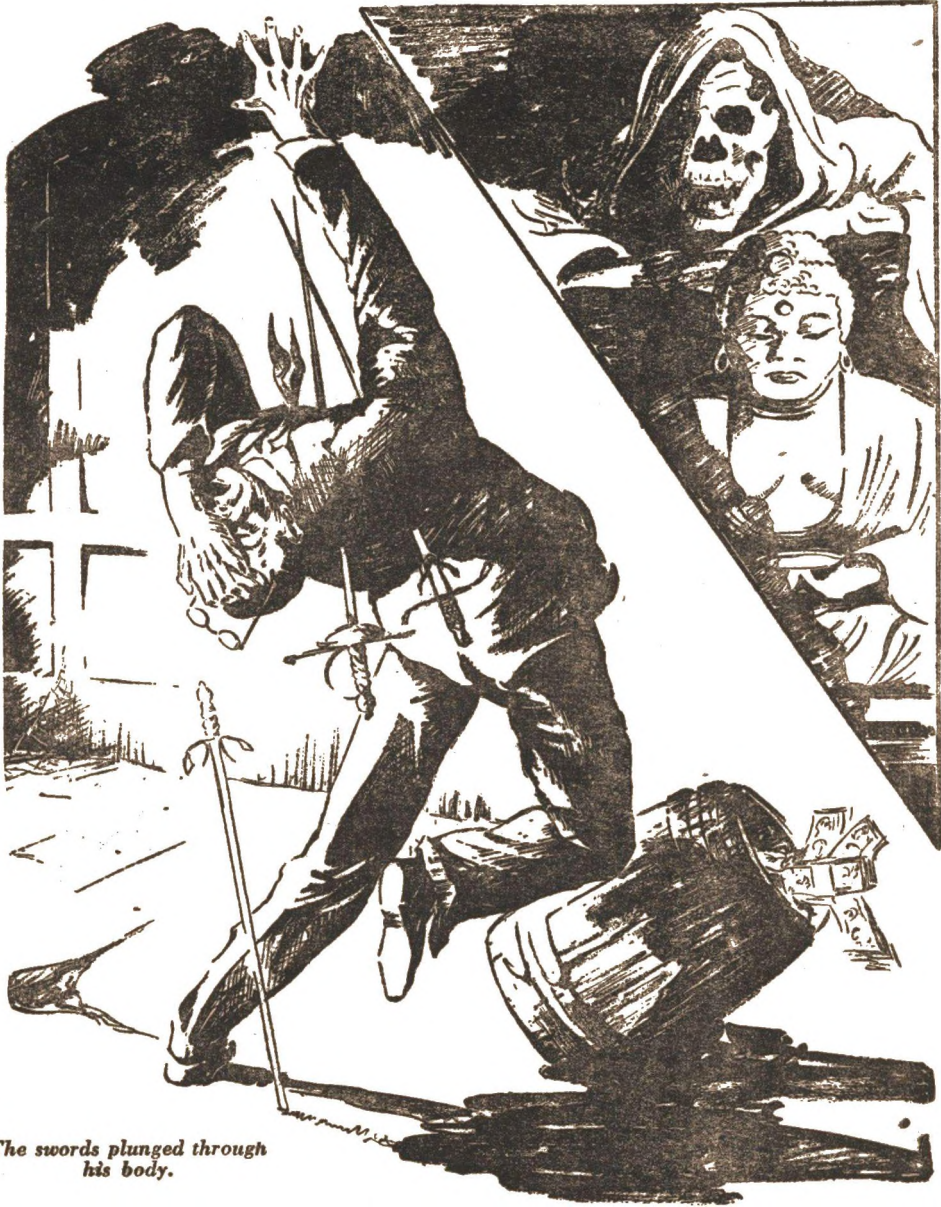
Two men carried a plain pine coffin and a lantern. The earth was wet and slippery. Twice the coffin almost crashed to the ground. The bearers were servants and their master lay inside the pine box. They were carrying out his final wish.

"Silly business if you ask me," Crandall snorted. "Burying a man in the dead of night! I don't like it."



"You don't like it?" Haade, a dour Dutchman grunted. "Do you suppose it's a picnic for me? It ain't right to bury a man in a rainstorm anyway.

Rain in an open grave means the corpse will never be at peace, and I tell you, Crandall, the minute the last spadeful of dirt drops on the casket,



The swords plunged through his body.

On that isle of disaster, a dead man's legacy bequeathed hate-spawned destruction. For the old eccentric had left six mystery casks—his last will and testament in one, and lethal messages in the other. And his money-mad heirs gambled with taste to outflank murder etched in metal.

I'm leaving this place. There's a nationwide depression on the mainland that will make 1932 go down in history, but I'd rather starve than be scared to death."

The open grave contained about three or four inches of water, and Haade, with his old world superstitions, was actually shivering. Rain in an open grave meant disaster.

"Come on." Crandall noticed his hesitancy. "In he goes. Steady now—get her square and when I give the signal, let go. A little jar won't hurt the old man. Not now it won't."

They rined up the casket with the grave. Crandall grunted and both men let go. The coffin shot into its resting place like a bullet. One end caught on the rough sides of the grave and for a moment the long box was at a distinct angle. Then the loose dirt dropped and the casket fell on an even keel.

"Hist!" Haade's suddenly nerveless hands dropped the shovel. "Did you hear it, Crandall? A knock from inside the casket. The sign that a living man is being buried."

"Aw—you and your crazy ideas." Crandall sent a shovelful of earth smashing down on the casket. "It's either your imagination or the body rolled a little. What difference does it make? He's dead!"

Haade nodded, but he wasn't convinced. Now that the grim business had proceeded this far, they were both anxious to get it over with. Their shovels flew and the grave filled up. They paused for a moment and wiped rain out of their faces.

Crandall said, with barely repressed eagerness in his voice, "I wonder what the old man did with all his money? There's some say he was worth millions, although he certainly never spent any of it around here."

Haade tramped on the muddy earth, packing it down. He was still frightened and didn't care who knew it.

"The faster we leave, the better I'll like it," he grumbled. "I wonder what the heirs will do? There's four or five

of 'em—a niece and a bunch of nephews. The old man hated 'em. I been thinking lately, Crandall. You know, I don't believe the old man was rich at all."

"Maybe." Crandall was trying to drive a crude wooden cross into the ground.

The storm broke with renewed fury and lightning made both men jump nervously. At last they were done. Not bothering to gather up their tools, both started running toward the little pier where a launch was moored. Haade leaped into the boat and Crandall slipped the hawser and piled in three seconds later. As the island faded into the night, Haade gave a long sigh of relief and sank back weakly.

"There she goes, Crandall. If I never see the place again, that suits me fine. It'll be on a night like this when he'll rise up. The island is cursed, Crandall. Forever cursed. I wouldn't come back for anything."

"Neither would I." Crandall steered a straight course for the mainland, "except that I would like to know where he hid all his money—if he had any. Keep an eye out for the mainland. It'll seem nice to see people again."

**T**HE murder trial of Mark Arnold attracted enough publicity to drive some of the war news off the front pages. Not that the murder was particularly outstanding, but the accused killer was.

Never, reporters wrote avidly, had they seen a man with such steely nerves. He hadn't cracked once. He'd refused to go on the stand, refused even to talk about the case to his own attorney.

The police maintained that Arnold and a business partner ran a successful brokerage house until the partner began to appropriate clients' funds for his own use. The crash came and the partner was found dead—strangled with such violence that his spinal cord had snapped. Everything pointed to Arnold. Motive, lack of



alibi, the necessary physical strength and his attitude of complete silence.

Four hundred pairs of eyes were riveted on Mark Arnold as the jury filed in. He was half an inch short of six feet and solidly built with two hundred pounds of sinew and bone. He merely glanced at the jury box, leaned back and twiddled his thumbs until the clerk told him to arise and face the jury.

Arnold stood up, neither flinching nor smiling. Even Hal Payson, the highest priced criminal lawyer in the country was far more nervous than Arnold. He stood beside the accused man, tearing a piece of paper into shreds and wanting desperately to wipe the tiny beads of sweat off his forehead.

"Not guilty!" the foreman said.

Payson's shoulders sagged. The victory had been hard won and he felt the strain. Mark Arnold's face was just as impassive as ever. There was no elation, no triumph, not even relief written on his features. He nodded to Payson, his lawyer, and then started to walk down the aisle toward the first freedom he'd enjoyed in months.

People drew away from him. Reporters didn't approach—they knew better. For something about the jib of Mark Arnold's chin warned them he might not take to being questioned.

Arnold felt all this keenly, although he didn't show his emotions. He knew what everyone thought. It was true that the facts should have condemned Arnold, even though they were purely circumstantial. It was only Payson's clever words, clever twisting of witnesses' testimony that had freed him.

**A**RNOLD turned left when he reached the sidewalk. He drew in several breaths of air, not because he had lacked fresh air, but because this was free. He could move about in it with no limit to his steps, no cement walls or barred doors.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. Arnold stopped and turned around deliberately. He faced a slender, middle-aged man.

"You're Mark Arnold? Of course you are. I'd like to talk to you. A matter of business, profitable business. No other man in the world could handle it as you might and you could use the money, couldn't you?"

Heaven knew, Arnold thought, he could. Somewhat less than four dollars was in his pocket and that represented everything he owned. All else had been sold to raise Payson's fat fee and to repay the investors in Arnold's firm.

"What's the proposition?" Arnold queried.

"My name is Foster," the stranger said. "I'll give you all the particulars. Nine years ago a man named Jerome Jelm lived on an island about four miles off the coast. He refused to allow anyone to see him except two servants who lived there. Jelm died on the island and was buried there—at least we found a grave. We didn't even know he died until three years ago.

"The servants must have buried him and disappeared after that. Hardly blame them. We sent a caretaker to the island and he lasted one night. Three others stayed there until about three or four hours after dusk and then they came back to the mainland. Said the place wasn't meant for a human being to live."

"And what am I to do about it?" Arnold queried.

"Jelm was reputed to have a lot of money," Foster said. "There are heirs. I've been appointed to handle the estate. They want to know one way or the other if Jelm did leave anything. We've searched banks and whatever property the old man had here and found nothing. We have been compelled to assume that he concealed on the island all of his assets.

"The old man was nearly blind. For some years prior to his death, his niece used to visit him—the only per-

son he'd allow there. She was only twelve or thirteen years old, but she used to lead him around and he showed her places where he might have concealed his money. Your job is to escort this girl to the island, insure her safety there and get her back. Do this and you share in whatever is found there. I promise it should run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. You get ten percent."

Arnold said nothing for a few seconds. Despite the money involved, the offer practically to make a hermit of himself was attractive. By the time he returned, people would have forgotten about his murder trial.

"Just why," Arnold asked, "have you selected me to do this?"

Foster smiled knowingly. "Because there is danger and the job requires a man of iron nerves. If something is wrong on the island, you'd have no trouble handling it. Not you! A man would be a fool to oppose you, Arnold. You could wring his neck as easily as a doll's and be as ruthless as—as, well, frankly, as you have already proven yourself. Is it a deal?"

Arnold smiled wanly and wondered if it was always going to be like this. If he'd be forever regarded as a confirmed slayer, a dangerous man, one to be wary of.

"Why not?" he asked. "I'm ready to start any time. Who is this girl and where do I meet her?"

## CHAPTER II

### THE FADING LIGHT

**A**NN THAYER was the type to give many a man a crick in his neck. She was smooth-skinned and had bright blue eyes. Yellow curls were neatly arranged at the back of her head. She greeted Mark Arnold with a firm, warm handclasp. Then, as he had expected, her fingers suddenly relaxed.

"You know me, eh?" Arnold asked. "Why should I have hoped you'd be an exception when my face has been

on the front pages of newspapers for weeks? Yes—I'm Mark Arnold, the killer, the man who breaks people's necks! That's why your friend Foster got me for this job. He said he wanted someone who could be ruthless. Well—here I am, ruthlessness and all. Say the word and I'll pop out of sight and never bother you again."

Ann Thayer gave a funny little laugh. "Of course not, Mr. Arnold. In fact, I think I'll feel much safer under your care than that of some wishy-washy man who'd be afraid of his own shadow. Would you mind taking my bags? There is a taxi out front."

It was seven o'clock and growing dark when Arnold and Ann reached the pier. A fast launch was moored and waiting. Foster had missed no details. An elderly man touched the peak of his cap and motioned toward the craft.

"She's all gassed and ready to go. Not that I envy you folks. The old man was buried while it rained. No doctor ever did say he was dead, and no undertaker handled the details. Me—I don't think he's dead at all."

"Very interesting," Arnold said. "But we're going anyway. Miss Thayer, can you handle one of these things? I'm not much on boats."

Ann could handle it—like a trained skipper. She sent the launch racing away from the mainland. As darkness closed in, she shivered.

"I wonder if we're doing the right thing," she said. "Jelm refused to allow anyone to set foot on his property except those two servants. I visited him three times, but only because he wrote and begged me to come."

"Then why should he deny you the privilege now, if he isn't dead? That sounds rather foolish because he must be. How could he live there—all alone—for almost ten years? However, if you're afraid, I'll go alone."

"I'm not afraid." She gave him a warm smile. "Tell me, did you really kill your business partner?"

Arnold's features became stony and



impassive. He asked, gruffly, "How far are we from the island?"

"About a mile and a half. I'm—sorry. I shouldn't have brought that up. Would it help if I said I'm sure you never killed anyone?"

Arnold didn't answer. He sat down on a small deck chair and remained like that for many minutes. Then he arose suddenly. There was smoke coming from below.

"Ann," he cried. "Ann—something is wrong. The boat's afire! It must be near the fuel tanks."

Arnold raised a hatch and a tongue of flame shot out to greet him. He slammed the cover back into place and ran over to where Ann guided the craft.

"How is it?" she asked. "Bad?"

"Very. We've got to get off this boat. Is that the island over there? Or am I just hoping?"

"It's the island. Mark, don't worry about me. I can swim. Are you ready?"

He took her hand firmly and they ran to the rail. They climbed over it, took a last look at the launch which was now blazing furiously near the stern, and jumped.

THEY were about two hundred yards away from the launch when fire reached the fuel supply. There was a roar, a wall of flame and the craft sank in two minutes.

They crawled up on shore and sat down, exhausted, wet and cold. Ann huddled close to him.

"How could that fire have started?" she asked.

"Don't worry," Arnold said. "It was probably just an accident. Let's head for the house. We might find something dry there and at least I can build a fire. You know the way, so just lead me on. And watch out—it's dark as pitch."

She found a narrow path, almost lost in the overgrowth of brush. It took them beneath tall, sighing cedars and then the full measure of Jelm's mansion struck Arnold forcefully. It

seemed to spread out in all directions. Gables, eaves, a banging blind, all summed themselves up to give the place an aura of evil. Of death and decay! The front door wasn't locked and they went in.

"Well, here we are," Arnold said grimly. "Stay close to me, Ann. There must be candles or lamps. You'll feel better when we throw some light on the situation."

"There used to be gas piped through the house. Jelm always had a lot of tanks hooked up to it. Look, Mark, isn't that a lamp on the table?"

Arnold nodded. He took an automatic cigarette lighter from his pocket and tried it, but the wick was wet. He drew it out, squeezed it and then gave the fluid time to climb up the wick. His next attempt was successful.

The table lamp was old-fashioned, with a mantel inside the glass chimney. It was very old and apt to fall into pieces at the slightest touch, so Arnold worked carefully. The jet hissed when he turned it on. Small particles of the mantel fell away, but enough remained so that there was soon that very white, almost ghostly light in the room.

Arnold pivoted slowly and made a wry face. The room was thick with dust. One huge armchair in a corner had lost a leg, and it sagged forward as though it would topple over at the slightest touch.

"It isn't exactly a pleasant place, is it?" Ann asked with a nervous smile. "Listen—isn't that rain?"

Arnold shrugged. "Might as well have a storm as not. Everything else has turned out to make our little jaunt unpleasant. Suppose we look for dry clothes. There are candles above the fireplace. Want to stay here while I take a quick look around?"

"I—ah—ah right, Mark. Just don't go too far away. Try the—let's see now—the third door down the hall. It used to be a bedroom."

Arnold was at that door when he heard Ann's scream. He turned so

swiftly that his candle went out. Hurling it aside, he rushed back to the room where he'd left Ann. She was still there, legs drawn up on the seat of the chair and her body tensed. For a moment Arnold couldn't figure out what was wrong. Then he glanced at the lamp. The light was slowly dying out. Not as though the fuel were gone, but as if *something* was actually withdrawing the light from within.

**S**HADOWS began to dance over the wall, weird, lurid things that changed shape and proportions ten times a minute. Arnold reached Ann's side and put both hands on her shoulders. There was so little he could do. Something was going to happen, something he couldn't fight. Something he couldn't even see, for the room was practically dark now. Only a low, bluish light came from the lamp.

Then even Arnold's nerves began to tremble, those nerves he'd built into steel. There was someone on the porch. He could hear the boards squeak and there was a gentle but insistent rapping on the door. A voice, querulous, half angry and yet weak like that of an old, old man, seemed to creep into the house.

"Let me in. Let me in," it said, and to Arnold it sounded like the sighing of a wind in the tree tops. Ann gave a sharp cry.

"It's him! Uncle Jerome! He isn't dead. Mark—let him in quickly."

They both ran to the door and that steady rapping ceased. Arnold flung it wide, prepared to welcome or tackle whatever was out there. He saw nothing. They both stared and then Arnold gently closed the door. They returned to the room where the light was still only a bluish, hideous hue. Ann sat down again.

"I—don't understand," she said. "I could have sworn I heard a voice—"

"You did. We're not both crazy," Arnold grunted.

There was a crash from inside one of the rooms down the hall. Arnold

jumped up, started for the door and then came back for Ann. He grabbed a candle off the mantel, lit it and they hurried in the direction of that sound.

"It's from—*his* room," Ann breathed. "How could anyone have got in there without our knowing it?"

"We'll ask whoever it is," Arnold said and thrust the door wide open. There was nothing—at least nothing they could see. Ann raised a hand and pointed to a huge wardrobe. The whole top section of it seemed to have been torn away. On the floor lay a brass-bound cask about two feet wide and three feet long.

"Look!" Ann cried. "Mark, I know what this means. That cask was one of Uncle Jerome's hiding places—one of those he used to show me. He had that entire wardrobe built around it and he used to keep a lot of papers in it. No one but *he* would have known where it was. Mark—do you think—"

Arnold handed her the candle, turned the cask right side up and examined it critically. The thing was heavily reinforced with brass, its hinges were large and the lock looked strong.

"Mark," Ann said in a voice that was low and monotonous with fear. "That *was* Uncle Jerome. We heard his voice. He came in, but we couldn't see him. He opened the secret compartment in the top of that wardrobe and dropped the cask on the floor so we'd find it. Uncle Jerome is dead—I know he is. But he came back anyway. He always said that some day he'd take my hand and lead me to his hiding places for the last time. He—he didn't take my hand, but he was here. I know it."

"Perhaps," Arnold agreed doubtfully. "Right now we must open that cask. Where are the tools, do you know?"

"There were some—in the cellar. I—I don't want to stay here alone. Take me with you, Mark."

She showed him the way to the cellar steps and they went down into the dank, dismal area below the ground. The candle gave off a flickering light that did almost as much damage to the nerves as complete darkness. Arnold found a rusty hammer and chisel. They were halfway up the steps again when there was a distinct thud from the floor above.

Arnold placed it as coming from the room where that cask had fallen. They raced upstairs, Arnold shielding the candle flame as he went. The door of that room was wide open. Inside was the cask, its lid raised, and crumpled beside it was a man.

### CHAPTER III

#### DEAD MAN'S MESSAGE

ARNOLD bent down and grabbed him by the collar, but he let go instantly. The man was quite dead. His eyes were glazing, his mouth hung open and his limbs were as limp as a rubber band.

As Arnold straightened up, he felt a sensation of dizziness and something acrid irritated his nostrils. He pushed Ann out of the room and quickly closed the door.

"Gas," he muttered. "Poison gas. Whoever that man was, he got the full blast of it. Ann, that cask must have contained the stuff. If we'd opened it—"

"I know who he is." Ann pointed an unsteady hand at the door. "He worked for Uncle Jelm. It's—Crandall, one of the servants."

Arnold gave a breath of relief. "Then we've solved our ghost. Crandall must have tricked us into opening the door. He came in—just how, I don't know—reached this room and attempted to open the cask. Maybe he dropped it and then hid when we came. He had a key—it's in the lock of that cask—so it proves what he was up to. Looks to me as though your deceased uncle realized there would be a lot of people looking for

his money, so he set a few traps. And Crandall bit on this one."

Arnold opened the door, held his breath and ran to a window. He flung it wide, forced the blinds apart and allowed fresh air to sweep the poisonous gas from the room. Then he examined the cask. It contained an envelope, addressed to *The Finder*. Arnold carried the envelope out to Ann and they both returned to the living room. The lights were bright again.

"This envelope was addressed by Uncle Jerome," Ann said. "I recognize his writing. Open it, Mark."

There was a single piece of paper inside, likewise written in that crabbed hand. As he read it, Mark gulped and wet his lips. Ann looked over his shoulder and gasped in horror at the significance of those words.

To my heirs, legal or pilfering:

I may or may not have died a wealthy man. It is now your privilege to find out. There are six casks hidden in this house. One of them contains my legacy. The others contain Death! They can be found if you look hard enough—so can Death!

I leave this strange legacy because I have always been considered a crackpot, so I may as well prove my enemies were right. I am a crackpot, but that's how I like it.

Ann laid the letter down slowly and gazed at Arnold. "It means that if anyone searches for those casks and finds the wrong ones, they'll be—killed. Mark, we can't permit that. It will be—murder. I—Mark! The door!"

There was a distinct rapping on the front door, insistent and urgent. Arnold moved toward it carefully, took a firm grip of the knob and suddenly yanked the door open. There were two people standing on the porch.

"You're Mark Arnold, the kill—the man who was sent here to guard Miss Thayer?" one of these asked.

Arnold nodded. "Come in. Miss Thayer is here."

Ann met them in the hallway. "These are Frank and Russell Gan.



They are brothers and—my cousins," she told Arnold.

"What do you want here?" Arnold asked in a low voice.

"Probably," Frank Gan answered, "the same thing you're looking for. We heard Foster had sent Ann here to search for the old man's money. She was his niece and we are his nephews, which gives us a share in the money as well. We know that the old fool left no will, even though he favored Ann because she spent a few weeks here off and on."

"Then you're due for a surprise you may not like," Arnold told him. "One of Jelm's servants returned tonight with the same idea as you have in mind. He's in one of the rooms down the hall—dead."

**R**USSELL GAN reached into his coat pocket, rather clumsily, and extracted a cheap nickel-plated revolver.

"If anybody has been killed in this house, we know who did it. You!" he accused. "You're practically a proven killer even if the jury let you go."

Arnold shrugged, but he was grateful to Ann for moving closer to him. "Guns won't do you much good here, gentlemen. You see, it's not me you'll have to be afraid of. It's your dead uncle. But—his ghost is less harmful than the casks. The Six Casks, gentlemen. Your uncle was a peculiar man. His legacy is contained in one of the casks, but the other five contain death. Crandall picked one of them—and he is dead. Therefore we have five left. You don't believe me! Then read this letter which your uncle wrote prior to his death."

The pair read it, looked at each other in astonishment and then Frank spoke in a slightly rasping voice.

"I guess this is on the level all right. Russ, go out and bring Dilson and Spencer inside. They are the old man's nephews, too. We've all got to work this thing out before we go sticking our noses into those casks. And I warn you, Arnold, that we'll

look at Crandall and if he was killed by a broken neck, we'll hold you guilty. That's how you killed your partner, wasn't it?"

Russell strode out into the night. Frank Gan went down the hall to the old man's room and disappeared inside. Ann looked up at Arnold, whose face had gone gray and grim.

"Mark," she said softly, "what really did happen between your partner and yourself? I trust you—no matter what you were accused of doing. Did you kill him?"

Arnold looked away. "The jury said I didn't. I told you that before. Forget it, will you? We've enough on our minds without that."

Russell returned with Dilson. He was a sly, wiry built man with a curl to his lower lip that seemed to give him a perpetual sneer. He favored Arnold with a dour, suspicious look.

Jim Spencer, the last of the quartet, stormed into the house. There was a rifle thrust in the crook of his arm. He greeted Ann effusively, shook hands with Arnold and began to chuckle in high humor.

"Imagine how the old boy would feel if he could see all of us getting set to rip his place apart. I ran across his grave just a few minutes ago. Somebody tore up the wooden cross and broke it. Where's Frank?"

"Down here." Frank popped out of the room where Crandall had met his death. "There's been a murder. Spencer, keep your rifle trained on that killer. Russ, you and Dilson come down here quickly."

Spencer instantly brought the rifle to bear on Arnold. They went into the living room and Arnold sat down.

"Look here, Spencer," he said, "you seem to be the sanest of your party so I'm going to talk a bit. First of all there is a note on that table—written by Jelm before he died. Crandall lost his life to find it. You might be interested and, for heaven's sake, man, put that gun down. Do you think I'd tackle the four of you, even if I did want to get rid of you?"

Spencer didn't seem convinced, but he picked up the letter, read it and looked grave.

"It seems like Jelm's writing," he admitted slowly, "but we've got to be very sure this isn't a trick on your part, Arnold. After all, with your record—well, you can hardly blame us. Ann, I'm going to join the others. You'd better come along with me."

"I'll stay with Mark," Ann answered.

**S**PENCER shrugged. "As you wish. But remember, Arnold, there's no way off this island except with the speed launch we came here in and I've got the spark plugs in my pocket."

He turned and walked down the hallway to join the others in the room where Crandall lay dead.

"Thanks," Arnold said to Ann. "It's the first decent statement I've heard in months. Say, do you suppose those four men will actually defy Jelm's letter and search for those casks? Are they fools enough for that?"

"Not foolish, Mark, just hungry for money. They'll search all right, but I won't help them. Not if it means they may be killed. I wish I'd never listened to Foster—never heard of this island. I'm afraid, Mark. Afraid for all of us."

Later Arnold and Ann Thayer faced the four men who came to claim their share in the estate. Dilson assumed the rôle of spokesman and Arnold knew that this man would go to any extremes to get his hands on the money. Dilson was no mollycoddle and evidently he'd also persuaded the others to work closely with him.

"Ann," Dilson said, "old Jelm trusted you. We know how he had you lead him around and he showed you these various hiding places. Where shall we look first?"

Ann said nothing, but Arnold felt her grow rigid and her hand, which he held, was moist with perspiration. Dilson drew his gun and stepped

close to Arnold. The gun prodded Arnold's stomach.

"Get this, you murderer, the jury let you go because they were all dopes. Everybody knows you were guilty, so if it becomes necessary to kill you, our consciences won't bother us too much. Ann, unless you want to see this killer get blown in half, you'd better talk. I'm not fooling."

"All right," she said. "I'll tell you where one of the hiding places is located. There's no need for Mark to suffer because of the brutal instincts of our little tribe. There's a big room at the back of the house. Jelm used to call it his prayer room. Take us there and I'll show you where one of his favorite hiding places was located. Mark goes, too. Unless he remains with me, I won't say a word."

They were willing to grant anything. Supplied with flashlights, they forced Mark Arnold and Ann to walk ahead of them. Ann opened a door and they entered a huge room. It looked like a miniature oriental temple. In the far corner stood a huge statue. It was a Buddha, squatted on a pedestal about six feet in diameter. Ann pointed to it.

"Below the Buddha, a section of that pedestal opens up. Look closely and you'll see a Chinese face engraved in the wood. Press the left eye."

Frank Gan rushed forward with a cry of elation. He dropped to both knees, sprayed the pedestal with his flashlight and found the Chinese face.

"Be careful, you half-witted fool," Arnold cried. "Remember what happened to Crandall and what Jelm wrote in that note."

"He was crazy," Frank Gan shouted. "Watch!"

He pressed the left eye of the figure. A panel slid back about half an inch and Gan opened it all the way. His flashlight illuminated the interior and revealed one of those brass-bound casks. Frank Gan shouted in elation, laid his flashlight down so that its beam gave him light enough to work by, and used both hands to

reach in for the cask. He dragged it several inches forward.

"It feels heavy," he shouted. "This is it, boys. I've found—"

"Look out!" Arnold called a warning, but he was too late. As the cask slid forward, some clever mechanism operated. The giant Buddha on the pedestal slid forward, balanced on the edge of the pedestal for a fraction of a second and then came down. It must have weighed a ton. Frank Gan heard it coming, but he couldn't move.

**T**ERROR and surprise paralyzed his nerves and muscles. He just gave one ghastly shriek which was cut off by the crash of the statue. Russ Gan, the brother of the victim, leaped to the Buddha and tried to move the thing. He tore fingernails loose, kicked at the grotesque thing, cursed and sobbed at the same time. But Frank Gan never moved or uttered another cry.

Arnold made a brief examination of what he could reach of the corpse. Then he approached Russ Gan. The man suddenly whipped out his gun and leveled it.

"You did this," he shrieked. "You did it, damn you! This is all a trick to get rid of us one by one so you can get the money. You're a killer—and a thief, too. I'm going to let you have it—right now."

Arnold saw his finger start squeezing the trigger. He stood about two feet in front of Russ Gan. His foot suddenly kicked out, hit Gan savagely across the ankle and at the same instant Arnold leaped to one side. The gun roared once. Arnold grabbed it, wrenched the weapon free and used his other hand to wallop Gan just over the heart. The younger man staggered backwards and Arnold closed in for the final blow.

"Hold it—killer!" Dilson snarled. "Sock him again and I'll put a slug through your back. Drop that gun! Russ—get a grip on yourself. Pick up the pistol, but don't try to use it unless Arnold pulls a trick. Every-

body return to the living room."

Dilson parked himself on the corner of a big table in the middle of the living room. Arnold and Ann sat side by side on a davenport that gave off clouds of dust every time they moved. Spencer lounged in the doorway, rifle under one arm.

"We're going to need your help again, Ann," Dilson said. "Two casks have been eliminated so far. There are four to go. Perhaps the first one we locate will be the jackpot. No matter—because we aren't going to risk our lives any longer. Not when we have a perfect stooge to do it for us. Arnold, you seem to be blessed with a halo of good luck. Nothing short of that got you free from the murder rap. So we'll just put that luck to another test. From now on you open the casks."

Arnold snorted. "Why don't you just start shooting? I'd rather die from a bullet than one of old Jelm's contrivances. Nothing doing—I decline the offer without thanks."

Dilson grinned and Arnold didn't like the look in his eyes. "One will get you five that you will. Ann tells us another hiding place or we will string you up by the ankles. Then you open the cask or—we get rough with Ann."

Arnold half started from his chair. "Why, you rotten—"

Dilson whirled around. "I'll take a look myself. I spent a few days in this place when I was a kid. Jelm used to go down cellar a lot and I'll bet one of those casks is hidden there. Watch Arnold. I'll be back soon. If I find one of the casks, he'll open it."

But Dilson didn't return. After about five minutes they heard his voice through the floor. It was hoarse and excited. Herded by Gan, Spencer and their guns, Arnold led the way with Ann at his side. They went down the cellar steps. Dilson was still yelling and they found him beside an open trap door in the middle of the cellar floor.

"Down there," he said stridently.



TDA

"Another cask and—another corpse. I can't see who it is. The guy must be dead. He won't answer me."

Spencer looked down, using his flash to augment Dilson's. With a muttered oath he swung through the trap, located a ladder with his feet and went down it. They saw him turn the corpse over, and even Dilson gave a cry of astonishment.

The dead man was Foster who had commissioned Arnold to guard Ann.

"He's dead all right," Spencer called up. "I think he tried to open this cask and a poisoned barb struck him. Arnold—come down here."

Dilson jabbed Arnold with his gun and forced him to the ladder. Spencer pointed to the cask.

"Open it," he ordered. "I think the sting was removed by Foster, but you're going to take the chances from now on. Watch out for that thing that looks like a fish hook. It speared Foster."

Arnold carefully avoided the barb, found the cask unlocked and raised the lid. He ducked back in a hurry, but nothing happened. The cask was empty.

"Fooled again," Spencer groaned. "Okay, Arnold. Climb up the ladder. Dilson, stand by to help me out."

## CHAPTER IV

### SUDDEN DEATH

**T**H**ERE** were only three casks left and two of these would contain a contrivance to kill. Arnold knew he'd be elected to open them, and even if he was lucky enough to tap the harmless cask first, the chances were that Spencer and Dilson and Gan would eliminate him. Ann, too, because they could rig a murder scheme which would appear like the work of Jelm, eight years in the grave.

Or was he really dead? Was that grave a fake? From what Arnold had learned of the old man's characteristics it wasn't beyond him to plot just

such a situation as this and watch them fall victim to his traps. The broken grave marker, the dimming of the lights and the voice which Ann had recognized as Jelm's, all could be scenery to lend more spice to the affair.

Arnold kept his eyes and ears open, waiting for a chance to get possession of a gun and turn it on his three jailers. But they were wary, too, and suspicious of every move he made. There was never a second when one of those guns wasn't covering him.

He tried to figure out Foster's place in this mess. Why hadn't Foster accompanied Ann to the island? If he wanted the loot for himself, why had he even suggested she go there and try to find the stuff? One thing Arnold was sure of—Foster's interest hadn't been quite as remote as he pretended.

Dilson had changed from a sneering, swaggering man to an utter coward. He kept looking around as if he expected to see old man Jelm standing beside him. Gan just slumped in a chair and said nothing. It was apparent that he felt his brother's death tremendously. Even Spencer acted nervous, pacing the floor and arguing with Ann to tell of another hiding place. Finally Spencer's patience seemed to be exhausted.

He walked over behind the davenport and pressed the muzzle of his gun against Arnold's head.

"Ann," he said, "your friend has about a minute to live. The less time I spend on this island and in this house, the better I like it, so I refuse to accept any more of your stalling. Make up your mind because I mean this."

"Tell him," Arnold said in a monotone. "There are only three casks left, I've got a chance of survival."

Ann arose. "Follow me," she said. "There's a room upstairs—"

Guns jabbed Arnold again. He sighed and preceded the party. Ann indicated a closed door on the second

floor. Arnold turned the knob, gave the door a shove and waited until Russ Gan, Spencer and Dilson sprayed the room with light.

It was another big room, outfitted like a man's hobby workshop usually found in a cellar. There was an old rusted lathe, a drill press that had been ruined by neglect, and a workbench which ran the full length of the room. The four walls were oddly decorated with pikes, swords, daggers and all manner of medieval weapons.

"Uncle Jelm used to make them from originals," Ann explained. "He liked to work with metal."

"Yeah," Dilson grunted. "But I'm not interested in a dead man's hobby. Look—right in the middle of the bench. It looks like one of those casks, covered with canvas."

Three flashlights centered on the object. Ann shivered. The thing looked more like a covered casket.

"You're right," Spencer said. "It's about the same shape and size of the casks. Arnold, get busy. Remove the canvas first and then open her up. Be as careful as you like. We don't want to lose you yet. This is only the fourth cask."

**A**RNOLD bristled. "Suppose I refuse? You'd kill me then, but one of you would have to risk your life to open the cask. It might almost be worth dying for—if I knew the old man would get himself another laugh."

"Oh, no," Spencer chuckled. "We'll kill you—certainly—but we won't open the cask. Ann will be delegated for those honors. So which is it, Arnold?"

With a despairing glance at Ann, Arnold moved forward. He studied the setup for a moment. There were about a dozen assorted knives and swords clamped to the wall directly above the canvas-covered object. Arnold seized the canvas, gave it a yank and exposed the fourth cask.

Behind him, the three men gave gasps of avid pleasure. Russ Gan did-

n't seem able to restrain his eagerness. He pressed closer until Spencer warned him to be careful. Russ retreated about three feet. Arnold rubbed his chin. If this cask was to provide another death, the method would be as clever and unexpected as in the other three instances. Arnold had no particular reason to court death, but he was entirely at the mercy of those three men.

Standing as far away from the cask as possible, he reached out with both hands. He pressed down a catch and the lock flange flew open. Now all he had to do was raise the lid, but when that happened—Death hovered very close.

"Open it," Spencer said sharply. "Hurry!"

Arnold sent the lid flying open and jumped back an instant later. Nothing happened. The cask was heaped with what seemed to be bundles of currency.

"That's the one!" Russ Gan shouted. "It's the right one! We've found it!"

He pushed Arnold aside, dipped both hands, up to the wrists, in the loosely piled wads of greenbacks. There was a whirring sound, a distinct click and five of those swords slashed down at the same time. They were so arranged that no man standing at the cask, could possibly escape. Russ Gan gave a wild shriek that died in his throat. Three of the swords took grim toll. Russ sank to the floor, dead before he reached it. His head was almost severed from his shoulders.

Arnold turned Ann around quickly and led her into the hall. Dilson came out after half a minute.

"You're the luckiest man alive," he told Arnold. "I looked in the cask. Until those bundles of fake money were touched, those swords wouldn't slash down. Russ was too eager."

"Fake money," Arnold gasped. "Then—that cask was just another of Jelm's tricks?"

"Yes." Spencer came out of the

room. "Exactly that, which means that you still have two more to investigate. One thing, Arnold, with each cask discovered, your chances improve. Now it's a fifty-fifty proposition. There are only two more casks and one of these is harmless. . . . Ann, it's up to you again. What other part of the house did the old man have you lead him to? Come on—stop stalling. Perhaps in two minutes the whole thing will be over."

"He's right," Arnold told her. "It's best to finish it up as quickly as possible."

"But they'll kill both of us when they find the money," Ann whispered. "I heard Dilson say so. They'll arrange things so it will look as though another of Uncle Jerome's traps did it."

Spencer walked closer. "No whispering," he snapped. "All I want is action."

ANN looked into Arnold's eyes. He nodded and gave her a slow smile. She turned on her heel, walked down the corridor and stopped in front of another closed door.

"This was Jelm's private study. He allowed no one to enter this room and he took me here only once. I vaguely remember something about a paneled wall. A section slides either up or down and there was a good sized compartment hidden behind it—large enough for one of those casks."

"Ah!" Dilson rubbed his hands. "Now we're getting some place and believe me, Arnold can do all the work. I'm not quite as impetuous as Russ. Let's go!"

Arnold opened the door. The room was a lavish place. All four walls were paneled right to the ceiling. Beautiful hand-carved stuff worth a small fortune. Ann stepped into the middle of the room and slowly pivoted.

"It's over on that wall," she pointed. "I remember because he brought me here late one afternoon and the sun was streaming through that win-

dow. It lit up the whole inside of the compartment behind the slide. I think you press or pull part of the scroll work engraved in the wood."

Arnold didn't wait to be ordered. He walked briskly to the wall, motioned for the flashlights to be centered on it and then he lightly passed his hands across the deeply etched designs. One tiny curved portion moved slightly.

"This is it," he said stonily. "I'll open her up and for my sake, I hope it's the last cask. I don't know why I was ever fool enough to get mixed up in such an affair."

He moved the hidden lever. A wide portion of the wall slid upward about four inches. Arnold wiped sweat from his face, called for more light and studied the problem.

"I see how he did it now," he said softly. "This cask is really part of the paneling itself. One side must be designed to match the wall. It's necessary to insert the hands through that opening and work the cask free. Well—seeing that I either have to do it or be shot, I might as well get going."

He thrust both hands gingerly through the narrow aperture. His fingers located the back of the cask and he pressed against it, trying to force it out. He heard one of those sinister clicks. The slot, which opened up, closed again. His two hands were pinned down firmly at the wrists. He tugged, called for help and began to shout. Neither Dilson nor Spencer moved a step. Ann reached his side and tried to pry up the moving section of wall.

"I can't budge it," she cried. "Dilson—Spencer—are you going to stand there and let Arnold die? There's no telling what will happen next."

"You said it." Dilson had a nasty grin on his face. "That's just why we're waiting. Get away from him. Ann—unless you want to be in on it when old Jelm's trap really goes to work."

Arnold kept tugging. He even



braced his knees against the wall and pulled, but nothing seemed able to move the trap which held him fast. Ten minutes went by and Arnold grew limp with fatigue. Then Spencer stepped closer.

"I don't understand this one," he said. "The trap worked, but Arnold isn't dead. Dilson, beat it into that workroom where Russ got his. Find something to pry open this slot. I'm betting we've found the right cask. That must be it or Arnold would be dead by now."

Dilson disappeared and came back in two minutes with a light, thin bar of steel. Spencer chipped a hole in the paneling, thrust the lever into position and leaned on it. The bar bent under Spencer's tremendous pressure. He was stronger than he looked.

Then the old, rusted mechanism gave way under the strain. The spring broke and Arnold's hands came free. He stepped back, massaging them and wincing with pain. Spencer gestured with his gun.

"Now get the cask out of the wall and open it," he directed. "Snap it up, Arnold. This does the trick, I'm sure."

Arnold got the cask out of its niche, placed it on the floor and raised the lid. The cask was empty!

**S**PENCER and Dilson groaned aloud. Arnold went over to the niche and examined it carefully. Dilson stood right behind him with his flashlight. Suddenly Arnold pivoted. His left hand balled into a fist and smacked Dilson full in the face. At the same time his right hand grabbed the gun which Dilson held. He wrenched it free. Spencer started to lift his rifle, but Arnold had him covered. He also held Dilson's flashlight.

"One move," he warned, "and I'll let you have it, Spencer. I'm getting out of here. If either of you follow me, you'll have a gun fight on your hands. Stand just as you are. Damn

this crazy business and everybody connected with it."

"Mark," Ann called out and started toward him.

"Shut up," Arnold snapped. "That includes you, Ann. Your dear cousins can take care of you from now on. I'm through."

He stepped out of the room and they heard him running madly down the hall. Dilson started after him, but Spencer called him back.

"Let the fool go. He can't get off the island and we'll take care of him later. Remember, I've got a rifle with a range three times as far as the gun Arnold has. Ann, I hope this proves to you that we must stick together. Arnold showed his true colors. He's a killer and all killers are cowards."

"Then Ann opens the last cask," Dilson declared.

"Calm down," Spencer said angrily. "What are you afraid of? There are six casks. One killed Crandall, the second disposed of Frank Gan, the third killed Foster, the fourth cut down Russ Gan and now the fifth one has been taken care of. Something must have gone wrong with the trap because Arnold didn't get hurt. No matter—there is only one cask left. The sixth, and Jehm said in his letter that one of the six contains his fortune. Which means the sixth cask must be harmless."

"Gosh—that's right." Dilson looked relieved. "Then the rest of it is easy. Ann, where would the last cask be hidden?"

"I wouldn't tell you if I knew," Ann said hotly. "Nothing can make me show you another hiding place. I'm through, just as Arnold is. Kill me—do anything you like—but I won't take any further part in this mad scheme."

"No?" Spencer asked with silky coyness. "We'll see about that, but first I've got a theory. Dilson, take a look at this wall. The carving is identical on both ends which means that there is a chance we might find another of those secret niches on the other side

of it. Here—take my flash while I have a look.”

Spencer checked the location of the release lever, found a similar engraved figure at the other end of the wall and moved this. Instantly a section of the paneling flew open, revealing another cask.

“Want to pull the cask out?” Spencer queried.

“Not me,” Dilson answered.

“You’re more of a coward than Arnold,” Spencer said derisively. “Hand me that steel bar. Prop it up against the panel like this. Now, hold it there so that slot can’t smash down like it did on Arnold’s hands. Steady—she’s coming loose. She is loose!”

He gently placed the cask in the middle of the floor and kicked it. He faced Dilson.

“We know this cask isn’t dangerous because it’s the last one. Just the same I risked my neck getting it out of the wall and now it’s your turn, Dilson. Open it!”

“Why not?” Dilson knelt beside the cask. “Brother, prepare to feast your eyes on a lot of cash, or maybe it’s jewels. No matter which—we share it now, Spencer. The old man did us a favor by putting the rest of his relations out of the way. Here she goes!”

He raised the lid. His face became ruddy with rage. The sixth cask was also empty. The lid started to fall and he gave it a hard shove back. Something that looked like a striking cobra slashed from inside the lid. It was a brass claw attached to a bar of similar metal.

There were three points to the claw and these bit into Dilson’s arm. He shrieked with terror, used his free hand to move the claw and then arose slowly. The ruddiness had left his face and he was perfectly white. His lips moved, but no words came forth. Spencer put an arm around him. Dilson continued to move his mouth. Then he sagged in Spencer’s grasp.

“Dead!” Spencer exhaled loudly. “Damn Jelm—the sixth cask was as

dangerous as the other five. He tricked us. That claw was poisoned! Ann, pick up my rifle. We’re going downstairs and try to figure this thing out. I don’t believe there is an answer. Maybe the best thing to do is leave the island even if we have to swim. Come on—I—I can’t stand it here. There’s death in every corner, in every breath in this damned house.”

## CHAPTER V

### TREASURY TOWER

THEY sat down on the davenport. Spencer seemed to have lost all his former courage. He was trembling and unable to think lucidly. The white light of the gas lamp threw its grotesque shadows around. Every now and then something creaked dismally in the old house.

Ann said, “Spencer, I want to get out of here. I’d rather spend the rest of the night on the beach. Please—I’m terribly afraid. I— Spencer— what’s wrong? Wake up! Talk to me! Spencer!”

But the last of her cousins just sat there, lounging against the back of the davenport. He was alive, but something had put him into a deep lethargy. His eyes were wide open, and staring. He breathed hoarsely, but even when Ann shook him, he made no other sound and he seemed to be as lifeless as a burlap bag.

The storm which had been hovering outside broke loose again. Lightning flashed through the windows. Thunder rolled and the old house seemed to shiver too. If only Arnold were here. Ann couldn’t understand his strange actions—unless Arnold really was a coward and like the others who had died, kept up a false front so he might locate the fortune of a dead man. If he were only at her side. . . .

There was an imperative knocking at the front door. Ann sprang up. That must be Arnold. There was no one else on the island. She didn’t no-

tice the gas lamp slowly grow dimmer until finally there was just that same bluish, ghastly light coming from it. Spencer remained exactly as she had left him—apparently in a coma.

She opened the door and a gust of rain and wind almost swept her off her feet. There was nobody on the porch.

"Arnold!" she called out. "Mark!"

The wind answered with a dismal howl. Ann turned around slowly, heedless of the rain that pelted her. A jagged streak of lightning illuminated the hall for a second. Ann raised one hand to her throat and froze in a spasm of terrible fear.

At her side stood *something*. Not a human being. Not a man, for nothing alive could have looked so emaciated. A putrid odor filled the hallway. Ann recognized it. Once she had opened a small grave where a pet dog had been buried. She was a child at the time and didn't know what death was. So she believed her dog had been buried because it had disobeyed. That same foul odor had met her nostrils that time—the odor of the grave.

"Are you frightened?" the Thing at her side queried and the voice was that of her Uncle Jelm.

"Of course you are," the Thing went on. "Anyone would be. But I mean no harm. Remember how I said I'd always come back so you could take my hand again and lead me about—as you did when you were a little slip of a girl? I've come back, Ann."

"Then you—are Uncle—Jerome?" Ann's tongue helped to form words, but she stood paralyzed in fear.

"Of course, child. I'm home again. Take my hand. I can't harm you."

**A**UTOMATICALLY her hand went out and grasped—bones! Or, if there was flesh there, she couldn't feel it. She was preparing to walk hand in hand with a corpse—with the ghost of a man dead for years. Every-

thing flashed through her mind. The grave, the broken cross, the dimming light—why it was dimmed again just as it had been when Jelm came the first time. Her feet moved like those of a robot.

"Don't let go of my hand," Jelm's voice croaked. "If I lose you, I may not be able to come back again. Remember when I was alive—when my sight failed and you led me about? There was one place I took you—the best of them all. Where I could hide my treasure and keep it from anyone. You will lead me there again, child."

"But I—don't know—" Ann began to say.

"Of course you do, child. Those thieving nephews investigated every other one of my hiding places. There is but one left and you must remember it. Come now—I was always kind to you. Just as you were the only person on earth who was kind to me. I took you there once. I—"

"The tower room," Ann said hoarsely. "The tower room!"

The Thing beside her gave another of those cackling chuckles, exactly as Uncle Jelm had laughed. Ann moved forward, still gripping that bony hand, still inhaling air made putrid by the smell of the dead.

She never remembered how she mounted the four flights of steps. They reached a small, circular room that overlooked the sea. She could hear the pounding waves, the rattle of rain against the windows and sides of the house.

"You're no longer afraid, child," the spectre croaked. "I wouldn't harm you. Now—here is the tower room. The hiding place. Find it!"

Ann walked into the very center of the room and looked directly up at the ceiling. There was a small skylight there and a heavy cord seemed to control a shade which could be drawn across it. She reached up for the cord and pulled—hard.

A creaking noise sounded. The curtain didn't move, but a whole section of the ceiling seemed to be dropping



down. Four chains controlled the slow descent. They supported another of those strange casks. Ann felt the bony hand jerk free and for a moment she and the spectre were parted. Then her forearm was seized.

"See, child! You didn't forget, did you? Now I must go back, but please—before I leave—let me look at you once more. I can never return. All earthly things must pass. For me there is just a grave. A grave that is damp and dark. Listen—thunder. In a moment there will be lightning. Stand near the window so that when it breaks, I can see you. Then you will be alone for I shall have gone."

Ann backed away until she stood with her spine against the window pane. It was a big window, reaching almost down to the floor. She remembered how she used to like to curl up before it and watch the surf beat against the shore.

**A** FLASH of lightning! The Spectre stood revealed. It moved toward her with both arms outstretched. Ann gave a shriek. She felt the two hands grasp her shoulders and she was forced back—back—against the glass. Harder and harder, until it cracked.

Fresh terror brought her wits into play. She pounded at the ghost—fought it with all the strength she could muster, but it was no use. A section of glass broke free and landed on the roof. She was being forced through that window. The fall would kill her as surely as those traps had killed the others.

Then she heard a shout, the sound of hurrying feet. The ghost let go of her, whirled about and a shadowy form lunged across the tiny room. The ghost gave ground. She heard a human fist strike against human flesh and the spectre admitted a hoarse bellow of rage and pain. The two bony hands and arms dropped to the floor. Human arms, warm and clad with flesh, came from beneath the apparel which the apparition

wore. Lightning illuminated the room again. Ann gave a cry of surprise. Arnold was here. He'd returned.

Arnold closed with the fighting, cursing fraud which had led Ann to this tower room. He drove a blow to the pit of his opponent's stomach, doubled him up in pain and then threw two fast ones at the man's chin. Both connected and hurled the man against the further wall. He dropped to his knees. A gun appeared in his hand. This time the room was illuminated by another form of lightning—man-made—crimson and accompanied by its own thunder.

Arnold gave a tremendous leap. He hit the kneeling man, knocked the gun aside and pinned him down. Two powerful hands reached up, circled Arnold's throat and held there like a vise.

Although Arnold fought back, his blows were growing weaker and weaker. Lungs screamed for oxygen, muscles and nerves called for a release of that horrible pressure.

Then, like a prayer answered, the steely fingers relaxed their grip. The man fell back and was still. Arnold looked up. Ann stood there, the gun in her hand. It was inverted.

"I—hit him—on the head," she said. "I had to do it!"

Arnold took the gun from her, held her in his arms for a moment, and then he gave vent to a long sigh.

"It's finished, darling. Everything is over. Here—take my flash. I'll carry our friend downstairs. He tried to make you believe he was the ghost of your Uncle Jerome, didn't he? Neat little trick. All he wanted was for you to show him Jelm's best hiding place, where his money must be. Oh, wait a minute. Let's have a look in this cask."

It was half full of bonds, cash and jewelry. Arnold lowered the lid and then picked up the limp form of the man he'd battled.

Downstairs, in the living room, the gas light was bright again. Spencer was on the floor, firmly trussed up

with a gag between his lips. Arnold placed the form he carried on the davenport and removed the big, winding cloak, a flesh-colored covering which made the man seem bald, and a strange mask. He looked down at Foster—whom Spencer had found dead in the pit.

**“DO YOU understand now?”** Arnold asked her. “Foster was behind it all. He came here alone and searched, but he couldn’t find Jelm’s money. So he hit upon a plan to make you get it for him. Remember how the cask, located in the paneled wall, imprisoned my hands, but didn’t hurt me? That’s exactly what your dear departed uncle planned.

“All his tricks were relatively harmless although they might have scared anyone to death. He knew those nephews would cluster like bees around a honey pot. He really did write that note which we found in the first cask, indicating that whoever looked for his fortune would be killed unless he found the right cask.

“Foster located this letter and read it. Then he ferreted out those hiding places and changed Jelm’s harmless traps into death traps. All except the one which imprisoned my hands. I guessed then—the secret. The Buddha, for instance, had been filled with sand taken from the beach to make it heavy enough to kill. The swords which dispatched Russ were formerly flimsy, tin-plated things. The claw which killed Dilson hadn’t been poisoned until Foster found it.”

“But Foster—in the cellar pit—” Ann gasped.

“A frameup, like everything else. Crandall, the servant, must have told Foster about the house. Foster just set one of the traps for him. That was to produce the letter for our benefit. He was hidden somewhere and had prepared those ghostly trappings—even to some chemical that gave off the smell of an open grave. Spencer was in on it. He was the only man

to examine Foster’s supposed dead body in the pit. I slugged him to keep him quiet. We took his word that Foster was dead.

“Spencer faked passing into a coma to let Foster get in his final work—that of making you believe he was your uncle, returned from the grave. False hands to lend the illusion they were skeleton’s hands, touched you. The voice must have been a lot like Jelm’s although it has been years since you heard him speak, and it wasn’t hard to make you believe it really was Jelm. The dimming light was controlled at the fuel tanks.”

“Oh, Mark,” Ann cried. “I thought you had run away.”

Arnold grinned. “I wanted a chance to look around—alone. All Foster desired to do was get rid of the heirs and blame their deaths on Jelm’s trickery, or possibly on me. My reputation as a killer would have helped him. So far as anyone else knew, Foster would never have been near the island. He had you locate the valuable cask—then he would have thrown you out the window. Maybe Spencer was slated for death too. Our boat was sabotaged so we’d be unable to leave the island.”

Ann shuddered. “Mark—let’s get off this island. I—I’m still afraid.”

Arnold took her gently by both shoulders. “Ann, I must know the truth. Are you afraid of me too? Are you? Because of what they said I did—to my business partner?”

Her eyes were wide and steady. “No, Mark—I’ll never believe you killed anyone.”

He sighed. “Swell—now I can tell you the whole truth. My business partner was accidentally killed. I accused him of being a crook, he lost his head, charged at me and fell in such a way that his neck was broken. Some friends of his found me astride the corpse and thought I was choking him. They fled without bothering to find out that what I was really doing was using artificial respiration. I

I didn't know then, that his neck was broken."

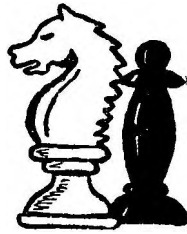
"But Mark—why didn't you defend yourself in court then?"

Mark smiled grimly. "If I admitted we were having a fight—well, imagine what any jury would think. I didn't have a leg to stand on except that there were no eyewitnesses. My lawyer was clever and I knew it, so I kept my mouth shut and gambled on his smooth tongue and the ten-

dency of juries not to convict by circumstantial evidence."

"Mark—" Ann moved closer—"I was so sure there must be an explanation. But it really didn't make any difference. Not to me. The man I loved couldn't have been a murderer."

For the first time in thirty years, the old house rang to a whoop of joy. It almost seemed to clear the place of its dead, grim decay.



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# Prosecutor's Payoff

By D. L. Champion

From the shadow of the chair the killer escaped—only to find that Satan had made a special reservation for him at the morgue.

I STOOD in the doorway of the bedroom and breathed a sigh of relief. At last her eyes had closed. At last she was oblivious of the pain in her shoulder, of the anxiety in her mind. She slept. I closed the door silently and tiptoed downstairs into the living room.

I looked at the clock. I said to myself, "Two more hours. Then she won't have to worry any more. After that the pain will go away. She will be well."

I sat down and lighted a cigarette. For a moment I forgot my wife sleeping upstairs. I thought of a man with an underslung jaw. With savage, deep-set eyes. With a hard merciless mouth.

Of course, under the circumstances it was foolish of her to worry. Yet when I thought of that man I felt a tiny shudder crawl along the base of my own spine. Well, after two more hours had passed it would all be over. Gretchen would be well again and our happiness would be resumed.

Outside, the snow fell like confetti. The wind sang a biting threnody about the house. Drifts piled up against the walls. I stood up nervously and went to the window. I remained there for a moment, my face against the pane. The snow flakes hammered silently against the glass. It was impossible to see a foot ahead of me.

I turned away, took two strides toward my chair, then froze to immobility. The scream tumbled crescendo down the stairs, poured into my ears like congealed vitriol. There was a swift vacuum at the pit of my stomach. My blood was a fluid mallet beating against my pulses.



I broke the paralysis which was upon me, raced toward the staircase. There were sixteen steps. Four strides got me to the top. I burst into the bedroom, panting and tense. The lights were full on. Gretchen sat propped up on her white elbows. Her clenched hand was held at her mouth. Horror was diffused in her grey eyes.

Standing at her side was a man with a gun in his hand. A man with an underslung jaw, savage deep eyes and a hard merciless mouth.

In a voice crackling with bitterness and mockery he said, "Good evening, counselor."

I set my jaw hard. Rage banished the fear that had been inside me. I clenched my fist and walked toward him. He moved his gun quickly. Its muzzle did not aim at me. It was directed at Gretchen's heart.

He said, "Easy, counselor. You're young to be a widower."

The courage oozed from me as I saw

Gretchen staring, panicked, at the gun. Bewilderment came in its place as my brain began to function.

"Wallace," I said, "how did you get here? How in the name of Heaven did you—"

He put his left forefinger across his hard mouth. He said, "S-s-sh, listen."

I strained my ears. I heard the whine of the wind as it beat against the walls. I listened with every fibre of my being.

Then, faintly, an obbligato to the sound of the wind, I heard a lower, deeper note. A lump turned over at the pit of my stomach.

"The siren," I said. "The prison siren. Then somehow you escaped. And tomorrow you would have been dead. You—"

I stilled the epithet on my tongue's end. I bent over Gretchen. I said, "Take it easy, darling. Everything will be all right. Try to go back to sleep."

I put her head back down on the pillow and drew the covers about her. I straightened and met Wallace's eye.

"If you've anything to say to me you can say it outside."

**H**E NODDED, followed me from the bedroom. In the hall beyond, he thrust the gun muzzle into the pit of my stomach and said, "I told you, didn't I, counselor? I told you the executioner would never burn me."

I stood there, frankly frightened, remembering other things he had told me. That he would live to kill Gretchen if she testified against him, that he would crush out and get even with me as the prosecutor who had sent him to the state penitentiary. I felt a wild impotent rage against him.

"Damn you," I said, "haven't you done enough? First, you've killed I don't know how many people. Then you happen to kill one as my wife is driving by. She is compelled to become a witness against you. I am compelled because of my job to prosecute the case. You try to remove my wife. You fail to kill her, true, but you wound her and drive her to the edge of a

nervous breakdown. Isn't that enough?"

He shook his head. "You and that dame sent me away," he said. "You're going to see that I get out. You're lucky, counselor. Once I'd promised to kill you both. However, I'm letting that go."

I leaned up against the wall, feeling dead and despairing. I said, "I'll do whatever you want. For Heaven's sake leave her alone."

He grinned unpleasantly. "Not completely, I won't. Now get this. As soon as this blizzard lets up, I want you to drive me to Weldon airport in your car. Your wife is going along as well. I'll sit in the back seat with her. I shall have the muzzle of this gun pressing into her flesh. Understand?"

I said weakly, "Go on."

"Before we leave this house you will phone the airport, chartering a plane to Chi. You will say Doctor Lewis, a specialist, is taking your wife there for her health. I'm the doctor, see? Then you'll go back home. Me and the wife'll go along to Chi in the plane."

"You're crazy," I said. "Do you think I'd stand for that?"

"I don't know what the hell else you can do. I've got friends in Chi. Me and the wife'll get in touch with them. Then three days later when I'm safe, I'll let her go. I'm holding her for those three days to keep your mouth shut until I'm safe. Get it?"

"If I don't do this?"

"I'll kill her," he said calmly. "As a matter of fact, I'll kill you both. But her first. Get it?"

I got it. I tried to force my brain to function, to create some plan which would frustrate him. But somehow my mind seemed paralyzed. He stood there grinning at me like a Daschau guard.

"It was damned convenient for me that I knew you lived within three miles of the prison," he said. "I figured since you were the guy who put me in it was only right you'd be the guy that helped me get away after I was out."

The door bell pealed with sudden loudness. A glint of hope came into my eyes. Wallace looked at me narrowly. "Just a minute," he said. He opened the bedroom door, removed the key and put it in his pocket. He forced me into the room before him.

I stood there sick and fearful as he bound Gretchen and fitted a gag to her mouth. Then he led me out of the room again and locked the door on the outside. Through all this procedure, the doorbell continued to ring.

"Open it," he said. "I'll stand behind the portieres with this rod in my hand. If it's a copper, stall him. If it's anyone else, handle him as if nothing were wrong. Now go ahead."

I went ahead, a wild hope in my breast. Perhaps I could get help from this caller; perhaps, in some way—

I opened the door and my heart fell. A stranger, snow-covered, stood on the porch before me. His cheeks were gaunt and hollow. His eyes were sunken deep into his head and there was a dark feverish flame burning in them. When he spoke it seemed as if his voice were projected from some uneasy tomb.

"The blizzard," he said. "I can't see through the windshield. May I remain here until the storm abates and I can go on? I saw your lights and thought—"

Automatically I said, "Of course, come on in."

He walked into the room, stooping his tremendously tall frame to get through the door. In a diseased, febrile sort of a way he looked like Lincoln. He removed his coat, sat down, and in the deep cadaverous voice which sounded like an echo in a graveyard, said, "My name is Mordaunt."

I nodded and told him mine. Wallace came out from behind the curtains. His gun was not in sight, but his right hand was in his pocket and there was a bulge against the fabric. He glared at me warningly. I read his threat and his thought. I introduced him as Doctor Lewis.

FOR a time we sat in a taut silence. I stared at Mordaunt wondering if I could enlist his help, wondering if I could tell him Wallace's identity before a bullet ripped into my heart. I looked up to see him studying Wallace's face.

"Seen you before somewhere, haven't I?" he said in his deep melancholy bass.

Wallace shook his head quickly. "Don't think so," he said, "I'm a stranger in these parts."

Mordaunt nodded. Wallace, slightly nervous because of Mordaunt's first remark, said casually, "Tough night for driving."

Mordaunt nodded again. "It's hell," he said. "I'd never have started out but it's business. Cash business and I need it. A hundred and fifty bucks to a guy with a family isn't hay."

Wallace and I nodded in inane agreement. Wallace stared out the window for a moment, then said, idiotically, "Nice night for a murder, eh?"

I shuddered at the word. But its effect on Mordaunt was remarkable. He stiffened in his chair. His face became a deadly white. His eyes narrowed and glinted coldly. His voice lashed out at Wallace.

"What do you mean by that?"

Surprise flickered into Wallace's eyes. I could see the outline of his knuckles in his pocket.

"Why, nothing," he said. "No offence meant. I mind my own business, strictly. Just a passing remark, that's all."

Mordaunt grunted and relapsed into silence. Wallace looked at him curiously. He said again, "Of course, I didn't mean anything at all. It's odd how many people get upset at the idea of death."

Not, I thought viciously, after you've killed as many men as Wallace has. Mordaunt looked up and stared at Wallace with his smoldering black eyes.

"Upset?" he said. "Not I. I've seen too much of it. Death is a natural

thing. Sometimes I think it's the only natural thing. I—"

His voice trailed off into silence. We sat that way for a long, long time. There was hollow fear within me. Yet somehow my brain was numb. It refused to function. I sat there, stupidly, foolishly, inept.

Mordaunt stood up suddenly. He crossed the floor and stood by the window. He stared through the pane for a moment.

"It's letting up a bit," he said. "Enough for me to go on anyway. Thanks for the hospitality."

He struggled into his great coat. I felt a sudden panic coming on. Dour, dolorous as Mordaunt was, he at least was a human being who prevented my being alone with Wallace. Somehow I didn't want him to go.

Wallace, never turning his back to me, moved across the floor toward the window, too. He glanced swiftly through the glass. "It's letting up enough for us, too," he announced. He fixed me with threatening eyes. "Will you put through that airport call now? See if the planes can go yet?"

He moved his right hand in his pocket almost imperceptibly. Dully, I got up. I made my way to the telephone in the hall. Mordaunt slowly buttoned his coat. Wallace took up a position of vantage between us. I dialed the airport. Mordaunt, his coat fastened, thrust his hand out perfunctorily toward Wallace.

"Well," he said, "goodbye, Dr. Lewis."

Wallace took the outstretched hand. Then for the first time since Wallace had entered the house, I functioned. I realized that for an instant, with his right hand gripping Mordaunt's, Wallace could not shoot. It was my chance. A chance that would have vanished forever in a split second. I had no time to search for a weapon. I used the one I already held in my hand.

**I** SPRANG at Wallace, swinging the telephone over my head. He heard my footsteps behind him, snatched his

hand away from Mordaunt and side-stepped. The phone smashed against his shoulder. He snarled an oath and whipped his gun from his pocket. I grabbed futilely at his wrist, succeeded only on gripping his coat sleeve. The revolver fired twice. Two bullets crashed into the wall at my side.

I closed in, still fighting for Wallace's right wrist. I felt his hand move. I felt the muzzle of the gun press against my side. I smashed my fist into his face, expecting death to pour into my body at any moment.

It was Mordaunt who prevented it. He had moved toward us as we fought. Five steely fingers and a thumb grasped Wallace's wrist and wrenched it away from my body just as two more bullets spewed from the hot muzzle. I smashed my fist into Wallace's face again.

Wallace staggered against the wall. He twisted his right hand as he went and wrenched it loose from Mordaunt. His little eyes glowed with hate. He stared for an instant at Mordaunt and said, "You interfering rat, I'll—"

He swung the muzzle of the gun away from me and directed it at Mordaunt. But even as he did so Mordaunt's hand was moving with incredible speed. It whipped inside his coat. An automatic was in his hand, firing even before Wallace's finger had tightened on the trigger. A single shot echoed through the room. There was sudden blood on Wallace's shirtfront. The fingers of his right hand opened in slow motion and his gun dropped gently to the rug.

His knees buckled slowly. He fell to the floor easily, like an alighting gull. He lay there on his side, his eyes glazed and his breath coming fast. He turned his face to me and there was unholy hatred stamped upon it.

His lips twisted and he cursed horribly. He said, "You're a lucky guy, counselor. But anyway, I made one thing good. That bloody executioner didn't get me after all."

Then he closed his eyes and died. I turned to Mordaunt. "Thanks," I said,



a note of hysterical gladness in my voice, "you don't know what you've done. This man here—"

I broke off as I noted the expression of his face. It was ghastly white. He was staring down at Wallace's corpse as if it were the body of his own father.

"For the love of Heaven," he said, "What did he say?"

I thought for a moment. "Oh, that. Why, he just escaped from the penitentiary. He was to die tonight. His real name is Wallace. Don't you remember, you thought you recognized him when you first saw him? You must have seen his picture in the papers. You—"

"My God," gasped Mordaunt. He stood there white and panting.

I looked at him, puzzled. "Don't you understand?" I asked. "Lewis wasn't his real name. He—"

Mordaunt looked up and met my gaze. There was something in the darkness of his eyes that caused me to shudder. He said, "Mordaunt isn't my name either. I don't like people to know my real name. It's Welton."

That staggered me. "Welton," I said. "Old Bloody Welt—" I stopped myself but too late.

"Yes," said Welton bitterly. "Old Bloody Welton. I've killed two hundred and six criminals in this state at one hundred and fifty dollars a head. I was on my way to the death house when the storm came down."

He rebuttoned his greatcoat and put on his hat as I stared at him. He nodded curtly to me and strode to the door.

"A hundred and fifty bucks," he said. "And I killed him for nothing. And I needed that dough." He turned his head and added over his shoulder. "You better call the coppers."

Then he slammed the door behind him and went out into the snow.

I looked at the body on the floor. I picked up the telephone and called the police. Then I went upstairs, a great relief flooding me.

I untied Gretchen and soothed her. She wept softly on my shoulder.

"There is nothing to worry about," I told her. "Nothing at all any more. He's dead."

She looked up at me with wet eyes. "Philip," she said, "you didn't—you didn't—"

I shook my head. "I didn't," I assured her. "He was executed in the manner prescribed by the law."

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*Young Roy Williams learned just enough from his bookworm sleuthing  
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# Twice-Killed Corpse

*By Fredric Brown*



**M**AYBE I was psychic, I thought, when I answered the phone. Because I'd just been thinking about an insurance company, and it was an insurance company on the phone. Not the same company, but still it was a coincidence.

"Bennett's Funeral Parlors?"

asked the voice, and when I said it was, the voice said, "This is John Rogers, Vice President of the Great Midwestern Insurance Company. Mr. Bennett speaking?"

"No," I said. "He's gone home for the day. This is Roy Williams."

"Will you be there for the next hour or so, Mr. Williams?"

"Sure. I'll be here all night, in fact."

"Fine, Mr. Williams. The head of our investigation department is on his way over to your place. I just wanted to introduce him in advance, and to tell you that we'll appreciate it greatly if you can do what he asks."

"Huh?" I said, "What does he want here?"

Maybe that sounded impolite, but I didn't mean it that way. I was startled at the thought that I was going to have a chance to meet and talk to a real detective. You see, I want to *be* one when I get old enough; I'm only nineteen now, but I've been studying criminology and crime detection since I was a kid.

"He'll explain that," said the voice on the phone, "better than I can. His name, by the way, is Armin Malone. And if you can do what he asks, I might say that our appreciation will—uh—take tangible form."

"Gee," I said, "if you mean—I mean I'll be *glad* to help him if it's anything I can do."

"Thank you, Mr. Williams," said the voice, and there was a click in the receiver.

I sat there in a sort of daze for a minute. Probably it was hoping too much, but just *maybe* I could make a favorable enough impression on the head of an investigating department that I wouldn't have to work as a mortician's apprentice much longer, or any longer.

I went to the window to see if I could see him coming, but I didn't see anyone outside that looked like a detective. The street lights flashed on while I was looking out; it was early evening, twilight.

**I** BEGAN to wonder what he'd want to see me about, and that put me to running over in my mind what corpses we had on hand. Of course, it might be information on some burial

we'd already made, but it seemed a better bet that his interest would be in the fresher meat. I ran over in my mind what we had on hand, and I found my feet leading me to the specially cooled room at the back of the building where we keep our customers.

Yes, I'd been right; there were four of them. And I thought of who they were and there was only one that seemed important enough to interest a big insurance company. That would be Mr. Murgatroyd. He'd come in this afternoon and Mr. Bennett had got him ready and laid him out and the funeral was for day after tomorrow.

I opened the lid of the coffin and looked in at him, and he was an ordinary looking little wizened oldish man. Mr. Bennett had done a good job but I noticed one thing. There were lines of pain in his face that showed his last illness hadn't been a nice easy one.

I was on my way back to the office when the doorbell rang and I went to answer it. The guy standing there when I opened the door didn't look like a detective at all. He was medium height, medium build, kind of medium all the way around. He had a moustache and a thick puffy nose and thick spectacles, and his hair was gray at the temples.

He said, "Are you in charge here?"

"Yes, Mr. Malone," I said, taking a chance it was him.

He looked surprised and said, "How did you know—"

I grinned sheepishly. I wanted to say I was a detective too, and had deduced it, but that would have made a bad impression and I wanted to make a good one. With a build like mine—my friends call me *Fatso*—and a face like mine, and only nineteen years of age behind me, I've got to act dignified, I guess, or people think I'm younger and dumber than I am.

So I told him about Mr. Rogers having called, and then I took him into Mr. Bennett's office. That's where I generally sit nights, when I've cleaned

TDA

up the place and done my work and am just sticking around in case a call comes in. I sat down at Mr. Bennett's desk and motioned Mr. Malone to the chair in front of it.

He said, "Did Rogers tell you what we wanted?"

I shook my head. "But my guess is that it's about Mr. Murgatroyd. Was he murdered?"

His eyes popped. He said, "What makes you think that? Did you notice anything unusual when you prepared the body, that made you think—"

"No," I told him. "Matter of fact, I didn't even help prepare the body; it came in before I went on duty. It was just a guess; he's the only sti—I mean body in the place right now that's important enough to interest a company like yours. How big a policy did he have?"

"Twenty thousand," he told me. "You are a very smart young man, Mr.—uh—"

"Williams," I told him. "Call me Roy, Mr. Malone. You see, I'm interested in being a detective, and I'd sure like—some day—to get a job with a company like yours. I'm studying hard, and I'll keep on studying. If you ever have an opening for an apprentice, sort of—"

He nodded. "I'll remember it, Roy. Nothing open right now, but I'll keep you in mind. Here's the situation about Mr. Murgatroyd: certain facts have come to light that make us think it is just possible that he was murdered."

"Ummm," I said. "Just a minute and I'll look up our copy of the death certificate and see what—"

"You needn't," he interrupted. "It shows the cause of death as angina pectoris. That's a painful form of heart trouble. The certificate was signed by Dr. Berger, Mr. Murgatroyd's regular physician. I'm sure it was signed in good faith."

"You mean he really had it?"

"For almost a year. He took out this particular policy with us just before it began to come on. And when he was

found dead today—well, Dr. Berger had no reason to suspect anything else."

"Are there," I asked him, "any poisons whose symptoms are something like those of angina pectoris?"

HE NODDED. "There are. You are a very shrewd young man, Roy. And of course you see by now what I'm leading up to. There are certain reasons why we don't want to go to the police and ask for a regular autopsy, unless our suspicions are confirmed by a preliminary examination."

"But why not?" I wanted to know. "If there's any reason for suspicion, why would an autopsy be—"

He smiled. "Know who one of Murgatroyd's relatives is?" And when I shook my head, he told me. "J. B. Donovan himself, Roy. President and director of the Board of the Great Midwestern Insurance Company. And—confidentially—he is a rather proud and irascible gentleman, and he moves in the best society, if you get what I mean."

I said, "I guess I do. You mean he wouldn't like it if it got into the newspapers."

"To say that he wouldn't like it," said Malone, "is a masterpiece of understatement. He'd fire Mr. Rogers, myself, and anyone else that had anything to do with it. You see, one can't take suspicions to the police and have an autopsy held without there being some chance—a darned good chance—of it leaking out and getting publicity."

"But if he *was* murdered," I pointed out, "you'd have to go to them, wouldn't you?"

"Of course. But if we're right, Mr. Donovan will have nothing to say about the matter. He's irascible, but he's fair. If it is murder, he wouldn't want us to cover up just to avoid publicity he wouldn't like. It's only if we brought it out into the open and then it turned out we were wrong, that we'd be in dutch. If it should be a mare's nest, we'd be holding the bag."



"Then you—uh—you want me to —"

"I want you to do nothing," he said. "Just that. In other words, let me find my own way out, and you stay here and fail to notice if I take a bit longer between here and the door off the main corridor than I should."

"You mean you want to take the body out? Golly, Mr. Malone, I'd get in a flock of trouble if anybody found out."

"No, no," he said. "I'll hardly disturb the body. I have specimen bottles with me, and it is necessary only that I secure a few very small pieces of viscera for analysis in our laboratory. What I do won't show at all. Two small incisions, under the clothes, and I'll leave everything just as I found it."

I stood up. "Sure," I said, "if *that's* all. Come on, I'll show you—"

"No," he said firmly. "I'm not going to let you make yourself an accomplice in this, Roy. What I'm doing is illegal. And if you stay here, you're protected in case anything goes wrong. You can say I came here and asked you questions and you answered them to the best of your ability, and then I'd say I'd let myself out of the outer door and left you here. That way—if we both tell that story—all the blame will be mine. See?"

"Well," I said. "But nobody'll know—"

"They *will* know, if there is poison in those specimens of viscera! In that case, I'll have to take them to the police and ask for an inquest and a regular autopsy. In that case, the police will overlook what I did—but will your employer overlook your part in it?"

"Ummm," I said. I couldn't quite picture Mr. Bennett overlooking anything like that. He'd say I should have called him. "I guess you're right, Mr. Malone."

"Fine," he said, and shook hands. "You sit here half an hour, and you won't know anything. Thanks a lot, Roy."

He went out into the hallway and I glanced at the clock and decided to

give it a full half hour before I left the office.

Mr. Malone must have worn rubber soles and heels, because I didn't hear which way he went once he was out in the hall. Nor did I hear any doors open or close.

He was smart, all right, I figured, to give me the out he was giving me. This way, if he went to the police and everything came out, Mr. Bennett couldn't blame me for anything except maybe carelessness in not taking him to the door. I wished he had taken me along when he took his specimens, but it was better this way.

I got out a book on criminology that I had hidden in a file drawer and started to read. I opened it to my place, and it was all about disguises.

It said that the kind of man who found it easiest to disguise himself was one of average height and build; that the simplest complete disguise was thick glasses, a moustache and a change in the shape of the nose. That if those three things were coupled with a slight change in the color and way of combing of the hair, one would hardly recognize one's best friend.

And that made me think of Mr. Malone, because he had the glasses and the moustache and he was medium all the way around, and he had a funny puffy nose that could easily have been—

"Gosh," I thought. But it didn't make sense, and there would be no reason for him to wear a disguise.

I realized that I hadn't heard him leave and I glanced up at the clock. I'd been so interested reading that it was twenty-five minutes already. And while I was still looking at the clock, the doorbell rang.

**I** WENT quickly to answer it, and there were two big men on the doorstep. They pushed their way in without waiting for me to ask them in. But that was all right because I recognized them as squad car cops whom I saw drive by every evening.

One of them said, "What's up? Was it you that phoned?"

"Huh?" I said. "Was it me that phoned?"

"That's what I asked you."

"Phoned who?" I asked. "You mean, phoned the police? No, not me."

"Anybody else here?"

"No," I said, hoping I was telling the truth and that Mr. Malone wouldn't still be back there and maybe get in trouble if they found him. "There's nobody else here—alive, I mean."

The bigger of the two cops sort of jumped at that, and then he frowned at me. "Oh, a wise guy, huh? Well, if you didn't phone, who did?"

I thought I'd better not get him mad, so I said, "I'm sorry, officer, but I don't know what you're talking about. I didn't phone anybody, and I'm the only one on duty here. You mean that somebody phoned in and gave this address?"

"That's it," he said. He turned to his companion. "Well, Pete, looks like somebody was kidding us. I thought a burglary in an undertaker's sounded goofy. Who'd want to steal stiffs?"

"Ghouls, maybe," said the other one. "They eat 'em. I remember I read once that—"

"Shut up," said the first one. "Well, we better take a look around, kind of, now we're here."

"You needn't," I said quickly. "Everything's okay. I was just looking around myself."

"What for?" said the one called Pete.

"Uh—just routine. I go around every once in a while to see that all the windows are open—I mean shut. And—"

"This guy ain't got all his buttons," said Pete. "Come on, sarge, you look that way and I'll go in here."

"Nix on that. Not with a bunch of stiffs around. We stick together. Listen, kid—first, where's the safe or wherever you keep money."

We don't have a safe, and what money we keep on hand is in a cash box in the office. I showed it to him,

and it was locked and I didn't have a key to it, so that was that.

"So you see it's all right," I told them. "You needn't—"

"Listen, kid, are you trying to ease us out of here? The more you talk the more we want to see. Where do you keep the cold cuts?"

"The— Oh," I said. "This way."

And I led them back to the rear of the shop and threw open the door. I figured if Mr. Malone was there, or had been there, he'd have heard us and had time to get out a window by now.

The dim light was on in the corner and the room was cold because we keep it that way, and it makes you shiver when you step into it. The slab was empty, as it should have been, and there were the four coffins of our four customers on hand. But one of the coffins was open, and it was Mr. Murgatroyd's coffin.

He was in it all right, but not the way I'd seen him last.

There was a big butcher knife sticking out of the middle of his chest.

I said, "Gosh!" and that wasn't anything to what the bigger of the two coppers said. He grabbed hold of the one called Pete. Kind of holding on to one another, they went into the dimly lighted room.

I eased backward, and they didn't seem to miss me. I got to the front office, and found I was sweating a bit. Now I was in a jam. To please an insurance company detective—or was he?—I'd let somebody go back there that had no business going back there and maybe they'd killed—

Wait, I said to myself, you can't kill a corpse, can you? And Mr. Murgatroyd sure was one by the time Mr. Bennett and his day man had gone home. A guy can't live very long or be very happy with embalming fluid in him in place of blood.

I closed the door of the office kind of softly and picked up the telephone book, because I had to find out something. If the man who'd called here and given me the sales talk on letting him go back there had really been the

head of an insurance company's investigation department, that was one thing. If he wasn't, that was something else. And I wanted to know which before I had to tell my story.

I SWISHED pages quick and there was a Mr. Armin Malone listed, and that was good. But when I called the number, he answered; and that was bad because he'd have hardly had time to get home from here unless he'd left pretty quick after I last saw him.

"Armin Malone speaking," he said. The voice didn't sound familiar, but I wasn't sure yet.

"This is Roy Williams," I told him. "Around at the Bennett Funeral Parlor. Uh—you're with the investigating department of the Great Midwestern, aren't you?"

"Yes. What can I do for you, Mr. Williams?"

"Well," I said, "was it you that came here and wanted to look at Mr. Murgatroyd's body, or was someone giving me the runaround?"

"What?"

I repeated it, a little different. He said, "No, Williams. I haven't been out of the house all evening. Someone must have impersonated— Say, I'll be right around there. I want to talk to you. Wait for me."

I thought about the police, who would be barging in here after me any minute and that maybe they'd take me down to headquarters. I said, "I'll try to still be here, but maybe we better talk a little now in case I'm not. First, this guy who said he was you said you had twenty thousand insurance on Mr. Murgatroyd, and that it was a recent policy. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right. But why—I mean, what did he want?"

"Look, Mr. Malone. He said there was a suspicion that Mr. Murgatroyd had been murdered. I was sap enough to let him go back to look. He stuck a knife in him."

"Who stuck a knife in whom?"

I told him, and then I heard footsteps coming toward the office door

and I said, "I gotta hang up," and I did.

The bigger of the two squad car men came in and said, "Who you calling on that phone?"

"I was just going to call Mr. Bennett," I told him. "I figure maybe he better know about this."

"You figure right, my plump young friend. But first I'm going to call the homicide bureau and the coroner. Then you can call your boss if you want to and if you don't, I'll call him myself."

He put in his calls, and then I put in mine. I said, "Mr. Bennett?" and when he said "Yes," I said, "This is Roy. First place, maybe I better quit because you'll fire me anyway. And maybe you better come down here. Somebody stuck a knife in Mr. Murgatroyd."

"What?"

But by that time I was getting fed up with being "whatted," so I just said, "Yeah," and hung up before he could ask anything else. I knew he'd come down all right.

"Well," said the squad car copper ominously, "are you ready to answer some questions now?"

I sighed, and nodded. And I sat down and it was a good thing I sat down because a long time later I was still answering questions. The same questions, more or less. Not asked by the same people.

The squad car cops were first. I told them the whole works, from the call I'd got from the guy who said he was the vice president of the insurance company and who I now figured was the same guy who came around and said he was Mr. Malone. The preliminary call had been build-up.

And then the homicide department got there and a Captain Brady started questioning me and put me through the story three or four times and then tried to pick holes in it.

Then Mr. Malone—the real Mr. Malone—showed up, and I told him all about it. And Mr. Bennett, my boss, came in and fired me first and then

I had to tell it all to him, and he fired me again.

Of course, I wasn't being worked on *all* that time. There was a lot of other conversation, and I picked up some information in between the times they questioned me. It was in between my questioning by Mr. Malone and my questioning by Mr. Bennett that the coroner came in to report to Captain Brady.

Brady looked interested the minute the coroner came through the door, and he said, "Well, doc?"

"He's dead," said the coroner, very solemnly. But I saw his eyes twinkle.

**T**HE captain didn't say a word; just glared until the coroner went on. "It wasn't the butcher knife. He was dead long before that. And it wasn't angina pectoris, although I don't blame the doctor who signed the certificate. Without a detailed examination, it would have been hard to guess—since the deceased did suffer from angina—that his death was not—"

"To hell with what his death was not," said the captain. "What was it?"

"Well," said the coroner, "I finally got around to trying Frohde's reagent. Ammonium molybdate dissolved in strong sulphuric acid. It turned blue, and then green, yellow, and finally—All right. all right—it was morphine."

"Quantity?"

"Won't guess until we make a detailed autopsy. But it was a lethal dose all right. And—"

The doorbell rang, and they let in a dapper-looking youngish man who said, "I'm Harvey Cummings, inspector," to the captain. "Mr. Murgatroyd's nephew. Someone from your department phoned me. Something wrong?" Obviously he'd been drinking; the odor of alcohol came ahead of him into the room like an advance guard.

"Yes, Cummings, there is strong indication that your uncle—uh—met foul play. We're trying to get to the

bottom of it. Mind if we ask a few routine questions?"

"The hell," said Cummings, looking startled. "Not at all." He sat down on the edge of the desk, and acted more nearly sober.

"You're an heir to the estate?"

"Not exactly, inspector. In fact, I'm told I'm not mentioned in the will; the money is divided several ways among other people. But my uncle told me he wanted to do something for me and made me beneficiary of an insurance policy he took out recently. Twenty thousand dollars."

"And where were you at the time of your uncle's death?"

"Well—if the doctor was right in saying he'd been dead two hours when we found him, then I was on the plane from Miami."

"Just who found the body?"

"Grange—that's my uncle's butler—and I found it together. You see, I got off the plane and came right around to the house—"

"You live there?"

"Yes, but I've been away for three months. Trip to Florida that was partly business and partly—well, monkey business. Anyway, Grange let me in and then opened the door of my uncle's study and we saw him slumped down in the chair at the desk. And then—let's see—"

"Did you know he was dead?"

"I went in and felt for his heart-beat, and then I knew. I told Grange to go for Dr. Berger—"

"Before or after you knew he was dead?"

"The minute we saw him, of course. Doc Berger lives only two doors away and it would have wasted time to phone. So the minute we looked in the doorway and saw him slumped down that way, I told Grange to run for the doctor quick. Then I went on in and found he was dead. Grange got back with the doctor in maybe three minutes."

"And Dr. Berger said he'd been dead two hours?"



"Come to think of it, he said two or three hours."

"Ummm," said Captain Brady. "Just as routine, Cummings, I hope you won't mind if we check what time you got on the plane and off it, and where you were staying in Florida, and what not."

"Not at all. Let's see, I left for Florida three months ago to the day, and I've been staying—" The captain took notes on the times and places Cummings gave him, and I didn't pay close attention. Then he asked, "Did your uncle know you were coming back?"

"He knew I was coming back some time this week, but not which day."

Then I missed the rest because that was when Mr. Bennett came in, and for what seemed like the twentieth time I had to tell that goofy story. It didn't make sense, even to me. I don't blame Mr. Bennett for giving me the bounce.

Then another guy came in; I presume the police had called him. And Mr. Cummings left and some of the coppers and the coroner left, and they took the body away about that time.

The new guy turned out to be Mr. Murgatroyd's lawyer, and Captain Brady started asking him about wills.

"Yes," the lawyer answered his first question, "He drew up a new will two days ago. But there weren't many important changes."

"And what were those?"

"Half the estate goes to charity and he shuffled around the amounts that go to various organizations. The other half goes, in varying amounts, to six different people. Robert Laker, one nephew, got thirty thousand whereas the previous will gave him fifty thousand. And the gentleman who just left, Mr. Cummings, was put down for ten thousand whereas he wasn't in the previous will at all."

"Thanks," said Brady. "Tomorrow I'd like to see an exact copy of that will, and—if it's still available—a copy of the old one."

He turned to Mr. Bennett and said,

"I think that's all we need to do here for tonight. Tomorrow, you'll get new instructions about arrangements for the funeral, of course."

He left, and the lawyer left, and Mr. Bennett turned to me and said, "Well?"

"You mean I should go too?" I asked. "I thought you'd want me to finish out tonight, and it's only ten o'clock, and—"

He said, "I wouldn't leave you in charge of an empty doghouse," and I saw he meant it, so I left.

I STOOD outside the door, not knowing what to do. It didn't seem right to go home because they didn't expect me there until dawn. Anyway, I'd slept until four o'clock in the afternoon and I wasn't ready to go to sleep again for a long time yet.

Somebody touched me on the shoulder, and I jumped. It was Mr. Malone. The second one, not the first.

He said, "Thanks for phoning me, kid. Otherwise, I might not have known about this until tomorrow."

"Gee," I said, "I guess I was an awful sap to let that guy, whoever he was, get away with what he got away with." That was a funnily worded statement, but after all what *had* the guy got away with? What percentage is there in sticking a butcher knife into an embalmed corpse?

Mr. Malone clapped his hand on my shoulder and grinned. He said, "Don't let it get you down. Better men than us have fallen for a smooth line, and you had no reason to suspect anything phony. I think your boss was unreasonable to bounce you for it. Maybe tomorrow when he's cooled down, I'll talk to him for you."

I said "Gee, thanks," and didn't feel half so bad about things. Mr. Malone, the real one, was turning out to be a swell guy. Suddenly I found myself talking to him like I'd known him a long time and telling him what kind of studying I'd been doing and what I wanted to be some day. I ended up

ruefully, "I guess I got a swell start tonight, didn't I?"

He laughed and said, "It's just what you needed. From now on you're going to be suspicious of everything anybody tells you. And in this cockeyed world, that's what a detective's got to be. Well, good luck, kid. I'm going home."

"Wait," I said, "I—I know I've no business asking, but have you got this case solved? I mean do you know who—"

He shook his head. "Nary a glimmer. And I'll let you in on a secret; the police don't know anything either. Something nutty goes on, but what? Eutcherin' corpses looks like the going of somebody with a screw loose, and if that's it, we'll be stuck unless he makes another move and we catch him doing it."

He went to his car and then, before he got in, he asked if he could give me a lift anywhere.

I still didn't want to go home. I said, "Thanks, but I guess I'll walk a while. It's too early to go to sleep when you're used to working nights. And thanks a lot for cheering me up, Mr. Malone. Good night."

He said, "So long, kid," and drove off, and I started walking. Not to any place in particular, just walking.

Anyway that was what I thought until I looked up and found I was on Beech Street near Fortieth. The Murgatroyd address—I'd heard it several times during the questioning and answering that had gone on back at Bennett's—was 4000 Beech Street. I hadn't headed for there deliberately, but my feet had carried me that way while my conscious mind tried to solve the riddle of why anybody would want to stick a butcher knife into a corpse.

*Why?*

And then, just like that, I knew why. I stood there gawping, and thinking I must be wrong because it was so simple, once you saw it.

I was standing in front of a house two doors from what must be the Murgatroyd residence, and I won-

dered if the house was that of Dr. Berger. But that didn't matter.

It was almost eleven o'clock, but there were lights on at the back of the Murgatroyd house. I went on down there and stood on the sidewalk, looking down the walk that led to the house. For a minute I was tempted to go up and ring the bell. What was the butler's name? Grange. If he was in, I could ask him a couple of questions that would make me sure I was right, if he remembered the answers.

But it would be silly. I had the answer now, no matter what Grange told me. Let the police verify it; that was their business and not mine. I didn't have any standing in the matter. Heck, I didn't even work for Mr. Bennett any more.

Or maybe I should go to the insurance company with my story; I'd get more credit for it there. Unless the police beat me to the solution, and it was so darned simple it seemed likely to me that they would. There was only *one* good reason why *one* person would have stuck that knife into Mr. Murgatroyd.

I was standing there thinking, and the car drove up and parked at the curb six feet from me, and a man got out. It was Mr. Cummings, the nephew.

And, like a darned fool, I said, "Hello, Mr. Malone."

**S**URE, it was a silly thing to do, but I was a bit drunk with having figured it out. And suddenly it had seemed, until I said it and he looked at me, that maybe when he knew I knew, he'd confess and I could take him around to headquarters and prove I was a real detective by handing them the case on a silver platter.

Anyway, I'd said it.

He looked at me without changing expression at all. Then, casually and conversationally, he said, "Are you crazy?"

Well, I'd gone that far; I had to keep it up. I said, "No, Mr. Cummings. It was you who phoned tonight and

then came around in disguise and used the knife, and then phoned the police when you left, so they'd find the knife."

He was good, I'll admit. The surprise on his face looked completely genuine. He said, "Kid, you feel all right? Sure you haven't been drinking some of your boss's embalming fluid or something? Why should I do something like that?"

"Because it got you twenty thousand dollars," I told him. "Or it would have. Double indemnity, if I'm guessing right, for accidental death. Murder rates as accidental death. If Mr. Murgatroyd had been buried as having died naturally, you'd have got the face amount of the policy, instead of double, if it's murder. You did something that was apparently screwy, but it was smart because it led to an examination that showed up the morphine."

He looked like he was thinking hard, and he said, "Maybe you're not as crazy as I thought you were kid. That makes sense, in a way. I do get double, now. But, seriously, you're wrong on the other part. How could I have known he was murdered? I just got back from—"

"He wasn't murdered," I said.

"Huh? But the coroner said—"

"He died of morphine. Your uncle committed suicide. Probably because he was dying of angina pectoris, and it kept him in such awful pain that he didn't want to wait for it to finish him off. He changed his will because he intended to do it. And he knew suicide would invalidate that policy of which you were beneficiary and he wanted to put you in the estate for ten thousand. But the way you were working it, you were going to get fifty thousand; the bequest plus the policy—doubled."

I was talking fast now, because I was thinking out some of the little things while I talked and they were coming faster, almost, than I could say them. He just stood there looking at me.

"You and Grange looked in the

study and saw him slumped down and you sent Grange for the doctor. Then you went in alone and found he was dead, and found a suicide note and probably an empty phial that had held the morphine. And you saw that if you took them away, *you collected on the policy*. And if they found he'd been poisoned, you were still safe. You had a perfect alibi in just getting back from Florida."

He said, "Kid, you make it sound bad for me."

"Then," I went on, "Dr. Berger never suspected poison and he signed the certificate for natural death. And you realized that if you could get that natural death changed to murder, you got the double indemnity. So you fixed a little play to get the police in to examine the body. Nobody else had any reason to do that."

For the first time he smiled. He said, "Kid, you're swell. You almost convince me. But just for the sake of argument, suppose you were right; how would you ever prove it? Assuming, of course, that I'd destroyed the bottle and the suicide note."

I should have stopped talking then and there, and said I couldn't prove it, and gone home.

If I'd had any sense, that's what I'd have done.

But I was drunk. Not on liquor or embalming fluid, but on something else. For years, I'd dreamed about being a detective, and here all of a sudden I *was* one. I'd cracked a case that had stumped the police and an insurance detective, and I knew I was right. I felt like a big shot, like Sherlock Holmes and J. Edgar Hoover rolled into one. I was drunk with success.

I said, "Sure, I can prove it. There's a glass top on Mr. Bennett's desk, and while you were pretending to be Mr. Malone and talking to me, you had your hand on it several times and left beautiful prints.

"And when the squad car cops found the knife in the body and I knew there was something screwy I

went back to the office before they did, and one thing I did there was to turn that sheet of glass with the other side up so those prints wouldn't be spoiled. Sure, you sat on that desk afterwards while the cops were questioning you, as Mr. Cummings, and your prints on top of it won't mean a thing. But how are you going to account for three or four perfect prints on the *under side* of that sheet of glass?"

He said, "I'll be damned," and stared at me. Then, "You might be bluffing, but you *were* studying crime detection, and that's just the kind of darn-fool-smart thing a kid like you would—" Then he looked like he'd suddenly made up his mind. He said, "Kid, you win. I'll even let you make a real splash with the story by giving you the suicide note."

He'd opened the door of his car and was reaching into the pocket inside the door.

**I** GOT the idea, but too late. I'd swallowed one story of his, earlier in the evening, but I didn't swallow this one. It stuck in my craw and I grabbed him to pull him away from the car door—just too late.

He had hold of the revolver that had been in the door pocket, and he twisted around in my grip and got it pointed in my ribs, and I let go.

He said, "Get in the car."

If I didn't get in the car, he'd shoot me down here and now and take a chance on getting away before anybody saw him or got the number of his car. But if I got in, I had a little time. I might be able to twist the wheel and wreck us and take a chance of me coming out of the wreck better than he did.

I said, "All right," and took a step toward the car, but he told me, "Wait, I'll get in first." He backed in, under the wheel, keeping the gun on me and not a yard from my belt buckle, and I got in after him.

I'd have to wait until the car picked up speed and then—

"Take his gun, kid," said a familiar

voice, and there was Mr. Malone—the real Mr. Malone—standing on the other side of the car and with an automatic reaching through the window with the muzzle of it against Mr. Cummings' neck.

Mr. Malone was grinning. He said, "Swell work, son. You drive and I'll ride with Cummings in the back seat."

We were on our way a minute later, and Mr. Malone was telling me, "You're doing swell, Roy. Two lessons in one evening. Second was: Never accuse a man unless you got the drop on him."

I said back over my shoulder, "I guess I was an awful sap to do that, Mr. Malone. And I feel foolish, too, to think that I figured I was the only one smart enough to pick Mr. Cummings, and here you were following him all the time. Instead of solving the case, I just beat you to it by springing it on him before you did."

I heard him chuckling. We were slowing down for a red light and the police station was only two blocks away now.

He said, "Kid, you see me tomorrow morning. We'll fix you up with some kind of a job until you have a few more lessons and maybe grow a moustache so you'll look out of kindergarten, and then—well, we'll see."

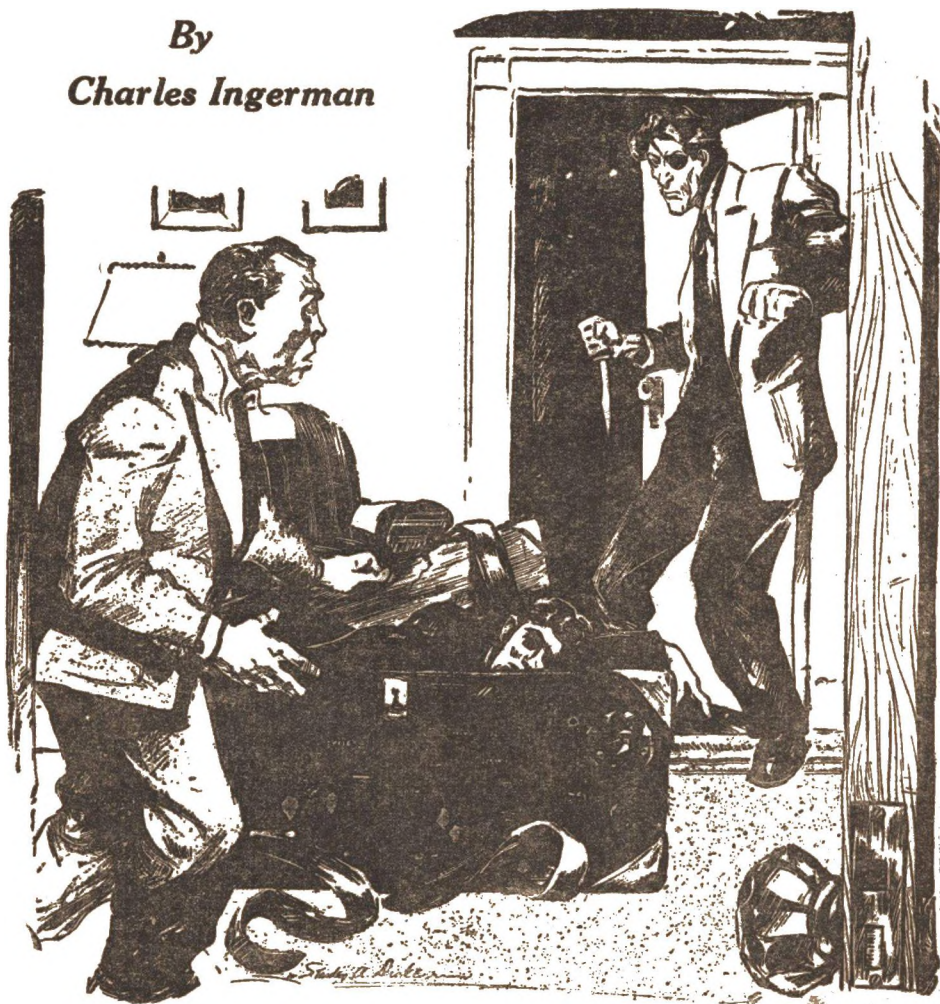
My heart seemed to do a couple of flip-flops and the light turned green but I forgot to start the car. I said, "Gee, that's swell of you, Mr. Malone. And after I botched—"

He interrupted me. "Think nothing of it, kid. All you botched was his bright idea for rooking the insurance company out of forty thousand dollars. And listen—we all get lessons from time to time. Me, I wasn't following Cummings tonight: I hadn't tied him in at all. I arrived on the scene because I'd been following *you* on the chance you were somehow implicated in whatever went on."

And he chuckled again, and when the light turned red again, I started the car and drove through it, but nobody noticed.

# A Night With Johnny Jethro

By  
*Charles Ingerman*



**T**HREE amazing things happened to Johnny Jethro on the night of September 26th. He bought a bronze Buddha. The express company delivered a trunk to his apartment. And, worst of all, he met the man with the black patch over his left eye.

He was an accountant, this Johnny Jethro, a mild little guy who juggled figures all day long for the Excelsior Manila Bag Company. He had never been known to make a mistake. He had, also, a well-limbered memory and a mind which was surprisingly logical, curious and imaginative.



**Buying the bronze Buddha was like rubbing Aladdin's lamp for the little accountant. For when he touched it, he fell under the spell of an eerie Oriental wizardry.**

He wasn't exactly fat, but he was comfortably plump. His hair was beginning to go, and he was pretty careful about brushing it just right, so that the thin spot wouldn't show. He was, in short, an average John, with no vices and a few sterling virtues.

On the evening of the twenty-sixth of September, then, Johnny Jethro was walking home from work, as usual. He had an ink-damp copy of his favorite newspaper in his hands. Suddenly he stopped, leaned against a convenient trash basket, began to read.

Dreaming of the East, with exotic peoples and manners, strange smells and sounds, was his greatest pleasure. This item was about the Asiatic Museum, that fairyland of Orientalia—priceless gems, armor, books, displays—where he spent almost every free Saturday.

#### RENOWNED CURATOR MISSING

Following the unexplained disappearance of the Star of India, incredibly valuable diamond, from the Asiatic Museum, another mystery was revealed this afternoon. Amos Thorbaldt, curator of the museum, was reported missing for the last week by his assistant, Abner Peabody.

Thorbaldt, whose work in Asiatic archaeology and Oriental gems is world-famous, left the museum Friday night, a week ago, and has not been heard of since.

Mr. Peabody explained that the disappearance was not reported earlier because Mr. Thorbaldt is notoriously forgetful, and often stayed away for days.

The trustees of the museum have offered a reward. . . .

How, wondered Jethro, with his precise accountant's mind, could a man be notoriously forgetful and ever get to be curator of the Asiatic Museum? And what could have happened to him?

Jethro folded the paper, thrust it under his arm, went bobbing along,

like a cork on a fishline. He didn't like puzzles. He liked things down in black and white, preferably in neat columns.

And then he saw the Buddha.

It was bronze. It was about eight inches high. It was admittedly ugly. But it was just the Buddha he'd been wanting for such a long time. A facsimile of one in the Tibetan Room at the Asiatic Museum.

His gaze fell full on it, now, and he stopped short, ducked through the stream of intent pedestrians to stand, rapt, at the window of Moe Leskinski's De Luxe Pawn Shoppe.

JOHNNY JETHRO stared at the Buddha, and the Buddha returned his stare from bland, slanted eyes. Until the day he died, Johnny Jethro never understood what happened then. It was uncanny.

The lips appeared to move, quite noticeably, and words rang in Johnny Jethro's skull like the pealing of a bell.

Two words, imperative and unequivocal. "Buy me!"

We should explain that Johnny Jethro was not given to spells, trances, spots before the eyes, automatic writing nor consultations with fortune-tellers.

So, when that Buddha spoke out at him like that, the hair on the back of his neck bristled, and there was a funny tingling weakness at the back of his knees, and his very first impulse was to run to beat the band.

But a strange light showed now in those oblique bronze eyes. What man can say it was only a chance highlight? And they fastened terribly on Johnny Jethro. For some reason, too, the palms of his hands were damp with sweat, and there was an eerie buzzing in the back of his brain.

He pushed through the swinging door of Moe Leskinski's De Luxe

Pawn Shoppe, and he swallowed the hard way as his reluctant feet dragged him to the cage.

A voice which only remotely resembled his own said: "That statuette in the window—Buddha, I think?"

"Nine dollars and seventy-five cents." The young fellow behind the ironwork grille smiled rapidly. "It's a very fine little piece."

But nine dollars and seventy-five cents! A flood of panic rose in Johnny Jethro's throat to strangle him. His accountant's brain was practically screaming at him: *It takes almost eleven hours for you to earn that kind of dough!*

Yet, over and above the voice of sanity, the bell-like command of the Buddha came again: "Buy me!" That, and the three years of yearning for just such a Buddha to grace his cheerless furnished apartment.

He dragged his money out, laid down five limp green banknotes, three quarters, and an assortment of small change representing the sales tax.

The leering clerk fetched the Buddha from the window, wrapped it lavishly with tissue paper, rummaged under the counter for a box. He took Johnny Jethro's name and address with meticulous care.

Johnny Jethro's heart hammered with bizarre, if bewildered emotion. He was, you might say, a bona fide collector, now.

And as he started from the gloomy shop, the batwing door swung inward. And he met, for the first time, the man with the black patch over his left eye.

A frightening individual, this. He was well over six feet tall, cadaverously thin. His face bones seemed to show white under his taut, pale skin. His huge, talonlike hands hung far below his coat cuffs. And the eye which showed—ah, that single, brilliant eye—was black and fiery and immeasurably evil as it centered on Johnny Jethro.

Jethro hugged his precious purchase to his plump chest, scurried by. It was not until he was home, behind

locked doors, that he felt really safe. Not until he was washing his supper dishes in bachelor solitude that he could begin to hum happily to himself.

At precisely 7:23—it is well to be exact about such things—the doorbell rang. Johnny Jethro was sitting in his easy chair, smoking his genuine one-dollar Moroccan brier, drinking the first can of brown ale. He was also contemplating, with singular pleasure, the bronze Buddha.

Johnny Jethro sighed, because it probably was Mr. Bentmar, grimly intent upon collecting the rent. He sighed, I say, and he got up and opened the door.

**I**T WAS not Mr. Bentmar. Mr. Bentmar would have been welcome, indeed, in comparison. No, the man who stood outside, peering down at Johnny Jethro, with a horrendous smile on his bloodless lips, was the man with the black patch!

"Mr. Jethro, I believe?" this individual croaked. Perhaps it was merely an accident that his gaunt, repulsive hand pushed against the door, that his foot hooked over the threshold.

"Yes," Johnny Jethro admitted, trying not to be too obvious about how he was struggling to shut the door again.

"I'm Abner Peabody," this human scarecrow explained, in a voice like a death rattle. "I've just come from Leskinski's."

The cogs in Johnny Jethro's mind began to mesh. Peabody. Abner Peabody. The assistant curator at the Asiatic Museum! This one-eyed monster!

"I'm very glad to meet you," Johnny Jethro lied, still striving valiantly to hold his ground.

"If you will please let me come in," Abner Peabody suggested, somewhat threateningly, "I have something important to say to you."

Jethro couldn't force Peabody's heavy foot out of the door, and he didn't have quite the courage to kick Peabody's shin. "Why, sure," he

yielded, happy as a condemned man ordering his last meal, "come in."

Abner Peabody came in, peered around like a turkey buzzard looking for choice carrion. He seated himself, uninvited, in Johnny Jethro's chair.

His scrawny hand reached out greedily, lifted the bronze Buddha. "Isn't it a coincidence?" Abner Peabody said huskily. "This is the very thing I came to talk to you about."

"What about it?" Jethro asked.

"Well, it's this way, Mr. Jethro. This piece should never have been sold. The clerk at the pawnshop made a dreadful mistake. I was on the very point of redeeming it when you bought it. Not that it's particularly valuable, understand, but it just so happens that it has a great sentimental value to me."

Jethro watched those gnarled, knobby fingers fondling his statue, and his bile began to boil. "The fact is, however, that I did buy it."

"Unfortunately, yes," Abner Peabody murmured. "You bought it, rather irregularly, and you are making me very unhappy. Very unhappy!" He paused, and that horrible, single eye focused sharply on Jethro, paralyzed him.

"I'm sure," Peabody crooned, "that you will be willing to do the right thing. This Buddha can't possibly mean as much to you as it does to me. I'll just refund the amount you paid for it, and we can part friends."

"To hell—" Johnny Jethro said in a furious falsetto—"to hell with parting friends. I don't want you to refund my money. I like that Buddha. I've always wanted one just like it. I'll keep it." He rocked up on the balls of his feet. "I'll have to ask you to go now, Mr. Peabody."

"You're being very unreasonable," Abner Peabody growled.

"The door is this way," Johnny Jethro insisted.

"I'd even be willing to go a little higher, now. Say twenty-five dollars?"

TWENTY-FIVE dollars! A net profit of one hundred and fifty percent. Jethro looked at the Buddha, and it spoke again. Not so loud, candidly, this time. But clear. Jethro would have sworn that it said: "Keep me!"

"Thirty-five dollars?" Abner Peabody purred.

"Get out!" Jethro was sincerely angry now. Angry with Peabody, angry with himself. Angry with the bronze Buddha. Especially with the bronze Buddha. "Get out," he cried, "or—" this shows you how little self-control was left to him—"or I'll throw you out!"

Abner Peabody unfolded himself slowly from the chair. He smiled humorlessly, with bloodless lips and that one blazing eye, at Johnny Jethro.

"You shall be very sorry about this," Peabody grated. His hand speared down, wrapped around the head of the Buddha, lifted it as a bludgeon. A fool could have read death in his glare.

Now that Buddha was Jethro's property. He had paid nine dollars and seventy-five cents, plus, for it. He was not in the mood to be robbed.

He picked up the weapon nearest at hand—it happened to be a tin of brown ale—and he prepared to sell his life as dearly as possible.

Don't ask me how these things happen. The fact is that Johnny Jethro waded in, collected two fine swipes on the skull from the bronze Buddha, and came back for more.

Then, miraculously, the ale can thudded on Peabody's knobby skull. Jethro stood there, panting, amazed at the beast in himself, as the tall man collapsed, in sections.

He stood there, paralyzed with horror, as Peabody gasped and gurgled and foamed at the mouth. Had Jethro killed him? Should he run out and call the cops? Would they put him in the electric chair?

And he was enormously relieved when Peabody's one eye opened again, venomously. The man rolled over,

slowly, pulled himself agonizedly to his feet.

"Get out!" Johnny Jethro snarled. And this was sheer bravado: "Get out or I'll give you some more!"

The gaunt man pulled himself together. He walked—you could almost hear his bones rattle, skeleton-fashion—to the door.

"You have not heard the last of this, my friend," he rumbled. "You will be sorry for the rest of your life about this, Jethro!"

Jethro bolted the door once more, stood there, bathed in cold sweat. He was not a man of violence. He was an ordinary ledger snoop. The most frequent exercise he got was carrying a balance in his head.

Breathing shortly, he went over, picked up his Buddha, set it on the table under the cone of light. His earlier elation was gone, and he was filled with a melancholic uneasiness.

**YOU** will remember we mentioned the express men and the trunk? It happened at precisely 9:11, by the cut-rate electric clock on the fake mantel-piece. Johnny Jethro was staring forlornly at the bronze Buddha, having just calculated that it cost him twenty-four good shows and a package of cigarettes.

The doorbell rang again, and he jumped as if he had been shot. At first, he wasn't going to answer it, but the pealing continued, persistent and stubborn, and he finally unchained and unlocked the door.

There were two men outside, this time, wearing the haphazard uniform of the Triboro Express Company. Standing on its end between the burly pair of them was a trunk.

"You John T. Jethro? Here's your trunk."

"But I didn't—"

They brushed off his incipient protest as if he were a gnat. They heaved the trunk up, and he had to get out of the way or get run over. He got out of the way.

They plopped the trunk down, not

too gently, in the middle of his cramped living room. They snarled: "Sign here!" which he did obediently, and they went away again.

Johnny Jethro looked at the trunk. It was large, heavy, brass-bound in the old-fashioned way. It was, obviously, at least second-hand, and more likely sixth- or tenth-hand.

There was a tag on one leather handle, which said: Sold to John T. Jethro, and the address. Jethro slumped in his chair and peered owlishly at the trunk over the black blob of his pipe.

It was extraordinary, of course, because he hadn't bought a trunk. Why would anybody send him a trunk, anyway? He got up, reluctant as a drunkard at a temperance drill, and he shoved the corner of it gingerly. It was fantastically heavy. It was locked, and no key.

If time had stopped at midnight, September 26th, these three baffling events in the life of Johnny Jethro would have been erased in stardust. As it was, in due course, it became Saturday, the twenty-seventh of September, and Johnny Jethro was sleeping badly.

In his dreams, Abner Peabody had bought the Excelsior Manila Bag Company from Mr. Bemiss, and he was sitting behind Mr. Bemiss's huge, carved desk, explaining with fiendish delight why he no longer needed the services of one Johnny Jethro, junior accountant.

"It's this way"—Abner Peabody said in the dream—"you are a Buddhist. You have a statue of Gautama Buddha in your apartment. I'll have you know, Jethro, that this is a good, honest, God-fearing concern, and we won't employ pagans and heathens here."

At which point, in the dream, Abner Peabody reached down and pulled a wriggling, pink-eyed rabbit from the waste-paper basket. From his pocket, he drew a perfectly terrifying knife, which flicked open to expose a razor-

sharp blade. It was horribly evident to Jethro that the bunny was about to be ruthlessly slaughtered.

ALL this was in the dream. Jethro's scream, however, was not in the dream. It was a real, twenty-four-karat scream, pitched a half-note below high C and powerful enough to bust a decibel-measuring machine.

Johnny Jethro was violently awake. Part of his dream had come true. Say a quick prayer!

For Abner Peabody was standing there, at the foot of the bed, with that honed knife in his hand.

"Where's that Buddha?" Abner Peabody rasped. He came around the foot of the bed, smiling not, murder showing in his single eye with horrid plainness. The knife moved, like the head of a snake, toward Jethro.

Jethro let out another bleat of sheer terror, and he hiked up the flaps of his nightshirt and lunged into the living room. Lights, strangely, were burning there. Fleeting, he noticed that it was 2:21 A. M. by the electric clock.

He dodged to the other side of the trunk, which now seemed considerably smaller. He was standing there, like a stag winded from racing the hunters, as Abner Peabody stalked from the bedroom.

Jethro watched in mute, palpitating fascination. The trunk stood in the middle of the living room, and around it, they began to play a dreadful game of tag.

When Peabody moved to the left, Jethro moved to the right. And vice versa. But all the time, the tubby little man was getting shorter of breath. Each time, the flick of the blade at the end of that long, lean arm, came closer.

Perhaps it was the seventh time around the trunk when Jethro realized that he was definitely on the losing end. Sooner or later—ah, sooner or later—

He lunged for the door of the apartment, fought the bolts. He burst,

nightshirt and all, into the hall. He raced for the street.

Obviously, he must summon a policeman. When a man is routed from his home in the wee small hours of the morning by a maniac with a knife in his hand, a policeman is indicated.

Smile, if you please, at Johnny Jethro. To himself, pattering along that frigid sidewalk toward the lighted corner, he seemed the perfect picture of outraged innocence and stark pathos.

At the corner, a shabby little woman returning from a big stint of floor-scrubbing saw him, let out a startled squawk. Somebody else yelled: "Hey! Hey, lookit!"

A night-owl taxi driver leaned from his cab, hooted: "Ain't you forgot some of your clothes, mister?"

A beefy cop turned the corner, attracted by these untimely pleasantries. He raised the nightstick in his hairy fist, and he grabbed Jethro's arm tightly.

"Whatcha doon here?" the officer of the law growled. "What'sa idea, walk-in' around in your nightshirt, bo?"

Jethro was horribly embarrassed. One of those crowds which gathers at any hour of the night or day in New York was blowing up. Jethro's throat was tied into knots.

"I— I—"

"Don'tcha know you can't traipse around like this?" the patrolman asked angrily. "It's against the law."

"I— I—"

"What's your name, anyhow?"

"Jethro. John T. Jethro." He wound his voice up. "I got to talk to a cop, right away!" he pleaded.

"Whatcha think I am—a Boy Scout?"

"I been murdered," Jethro blurted. "I mean, Buddha—"

The policeman's jaw unhinged. He tolled Jethro, with strange gentleness, to the call box on the nearby lamppost.

"This is Finnegan," he spoke into the green box. "Send a wagon, huh? I got me a loony here."



**F**INNEGAN was there, and the taxi driver, and assorted cops from patrolmen up. Somewhere, somebody had dug up a suit for Jethro, which was only six or seven sizes too small. They were all looking at him, like something under glass.

Jethro wasn't happy. He was under arrest, temporarily, for disturbing the peace. He was under observation, also, by a couple of beetle-browed medicos in the corner of the room. He was definitely under a cloud.

"Now, maybe you'll tell us just once more," the icy-voiced Captain MacGruder asked. "What has Buddha got to do with all this?"

"He's a little bronze statue," Jethro explained. "He's the reason for the whole thing. First off, I heard him say—"

"Indubitably a schizophrenic aftermath," the older doctor muttered.

"Symptoms of a fanatic monomania, coupled with an acute melancholia," hazarded the other.

"If you'll just let me explain," Jethro pleaded piteously. "You see, I got this Buddha, and—"

Finally, they let him get it out, slowly and carefully, the way he thought.

"After Peabody came the first time, offering to pay so much for it, I got the idea it might be more valuable than it seemed. So before I went to bed, I hid it. If you'll just let me go—"

"I never heard of anything wackier in my life," Captain MacGruder said. "A man named Peabody, eh? Well, I'll detail a man to go with you, but I warn you right now, you'd better come up with the answers, or you'll probably end up in a nice padded cell at Matteawan!"

Johnny Jethro regarded the muttering doctors. "I think so, too," he answered sadly, shaking his head.

Detective Arnoldby was a big, thick-necked guy with a face chiseled none too carefully from a granite boulder. He took Jethro back to the drab brownstone, held his arm as they went up the steps and inside. They climbed

the stairs, came to Jethro's apartment. Arnoldby put his hand on the door-knob and the door swung open.

The door opened, and Arnoldby cursed and Jethro groaned and felt that he was going to faint. The place looked as if an inquisitive cyclone had struck it. Nor was that all.

There, in the middle of his living room floor, the archaic trunk was half opened, and from it spilled the body of a man. He was elderly, with grey hair, a wisp of brief, grey mustache. One blue eye gazed fixedly at a fanciful pink flower in the carpet. He was very, very defunct.

Arnoldby turned, snarling, to Jethro. "Well, I'll be damned. You sure didn't say anything about this. So it's murder, now, huh?"

"I— I— I didn't know—"

"This is your apartment."

"Yes, but that trunk was locked. That man—"

**A**RNOLDBY grabbed Jethro's right arm, clicked the bracelets in place. The free end he fastened to the standing pipe which rose from the radiator. "Murder!" he growled. "Well, I'll phone headquarters for the clean-up boys. You'll fry for this job, screwball!"

He slammed the door, went out, leaving a very bewildered Johnny Jethro standing in the shambles of his apartment. One thing, he perceived, led to another. Now, probably, he was going to be charged with murder, too. All because of that damnable bronze Buddha.

The bedroom door opened as if of its own accord. Jethro stared. Abner Peabody came into the living room. He had that knife in his hand, still. He was still smiling with bloodless lips, leering with that single, awful eye.

Without speaking a word, he crossed the room, locked the door securely on the inside. Johnny Jethro could hear his own heart go pitter-patter-pop.

"Confound you!" Abner Peabody grated. "Where did you put it? I've gone through this place with a fine-

TDA

tooth comb. I've got to have that Buddha!"

Jethro declined, in a manner of speaking, to answer.

"You'd better talk," the tall one-eyed man insisted. "I haven't got much time, but I've got time enough to make your death a very unpleasant one."

Jethro was paralyzed with panic. But let this be said for him: He stood his ground, and not wholly because of the chain on his wrist.

"No!" he yelled. "I won't tell you! I won't, see? I won't!"

Peabody's voice got smooth as silk. "Then there's just one thing to do before I go back down the fire escape." The knife's glistening point advanced six inches, so that it made a horrid dent in the white of Jethro's night-shirt.

There was a rattle at the door. "Speak, fool!" Abner Peabody rasped. "Where is that Buddha?"

"No!" groaned Johnny Jethro.

"Open up!" Arnoldby's bullfrog voice bellowed. "What's the idea?"

Jethro tried to yell, but Peabody's lean hand clapped over his mouth before he could get words out.

"All right," Peabody grated, drawing the knife back. "Damn your soul, anyway!"

There was the sharp, brittle crack of breaking glass, and a voice like the trumpet of doom on Judgment Day yelled:

"Hold it! Hold everything!"

Peabody spun, his face drained a fish-body white. Framed in the window, beyond which was outlined the gaunt skeleton of the fire escape, crouched a big man with a big gun in his fist.

He burst in the window, crossed the room in a flying leap. Peabody let out a little scream of wild rage, but the big man wrested the knife out of his scrawny fist, clipped him dexterously along the side of his knobby cranium.

**P**EABODY let out a quick sigh, slumped clumsily to the floor. Jethro stopped trying to pull his arm

out of the socket. The big man crossed to the door, opened up. Arnoldby came in.

"Well, it worked out swell, didn't it?" he asked, beaming at Jethro.

"Huh?" Jethro gagged. He could still feel the dent that knife blade made against his bread-basket. "What you mean?"

"I mean," Arnoldby said proudly, "we got him. I didn't think you'd tear your own apartment to pieces like this. I also heard the click of the lock after I left the apartment. Someone else was here. It was simple to call headquarters and have them shoot some cruisers here to cover all the entrances."

"And how about me?" Johnny Jethro demanded in righteous indignation. "Here I was, left all alone with a vicious killer. Did you think about that?"

"Heck," Arnoldby scoffed. "We had to catch him, didn't we, whoever he was? And we moved as fast as possible."

The big detective who had come in through the window was kneeling beside the body of the elderly man on the floor. He was down on his hands and knees, so that he could peer closely.

"Hey!" he yelled. "You know who this is?"

"No," Arnoldby returned. "Just a guy who—"

"Wait a second!" another dick yipped. "That's Amos Thorbaldt. That's the missing curator, that's who it is!"

"And that's Abner Peabody, the assistant curator," Jethro squalled. "He tried to kill me. He killed Thorbaldt, too!"

"Why?" It was a new voice in the room. When they turned, Captain MacGruder was standing there, a quizzical expression on his horsey face. "Why," he repeated, "would Peabody be doing all that, Jethro? What do you know about it, anyway?"

"I know a heck of a lot about it," Jethro maintained moistly. "It all started with the bronze Buddha. You

see, Peabody swiped a diamond, the Star of India—”

“How do you know?” the captain growled.

“Because I know,” Johnny Jethro proclaimed. “Think I’m a dummy? It’s the only thing makes sense.” He gulped. “Peabody hid the diamond in the bronze Buddha. He figured it was safe, and he could move it whenever he wanted to. The only trouble was, Thorbaldt got wise.”

“You can’t prove that!” Peabody snarled suddenly, struggling to sit up.

“Sure I can,” Jethro said stoutly. “I reckon I can prove that you were the one who hocked that Buddha. Thorbaldt must have known you were a crook. He was on your neck. What could be safer than to put it in Moe Leskinski’s De Luxe Pawn Shoppe, where it couldn’t be sold unless you defaulted on the interest payments? It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack for Thorbaldt to find it there.”

**CAPTAIN MacGRUDER** grunted: “That’s very logical, very clever. Where do you come into the picture?”

“I bought the Buddha,” Johnny Jethro explained. “Evidently the dumb clerk didn’t know it couldn’t be sold as an unredeemed pledge yet. You know how those places are, with seventeen nephews standing around, pretending to work.”

“How about Thorbaldt?” the captain asked. “Can you prove Peabody killed him?”

“Maybe not,” Jethro admitted candidly. “But he’s probably been dead a week—ever since he was reported missing. By this time, somebody was in an awful sweat to get him off their hands, so they sent him to me.

“But you see, I can prove by the men from the Triboro Express Com-

pany that that trunk was delivered here, locked, at 9:11 last night. They’ll know where it came from, who sent it. That’ll let me out. And it ought to cook somebody’s goose, especially if you find out who unlocked it here.”

“It’s a dirty lie! It’s a frame!” Peabody snarled, but he wasn’t very convincing. He knew it himself.

“How about that diamond?” MacGruder asked. “We’ve looked high and low for it for ten days. There’s a whale of a reward. You claim it was in the Buddha. Where is the Buddha now?”

“In the incinerator,” Jethro said.

The silence which came into Jethro’s apartment was like that in a graveyard at midnight in the dark of the moon. Captain MacGruder finally found his voice. “In the incinerator? Good Lord, Jethro, that diamond was worth a king’s ransom. The reward for recovering it is ten thousand dollars!”

Johnny Jethro seemed to lapse into an ecstatic daze. “Do I get it? Do I get the ten thousand dollars?”

“That’s for returning the diamond. You pitched it into the furnace, you mope.”

“Oh, no, I didn’t!” Jethro purred. “Do I get the reward?”

“If you can produce the diamond.”

“Why,” Jethro said happily, “that’s simple. After Peabody’s first visit, I saw the plaster in the Buddha’s head. I dug out the diamond with a nail file. Heck of a job, too, getting it past that curved, narrow neck.”

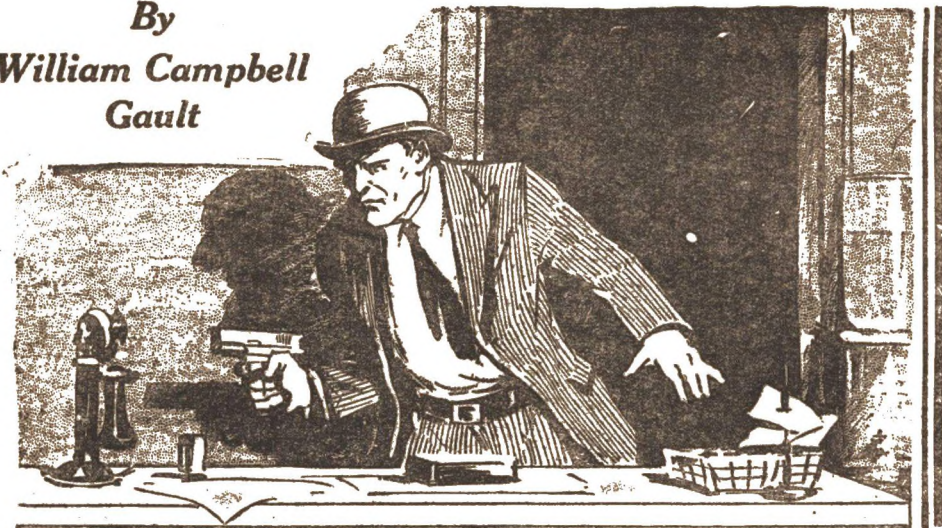
“But the diamond,” groaned MacGruder. “Where is the diamond?”

“Oh, the diamond?” Johnny Jethro chirped blithely, squinting at the rosy dawn over Long Island City. “Why, it’s in that bottle of ink, over there on the desk. Nobody ever thinks of finding anything but grief in an accountant’s ink bottle!”



# Alibi for Sale

By  
William Campbell  
Gault



*His name was cleared, the Big House was behind him, and once more he could take the world by the tail. But he owed a debt to a dead man—a debt that demanded payment in his own blood.*

**H**E WOKE, trembling, stifling a cry in his throat. His pajamas were wet with perspiration. Another nightmare; two men in uniform had been chasing him down a long corridor—a corridor which had ended abruptly.

He got out of bed, picked up his cigarettes, and went over to sit by the window. He thought: *I'm innocent, but so was Johnny. I'm innocent, and I let him blacken his name to get me out of—that place. After nine years in there, a man knows no shame. But I do now.*

Outside, the street was deserted. The wind was mild, an advance agent for the spring still on the road. All the snow was gone, though the streets were still wet from its recent melting.

Clancy, the local cop, turned the corner right then and came sauntering up the street. Fred drew back from

the glance he knew Clancy would throw toward his window. It was a part of his cross; all men on parole share it.

Clancy had known him since he was a kid. He had known the whole rowdy gang. Fred, and Johnny Dolan, and Fatso Shultz and Solly Cohen. And Blackie Garno, the ringleader. *We were young and wild, Fred thought, but I can't believe we were all bad. I can't believe any of us would be capable of murder.*

Johnny was dead now. Johnny had died with a lie on his lips, had died confessing to the murder for which Fred had already served nine years. It was Johnny's confession that had been instrumental in gaining Fred his parole.

Johnny was dead, and Fatso ran a grocery store. Solly was a theatrical agent. Blackie had gone on into the

career for which his early life had so well fitted him. Blackie was in the rackets.

Johnny's sister . . . Fred put her from his mind. Johnny's sister, Ellen, had been what Fred had lived for all the young years of his pre-prison life.

Fred knew he would get no more sleep that night. If he walked the streets, there was a chance Clancy would ask a lot of annoying questions. But he couldn't stay in his room. Not tonight.

**O**UTSIDE, the wind had shifted and there was a damp rawness in the air. He would have liked to stop at a tavern, but he knew he couldn't tempt himself. He had lived without it for nine years, and he had never been a rational man with liquor.

He had been out for two weeks now, working in a print shop all day, and dreading every night, the thought of Johnny Dolan lying heavily on his mind. He thought of Ellen again, and he hated to face her. But after a half hour of walking, he found himself in front of the Golden Grotto.

He stood there in indecision, the raw wind biting his legs, the torrid beat of the house band coming faintly through the door.

Then he went in.

There was smoke and the smell of food in there, the noise of dancing feet and chattering couples, and above it all the inspired soaring brass of the band. Rackety, but for some reason comforting. Fred checked his coat and followed the headwaiter to a small table near the door.

He ordered a sandwich and coffee, and asked: "Is Ellen Dolan still singing here?"

The waiter nodded. "She'll be on in about ten minutes."

There was another voice, then, at his side, saying, "Hello, stranger."

It was Blackie Garno, nine years older and thirty pounds heavier. And coarser. His black eyes looked appraising. "Got out a couple of weeks ago, I hear."

Fred nodded.

Blackie dropped into the chair opposite. "Got a job?"

Again Fred nodded. "That's one of the conditions of parole."

"I was thinking, maybe," Blackie said, "that you'd—"

"I wouldn't," Fred interrupted.

Blackie shrugged smilingly. "If you want to work for peanuts, who am I to change your mind?" Then: "Came to see Ellen, I suppose."

Fred said: "That's right. But I don't know how she'll feel about me after—after Johnny did what he did."

Blackie was silent for a moment. When he spoke his voice was sincere. "I think she's still carrying the torch. I—I tried to talk her out of it."

Fred looked up curiously, and then he understood. "Pal," he said.

"Singing for drunks isn't good enough for Johnny's sister," Blackie said.

"Neither are you," Fred said.

Blackie stiffened and his eyes held something ugly. Then he relaxed. He said: "I forgot you were a friend for a second."

"Let me put it this way," Fred said. "And you can consider it an apology. Your way of life isn't good enough for her. She belongs on the straight and narrow. Being poor wouldn't damage her as much as—as being what you are. That would damage her more than it has you, Blackie. I think you can see that."

"You spout too much," Blackie said. But his eyes were calm.

They were both silent a moment, watching the dancers. Then Fred said: "About Johnny—the confession. Johnny didn't kill that night watchman. And I didn't. But I'm going to find out who did."

Again Blackie seemed to stiffen. He said: "We were all questioned about that. I don't like to be questioned too much. Aren't we going to be friends, Fred?"

"We're all friends still," Fred said. "And I'm not forgetting how you fellows worked to clear me. But Johnny



was my friend, too. Johnny was special."

The m.c. was in the center of the deserted dance floor now, and the crowd quieted. The m.c. said: "Mr. Garno presents—"

Fred looked over at Blackie. "This spot is yours?"

Blackie nodded.

Fred felt resentment surge through him. He turned his eyes toward the m.c. Ellen Dolan was walking out to the center of the floor.

She was older now, but time had done nothing to her appeal. She looked the faintest bit tired. She was smiling, her eyes taking in all the tables, and the applause was deafening.

**S**HE sang a torch song, and her voice wasn't the best in the world. But it didn't need to be for that song. She put it over very well. She put it over with the warm, sincere essence of her personality.

Blackie said: "It's no charity, hiring Ellen, if that makes you feel any better."

"It does," Fred said.

Blackie signaled the headwaiter. He said: "Tell Miss Dolan that an old friend is here to see her. And bring another chair."

Fred felt a tenseness creeping over him. Ellen had written him every week, every week for nine years—until Johnny's confession. Ellen wouldn't understand why Fred hadn't tried to clear Johnny. Women have a higher standard of nobility. After nine years in prison, standards can drop.

Then she was walking toward them between the tables, and she saw him.

For a moment it seemed she was going to turn back. Then she came on, her face a mask.

Fred rose with Blackie, and Ellen murmured something, avoiding his eyes.

Blackie said: "I suppose you two will have a lot to say that won't concern me." He left.

Ellen still stood. Fred said: "Sit

down, please. I've got to talk to you. I've got to make you understand."

She took a chair, and her eyes on him were perfectly blank. She said: "I believed you were innocent. For nine years I believed it. But since you—since you let Johnny down, I can't be so sure, Fred. That's why I didn't write."

He felt a great emptiness grow in him. "You've got to believe in me," he said. "It's all I've got, Ellen. And I'll find the guilty one. I'll clear Johnny's name if it takes the rest of my life." He paused. "I couldn't do that in prison."

"After nine years?" she asked. "It would take more than a lifetime."

"One of the gang knows something," Fred told her. "One of our gang was with that bunch who robbed the warehouse. One of them left that crowbar behind, that crowbar that was traced to me. That crowbar was in our clubhouse."

"All of them had alibis," she said quietly. "All but you, Fred."

"An alibi isn't too hard to get," he explained.

"You'll implicate one of your own friends. Would you turn on them now?"

"One of them let me go to prison. One of them could have prevented it, but he didn't. I'd turn on that one."

She was studying him now, and she looked weary and puzzled. She put one hand to her forehead in a despairing gesture.

"I'll need your faith," Fred said. "Like I needed your letters every week, to keep me sane, I'll need you now, Ellen."

She looked up, and her eyes still studied him, looking for some answer. "I don't know what to say, Fred. Nor what to think. I've wanted to believe you were guilty these past weeks. I've tried to believe it. It was the only way I could kill my—" She broke off.

"Don't try to kill it," he said. "I'll make you glad you didn't. That's a promise, Ellen."

Blackie was there then, suddenly.

Blackie said: "It's almost time for another song, Ellen."

She rose. She said to Fred: "I can't say anything now." Then she was walking back to the dressing room.

Blackie said: "Where did you pick up this cop complex? What have you got to gain by stirring up a mess of trouble?"

"I'd like to clear Johnny's name. And mine." Fred laid a bill on the table. "But maybe you wouldn't understand that, Blackie." He went back to the checkroom for his coat.

It was really cold out now, the wind bitter, the first drops of slushy snow driving in from the north. Fred pulled his hat down low over his forehead and started toward home.

**I**T WAS Sunday now, and a day of rest for him. But there would be no rest for him, no real rest, until the murder of that watchman was solved. Until once again Ellen Dolan could meet his gaze with the love in her eyes she had shown the day he made the trip up to prison. The bitterness of the weather matched his mood, and he reflected that in this situation he couldn't expect much help from the only friends he had ever known. In this situation they would be on the other side of the fence.

He turned up Parker Street, lost in the blackness of his thoughts, and then he was aware of someone standing near a street light, waiting for him to approach.

It was Clancy. His full cheeks were red and cold and his blue eyes were even colder. "It's late," he said. "It's almost morning. I hope you've been in good company."

Fred felt a moment's panic, and his first thought was of the prison, of that bleak nine-year home. Then he controlled himself. He said: "I was over at the Grotto, the Golden Grotto."

"Blackie's place," Clancy said. "Blackie is no company for a paroled man. I should think you'd know that."

Again Fred felt that obsessing fear. He said: "I've something to do. I've

a name to clear. I was over there for information."

Clancy was silent, his blue eyes sharp. Then he said: "I think maybe you'd better let the police take care of the detective work. That's our business. It isn't my intention to ride you, but it's my job to keep an eye on you."

"I understand," Fred said.

He had the feeling Clancy was watching him as he went on up the block! He thought, *I've got the law to fight, too. Four friends and the law. And Ellen's faith to regain. I've got more than I can handle probably. I think I'm a damned fool.* And he thought of that bleak place again, and shivered deep inside.

He slept about four hours. Then he went down to the hall phone and looked up the number of Solomon Cohen, Theatrical Agent.

Solly's voice had deepened but he was no less breezy.

Fred asked: "I wondered if you'd be home today? I wanted to see you."

"Sure, kid," Solly said. "Any time I'd like to see you. Why not right away? I live over at the Stratford."

The Stratford was a slightly shoddy imitation of a first-class hotel. Solly had a room on the second floor.

He took Fred's hand warmly, and his smile was the first pleasant thing Fred had experienced in weeks. Solly had a heart as big as his mouth and a brain as active.

Fred told him about his plans. Fred watched him all the while he was explaining.

He could almost see Solly's nimble brain working behind those big eyes. Solly said thoughtfully: "If one of us knew about it, that one would be in on it. Would that guy spout? No. And if he did, would you turn him over, kid? Would you send a guy where you've been?"

"I would," Fred said. "I'd turn him over."

Solly shook his head. "And you think you can get him to confess, if he knew that. You think you can just

ask him if he was in on an old robbery and he'll admit it and then you'll turn him over to the cops. Where did you check your brains, kid?"

"I don't know," Fred said. "They were never my long suit. I'm just so damned determined about this thing. I—Solly, it's what I'm going to live for until I clear it up."

"Okay," Solly said. "Every man to his trade. But don't go after it like that. Keep your mouth shut and your eyes open. Use your noodle. Even then, I'd rate your chances maybe one in eight thousand. Bad odds."

"It would be you or Blackie or Fatso Shultz," Fred said. "That's not one in eight thousand."

Solly smiled. "Or Johnny Dolan. He sure told a convincing story before he went. Convincing enough to influence a parole board. Have you thought of that, Fred?"

"Johnny didn't do it," Fred said stubbornly.

"You're thinking with your heart," Solly said. "Think with your head for a change." He paused. "Have you seen Fatso?"

Fred shook his head.

Solly was looking at his watch. "Well, look, we've still got a couple of hours before noon. And Shultz keeps that place open Sunday mornings. We could run over there."

They took a cab, at Solly's expense.

The Dutchman's place was no supermarket, but it was neat and clean. "C. C. Shultz—Quality Groceries" was lettered on the awning.

"C. C. for cash and carry," Solly said. "If I could hang onto money like Fatso I'd be a millionaire."

**S**HULTZ had grown since Fred had last seen him. But not taller. All his growth had been confined to the front and sides. He was arguing with some man about half his size when they entered. Then Fatso saw them, and stopped in mid-sentence.

His bland face folded into a smile,

and he came out from behind the counter.

For a moment Fred's eyes followed the smaller man, his memory fighting to place him. But the man disappeared through the door without turning around.

Shultz' big hand engulfed Fred's, and his big voice boomed out a welcome. "Old friends," he said. "It's good to see old friends." His whole body seemed to shake when he talked.

Shultz had always faintly irritated Fred, and he hadn't lost that faculty.

There was one of those awkward silences for a moment. Fred didn't want to broach the reason for their visit, and Shultz was looking at them curiously.

Solly said: "We just dropped in to talk over old times."

Shultz' face wreathed into a smile. "And what times! What a wild gang we were!"

There was another silence, and Fred wondered at that. Neither Solly nor Shultz had ever lacked words. But Solly knew the purpose of their visit. That would quiet Solly.

A customer came in then, and Shultz busied himself behind the counter. Fred said in a low voice: "Do you know that man Shultz was arguing with when we came in? I'm sure I've seen him some place."

Solly shook his head. "He may have been in the neighborhood since we were kids. But I don't remember him."

Shultz was back now, and Fred said: "Who was that fellow that was in here before we came? I could swear I've seen him, but I don't know where. Did he hang around with us?"

Shultz shook his head placidly. "Nah. He's just a collector. He claims I owe him some money, and I claim I don't." He chuckled. "Who do you think will win?"

"Three guesses," Solly murmured. He looked at Fred. "Well, if we want to get over to the hotel by eleven we'd better blow."

Fred nodded, knowing that this strain was worse on Solly than on himself. "I'll see you again, Fatso," he said. "I'll be dropping in from time to time."

"Sure," the Dutchman said. "Any time. I'm always glad to see old friends."

Outside, Solly said: "What did we see in that slob when we were kids? Were our tastes debased?"

Fred smiled. What was it about Shultz that caused that faint annoyance?

Solly seemed to answer the unspoken question. "That Shultz smacks me as a phony. He acts like the original glad-hand Charley, but he's got his first nickel." He paused, searching the street for a cab. "You've seen Blackie, I suppose? Blackie should be the number one suspect. Blackie is a bad boy."

"I've seen him," Fred said.

"Well," Solly said. "That leaves only me. Fred, this is going to take time. If Johnny didn't take that crowbar, this might take a lifetime. And I wouldn't guarantee it even then."

A cab sidled up, and Solly waved him in.

But Fred shook his head. "I think I'll take a walk. If you get any ideas, call me."

Solly smiled. "That's a promise."

Fred walked without destination through a neighborhood he had known as a kid, through a neighborhood that had cursed the gang's existence. *Wild*, he thought, *we were that. But murder. Murder is something else.*

He thought of Ellen, and went in a drugstore to look her up in the phone book. Fortunately, the phone was listed in her name.

He put a nickel in the slot and dialed her number.

Her voice was sleepy, and Fred said: "I hope I didn't wake you up. This is Fred."

"You did," she said. "And you kept me awake until about four hours ago. I—I'm glad you called, Fred. I want

to apologize for last night. I want you to know that I'll never doubt you again."

Fred felt warmth flood through him. He said in a low voice: "Thanks." And he told her about Solly and Shultz.

She said: "I have a kitchenette. I could make some coffee. We could eat sweet rolls. And talk things over."

"I'll be there," Fred promised. "In five minutes."

He was there in eight. Ellen met him at the door, and her lips on his were what had kept him alive those nine years.

She was crying a little. She said: "When I think of how Johnny loved you. And how I do. When I thought of that, I was ashamed of myself, Fred. I was ashamed of what I had been these past few weeks."

There was the smell of coffee in the air. The sun was shining through her dinette window. Fred could feel his bitterness melting like late spring snow.

She went back to turn off the gas under the coffee, to put a plate of buns on the table. "The things I said last night. What I said about your not having an alibi. And how—"

But Fred had stopped listening. Something had clicked in his mind, and for a moment he was transported back nine years, to a police station, to the whole gang lined up before that tough sergeant. *Alibi*, that had been the key word.

He said swiftly: "Ellen, I've got it. I've got a lead. I'm going back to see Shultz."

"No," she said. "If you've got something, the police can handle it. You're a parolee, Fred. You can't do anything foolish."

"The police can't handle this," he said. "It's just a hunch. It's something I've got to handle myself."

She had turned white. She had put a trembling hand on his arm. "I won't try to change your mind, Fred. I know how long you've carried this.

But above all, be careful now."

Shultz was getting ready to close when he returned. It was only a few minutes before noon. Shultz looked up swiftly, and his eyes lost their blandness for a fraction of a second.

Fred said: "That man who was here before. He was no collector, Shultz. He was your alibi. He was the man who claimed you were with him the night of the robbery.

"You're crazy," Shultz said. "What are you talking about? What are you trying to pin on me?"

"Murder," Fred said. "And something that might even be worse. Letting a friend go to jail for it."

Shultz smiled, a clumsy attempt. "You've been too long in that prison, Fred. You're—how do they say it—stir crazy." But his eyes looked frightened.

"Get him," Fred said. "Get him, and we'll all go down to the station and let the cops work it out. I'll take my chances. He's probably been bleeding you ever since. Maybe that's what you were arguing about when I came in."

Shultz was moving toward the counter, and Fred had a sudden premonition. Then Shultz' big hand moved swiftly and Fred realized what a fool he had been.

Shultz had a revolver in his hand!

**F**RED could hear the ticking of the big clock on the wall. He could hear a youngster shouting up the block. He could almost hear the beating of his heart.

Shultz said: "A paroled man. An old friend, too. Trying to rob my store. Trying to hold me up. And I had to shoot him."

"I have no gun," Fred said. "I couldn't hold you up without a gun. It would look like what it is. It would look like murder."

"You had your hand in your pocket," Shultz said. "I thought it was a gun. You said it was a gun."

"Be careful," Fred remembered Ellen had said. "Above all, be care-

ful." He knew he could hear his heart beat now. His hands were clammy.

"Shoot," Fred said hoarsely. "Shoot, you damned slob, and get it over with." His brain was filled with a red mist. "Shoot—but don't miss."

"I won't miss," Shultz said, and he was coming around the counter. "I'll be too close to miss."

The big man seemed to get bigger and bigger until Fred realized that it was a trick of his eyes. Even Fatso wasn't that big. The gun in his hand seemed to grow, too. Fred opened his mouth stupidly, and his feet seemed nailed to the floor.

This was what they meant by slow death. This was a nightmare come to life. He could see the big man's eyes now, and then he saw that pudgy finger tightening on the trigger.

There was a crashing report, and Fred closed his eyes.

He closed his eyes and felt no pain, and he opened his eyes again. Fatso still stood there, gaping at the door, holding one fat hand in the other. The revolver was on the floor, and blood was dripping from the held hand.

From the door, a voice said: "Me, on the side of the law. That's a laugh. Me, a boy scout."

Blackie stood there, an automatic in one hand, his eyes like pieces of ebony. "Ellen phoned me," he said. "In a pinch, she knew who to call. To save her boy friend."

Shultz was slobbering, his face the color of putty. Shultz whimpered: "You've got nothing on me. What's the word of two men like you against mine? I'm respectable."

"You'll spill your guts," Blackie said. "Your life won't be worth a nickel if you don't. I don't like to get into trouble. And my boys don't like to see me in trouble. They are bad-tempered."

The big man's body seemed to sag. Fred knew, then, that the case was closed.

He went to the phone to call the police. He hoped Ellen was keeping that coffee hot.



# First Find the Body

By H. Q. Masur



## CHAPTER I

**T**HE somber reception room of Schumaker's Mortuary was empty. I stuck my head into the tiny chapel and called out, "Oh, Mr. Schumaker!" and my voice struck a sour note against the pump organ and bounced back.

The sharp smell of formaldehyde wrinkled my nose. Then I spied the

two boxes—cheap pine coffins made of unpainted boards slapped haphazardly together—and a thin shudder ran through my frame. Cheap packing crates like that always depress me. If undertakers were going to plant their clients in such junk, I

*He knew all the lethal requirements, the Casket Kid did. But when he sold his newest batch of coffins, he did not realize that one was made to his own measure. For that sale was only the first instalment on a far-flung homicide campaign.*



*His eyes like ice, he raised the gun calmly.*

would soon be applying to the government for unemployment insurance.

I was thinking about it and growing gloomy when the gun went off behind me. A muffled *plop* like the slapping together of two pieces of

wood. And the brand new Homburg jumped off my head and sailed halfway into the chapel and settled neatly upon one of the pine coffins.

I grabbed my scalp and ducked behind the door and felt my heart lurch violently against my ribs. I don't like being shot in the back—don't, as a matter of fact, like being shot at all.



I hugged the floor and cautiously peeked around the door and there was this girl with a .22 automatic in her hand.

She was beautiful and angry. A low-crowned hat with a wide brim shadowed her face, but did not conceal the fire in a pair of startling topaz eyes. Her mouth was a bright splash of deep crimson, all the more striking because of the whiteness of her skin—a typical female trick. The dark tweed sport coat hugged her waist and flared in the skirt.

"Hey!" I yelled. "That thing's not loaded with blanks. Put it away."

I snapped my head back just in time.

The .22 hiccuped again and a long sliver of wood peeled off the door jamb. That did it. I was good and sore. And then, through the crack, I saw her taking slow, deliberate steps toward the chapel, the gun held stiffly before her, the bright crimson lips as thin as a worn dime.

Sure, I'm a guy almost six feet tall, and she was a slip of a girl you could knock over with a whiskey breath, but she was carrying hand artillery and that about equalized everything. I felt the skin gathering in tight little pleats at the back of my neck. It was the look in those topaz eyes that worried me—a look of intense, almost fanatical, fury.

I SCUTTLED a quick look around the chapel, spied the two pine coffins and made a dive for them. The lid of the nearest one came open easily. I tumbled in with no dignity whatever and pulled the cover back into place.

There was a tiny knot hole in it to which I glued my eye. It afforded a view of a large part of the chapel if I didn't mind straining the tendons in my neck.

The girl came in slowly, elbows stiff, and her eyes swept around the room. She headed toward a colored window that had for the moment escaped my notice, opened it and

peered out. When she turned around, white teeth had caught her underlip in frustration. Very slowly a change came across her face. The fire died out of the eyes; the line of her mouth softened, quivered; her whole expression seemed to crumple. And then two large pearl-like tears squeezed out of her eyes and rolled damply down either cheek.

She moved, almost in a trance, toward the pump organ. Her fingers placed the .22 on the ledge; she slipped, quite unconscious of her grace, onto the stool. And then she started to play.

How she ever coaxed such music out of that old grinder I do not know. I think it was Wagner—I'm not sure. The notes poured out in a molten, tempestuous crescendo that swelled and filled that chapel like the Philharmonic under Toscanini's baton in Carnegie Hall. Even in the muffled, cramped space of the cheap pine coffin it held me almost breathless.

And then, suddenly, I was aware of the operation of another of my senses. I was smelling something and it was not pleasant. It came to me with an abrupt shocking impact. Embalming fluid! *I was smelling embalming fluid.* The coffin seemed full of it.

My mouth went as dry as a piece of flannel and I guessed that maybe Schumaker had temporarily stored a corpse in this box. That, together with the weird music now pounding into my ears, made vacating the coffin one of the most pressing and imperative desires I have ever experienced.

Silently I lifted the lid, swung it to the floor and sat upright. The girl kept playing, the music kept getting wilder and wilder. I got my feet out and moved toward her.

With a discordant crash the music stopped.

She grabbed for the gun, swung around on the stool and squeezed the trigger. I heard the thin whistle of the bullet as it missed my right ear

by inches. I felt the scorching heat of the muzzle blast against my forehead. And then I piled in on her, both hands curling around her gun wrist. A quick twist, a wrench, and the .22 bounced lightly on the floor. I scooped it up.

"Now," I said, "what's the idea? What kind of a Gestapo do you belong to, going around trying to assassinate people? For shame!"

She sat there, nursing a small fist, the topaz eyes glowing. Her voice was drawn taut, like a violin string at the breaking point. "Where is it?" she whispered.

"Where is what?"

"The ring, you thief."

"What ring?"

Her lips curled contemptuously. "The one you stole from my brother. I know you must have taken it off his finger before you—you cremated him. I sent you a telegram telling you not to cremate him. I wanted to claim the body. Why didn't you obey me?"

I glanced down at my striped trousers and the sober cut of my dark Oxford coat and grinned at her.

"The light shines," I said. "You think I'm Herman Schumaker. Uh-uh! I am not, nor would the condition of my glands permit me to be an undertaker. These sober vestments are merely the adornments of my business. Permit me, the name is Todd, John Todd."

Contrition flashed across her face. "You—you're not Mr. Schumaker?"

I shook my head, smiling.

"Oh, I'm sorry—terribly sorry!"

"Not me," I told her. "I'm glad. That is, if you've really made up your mind to kill him."

"Oh, but I have," she stated coolly. "What I meant was that I'm sorry I shot at you."

"Think nothing of it," I waved my hand, and dropped the .22 into my coat pocket. A safer place for it would have been the exact middle of the Atlantic Ocean. "And now," I said, "what's all this about a ring?"

She leaned eagerly forward and hope flickered in those topaz eyes. "Could you help me?"

"Todd, boy, mind your own business," I was telling myself. "You know what happens when you get mixed up in other people's affairs." Aloud I said: "I can try."

SHE leaned forward and spoke earnestly. "You see, there were only two of us left in the family, my brother Vic, and myself. Dad felt I was pretty irresponsible, so when he died he left all the money to Vic. Vic was writing a book about hobos and he'd gotten hold of an old Model T and was bumming around the country. Two days ago he was in a terrible accident. He crashed his car against a tree right outside of this town.

"It was a freak accident and a lot of papers published pictures of it because it looked like the tree was growing right out of the front seat of the car. I saw the picture and recognized the license number. Vic had already been removed. So I sent the coroner of Luden's Corners, Mr. Schumaker, a telegram telling him to hold the body.

"When I got here this morning and called him on the phone he said the body had already been cremated, that there were no papers of identification and that's why they had disposed of it. I asked him about the ring and he denied finding any. Of course he's lying."

"Was it such a valuable ring?" I asked.

She shook her head. "That's not the point. The ring will identify Vic. It's a big Indian-head ring with a picture of mother inside." She caught her lip with her teeth.

"Go ahead," I said.

"Maybe you'll think I'm mercenary, but if there's no way of identifying Vic I'll have to wait five years to prove that he's dead. That's how long a person has to be missing before you can inherit their estate.

Well, I haven't a job, or any money, or anything. Vic was taking care of me."

"I get it. First you have to find the body. Still, you ought not to go around popping guns at local officials. It's not important enough to kill a man for."

She smiled brightly. "Confidentially, I wasn't really going to kill him. I was only trying to frighten him."

I took her gently by the arms and lifted her off the organ stool. "Listen to me, you go back to the hotel and lock yourself into a room and stay there. I'll talk to Schumaker when he comes in. Leave everything to me."

She leaned suddenly forward and brushed a fleeting kiss against my cheek, and ran out. Her mouth was cool and even after she was out of the chapel my fingertips were still tingling.

I dropped down onto the stool, tapped a pill out of a deck of cigarettes, pasted it against the corner of my mouth and scratched a match into flame with my thumb nail. I took a long drag and squinted my eyes against the upward swirl of smoke. I kept thinking about the girl and her dead brother, Vic; and suddenly I realized that I didn't even know her name.

That did not seem to make much difference. You know how it is after you meet certain people—it's almost like they were still with you—you can actually feel a glow. Well, that's the way this topaz-eyed beauty had affected me.

I swung around on the stool and faced the organ keys. I kicked some air into it with the pedals and started playing chopsticks. It sounded pretty sour, but that's the extent of my musical attainments. I had picked out a half a dozen bars when a pained voice howled:

"Stop! In heaven's name, stop!"

I twisted around.

## CHAPTER II

YOU would never know from looking at him that Herman Schumaker was an undertaker. He stood in the middle of the aisle, between a row of folding chairs, his pudgy hands pressed against his ears, his round pursed face arranged in an expression of utmost horror. It was as if he'd caught me stealing gold inlays from the mouths of his embalmed clients. He was short and stout and his large paunch compelled him to keep the last four buttons of his vest open.

"What are you doing here?" he squawked. "Who are you?"

I fired my best toothy smile at him, plucked out an engraved card and tendered it.

"Don't you remember me, Mr. Schumaker?" I said. "John Todd of the Continental Casket Company. We sold you those silver-fitted coffins last year that—"

"Enough," he cried. "I remember. I remember only too well. You said they would move like hot cakes. All of them—the whole half dozen—are still in my basement." He balled his fist and waved it threateningly. "You four-flusher!"

I backed away placatingly. "Easy, Mr. Schumaker, easy. Think back to what I told you last year. You bought those caskets at a price that will earn you over two hundred percent on your original investment. Think of it. Naturally, you can afford to hold them longer than a year for that kind of profit. It's a sort of speculation. Now I'll tell you what we'll do. If you're not satisfied we'll give you a liberal trade-in allowance toward the purchase of our new—"

"Nothing doing," he snapped. "I'll keep them."

I produced a catalogue from my inside pocket. "Here, feast your eyes on one of the most beautiful—"

"Good day," he said firmly.

I flipped the catalogue open to a picture of the solid walnut job that



Continental had made the mistake of building at this time. It was a beautiful inlaid box, much too expensive for the average citizen. We were stuck with five hundred of those boxes and I, as their star salesman, was making this whirlwind tour trying to unload.

I let the words drip out like syrup. "My dear Mr. Schumaker, in all its long and honorable history, in all its years of faithful service to a be-reaved public, the Continental Casket Company has never built such a coffin, put into it such loving care and patience. Copper-lined throughout, water-tight, constructed of prime, hand-polished lumber. Expensive—yes. But what a buy, Mr. Schumaker, what a buy!"

Red flushed up through his neck and it seemed to swell with anger. "No," he fairly screeched. "Good-bye, Mr. Todd."

I gave him a look of pity and shook my head sadly. "And I thought you were a man of foresight, Mr. Schumaker. Let me call your attention to one important item you seem to have overlooked. Luden's Corners is an exclusive summer colony. You can never tell what might transpire next season. Some millionaire might drown in the lake. Do you think his family would permit you to ship him home in a cheap box? Never. They would insist upon the best. Think of the saving if you had it on hand, if you didn't have to order special. Why, suppose a boat capsized on the lake and three millionaires got drowned—"

His round face lighted up. "You really think something like that might happen?" he asked hopefully.

"Our lives," I said solemnly, "are in the hands of destiny. Anything might happen, Mr. Schumaker, anything."

"Er—how much are those boxes?"

"Four hundred dollars, ten off for cash, and you can easily sell it for a thousand."

I whipped out my order book and moistened the tip of my pencil.

He looked undecided. "I — I wouldn't pay more than three hundred."

"What!" I exclaimed in a shocked voice. "For a box like this? Impossible, Mr. Schumaker. I'd get fired."

"Well—" he started uncertainly, scratching his head.

I picked up the cue swiftly. "Tell you what I'll do. Let's split the difference and I'll give up my commission, just to make a fast sale. Thirty-five and I'll put you down for two dozen boxes."

"One dozen," he said flatly.

"Good enough."

**I** WROTE the order rapidly, let him initial it and pegged it away in my pocket. I grabbed his hand and pumped it up and down. I complimented him on what a shrewd deal he had made. I greased him and oiled him until his fat, pursed lips crawled into a wide grin. I had him chuckling with delight and offering me cigars.

And so I thought the time had come.

"You're the coroner at Luden's Corners, aren't you, Mr. Schumaker?" I asked.

"I am," he nodded.

"That was a mighty peculiar accident happened outside of town a couple of days ago, the one with the tree sticking out of the car. I read about it in the paper."

The smile rubbed off his face. "Yes," he said noncommittally. "Good day, Mr. Todd."

"What was the driver's name?"

"I don't know. No identification." Schumaker's mouth grew thin.

"No papers?" I lifted my brow. "No jewelry? Not even a ring?" I watched him narrowly.

A sudden vein bulged in a blue diagonal across his temple. His blue eyes started to smolder. He was having trouble checking his temper; and then he stopped fighting and let it run away with him. His face turned

an apoplectic purple and he shouted:

"You too? First, some crazy dame calls me and says I'm lying. That I stole a ring off the corpse's finger. That I had no right to cremate him. And now you, Todd. Well, I never found any ring on him. And I cremated him because we haven't any pauper's burial grounds in this county. That's all."

He turned and started for the reception room. I followed him and started out the door when I almost got bowled over. A tall, angular chap, hatless, with a blue denim shirt open at the neck, came pounding through the door. His face glistened with sweat and the breath labored heavily through his nostrils.

He stopped short, gulped three times while a prominent Adam's apple made as many round trips along his scrawny throat.

"Gosh!" he gasped. "Better come quick, Mr. Schumaker. Sheriff Steen sent me. There's been an explosion over to Mr. Willard's place. Blew Mr. Willard apart somethin' terrible. Pieces of him all over the place."

Schumaker stiffened and his bulbous features grew tight and seemed to pinch together. His eyes were wide open and so was his mouth. He sucked in a single noisy breath, swallowed, and then started his short legs working like pistons on a ferry.

I knew who Jefferson Willard was. He had a big estate here on the lake front and a private laboratory adjoining. A long time ago he'd invented a chemical dye and cleaned up a fortune. Ever since then he'd been dabbling with new ideas, never quite able to find anything that clicked. He was reputed to have a lot of dough socked away and a tempestuous young wife he'd plucked out of a burlesque line some years back.

"You see," I called after Schumaker, "here's your chance to sell one of those silver-fitted caskets. Two hundred percent profit."

But he didn't hear me. I could see him through the door, leading the

tall guy by at least a foot. I thought this would be a good time to have a look around the place, so I turned and snagged my toe on something and hit the floor with my ear.

It was the Gladstone bag that did it. I hadn't seen it before. It was on the floor and had tripped me as neatly as if it had been planted there for that purpose. I sat there, using a considerable amount of language and then I grabbed the bag and opened it.

At first I thought it was empty and then I saw all the junk lying on the bottom—loose dirt, about a half inch of it, and chipped gravel. The bag was a good one, stained cowhide, and I stared at it, completely puzzled. First, it didn't seem to be the sort of bag one would carry dirt in; second, what the devil did Schumaker want with a load of chipped gravel anyway?

None of it made any sense, so I got up and prowled about the room, opening an old gilt sideboard and examining the drawers. They were quite empty. I went through the chapel, found the back stairs to the basement. A single naked overhead bulb was glowing. I took a look around and felt a chill crawling swiftly up my backbone.

In the center of the whitewashed room was a wooden table composed of two wooden horses and a long slab of wood set on top of them. Shelves beside it along the wall contained chemicals and a full set of embalming tools. Down here there was the cloying, faintly sweetish smell of death, and a movie montage of a hundred corpses flashed before my eyes with the fat Schumaker sweating over them.

I'd had enough. I turned and took the stairs three at a time and didn't stop until I was outside sucking long draughts of fresh air into my lungs. My coupé was parked by the curb. I stood beside it and weighed my next move.

I had in my pocket Schumaker's signed order for twelve inlaid walnut

TDA

caskets. I had in my nostrils the soft, elusive scent of the topaz-eyed dream. On the one hand, I was finished with Luden's Corners and could beat it; on the other, I could stay and try to help the girl.

The smart move would have been to get out. I stayed.

I climbed into the car, kicked the starter and headed out toward the Jefferson Willard estate fronting the lake. I wanted a word with Sheriff Steen. In all probability he had viewed the automobile accident and there was a chance he might have noticed a ring on the chap's finger before Schumaker took charge and carted the body off.

**T**HE Willard mansion had been built a long time before by an architect suffering from a bad nightmare. Constructed of brown stone, gabled and turreted, it looked like an armory, fantastic and incongruous, set as it was on a lush rolling green lawn. It was surrounded by a high brick wall into which had been cemented jagged bottle fragments.

I drove through the gate and headed toward a small wooden building at the bottom of a knoll where a couple of figures were standing. The roof, I could see, had been blown clean off the building, its debris scattered carelessly about, and the walls were bulged outward as if expanded by some giant breath.

I braked the car and a huge bear of a man lumbered over. He was wearing an ill-fitting burlap suit with a black string of a necktie. A big star twinkled on his lapel and I guessed he was Sheriff Steen. He owned a big, wedge-shaped face and black beard stubble shadowed a long shovel chin. Loose tobacco juice stained the corner of his snagged mouth.

He aimed a pair of cold grey eyes at me and asked: "You got business here?"

"Yes," I said. "With you, sheriff."

I was looking at the three people

who were approaching with puzzled expressions. In the vanguard, Herman Schumaker was mopping his streaming forehead with a soggy, soiled handkerchief. When he spied me his jowls began to twitch.

The woman was really worth a stare. She had a tall, voluptuous, almost Vikingsque figure, richly burnished hair with even-cut bangs curled against her forehead, and a wide mouth as sensuous and as crimson as an open wound. Tears streaked her face, her competent shoulders convulsed erratically as she wept, and a tiny lace handkerchief made futile efforts to stem the flow.

At her side walked a tall chap with a bronzed face, built like a wedge, wearing a beautifully tailored chauffeur's uniform. The gleaming patent leather peak was tilted at a rakish angle, not at all in keeping with the solemnity of the occasion. He had just lost his boss through a most violent death.

How violent it was I noticed at that moment and the sight twisted my stomach like a grappling hook. For not fifteen feet away, on the grass, beside a frayed piece of roofing, lay a man's shoe. In the shoe was the stump of a leg . . .

Hastily I averted my eyes, turned them back to Sheriff Steen. "I'm sorry to be troubling you at a time like this, sheriff, but I want some information."

"About what?" His eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"The accident that took place outside of town two days ago when that young fellow cracked his car against a tree."

The other three were now directly behind the sheriff and listening.

"What kind of information?" Sheriff Steen asked.

"Well," I said, "I'd like to know if you noticed a ring on the fellow's finger, a large ring with an Indian head—"

I never finished that sentence because Schumaker caught me by sur-

prise. I never guessed he could move so fast. With a growling noise he hopped on the running board and smashed his fist against my nose. One pudgy fist grabbed for my windpipe and started to cut off a vital flow of oxygen. The door opened and we tumbled to the ground.

I put my knee into his stomach and he grunted. A short jab to the point of his chin and his fingers uncurled from my throat. I got up. His features were violently contorted and he lunged at me. I brought this one all the way from China and it met him clean. It sounded like the smack of a ball against a bat. His whole fat body backflipped once and stayed on the ground. It was fine.

And not until then did the sheriff erupt into action. He got a half-Nelson on me from behind, pinning my right arm back. "Hey!" he said. "You want to spend a couple of days in the clink. Herm Schumaker is the coroner hereabouts. You can't go around beating up public officials."

"What!" I yelled. "He attacked me first. You all saw that. I was only defending myself."

**S**CHUMAKER struggled to his feet. His cheek had a deep cut in it and a thin line of blood wavered down to his chin. His eyes were dull, opaque, like soiled windows in an empty house.

"Throw him out, sheriff!" he said in a choked voice. "You know what he's getting at? He's trying to say that I robbed that dead fellow's body. That I stole a worthless ring off the corpse's finger. Me, coroner of Luden County for ten years, and now he's trying to ruin my reputation."

The woman gave a loud convulsive sob.

"Easy now, Mrs. Willard," the chauffeur said soothingly.

"Oh, my poor dear Jeff! Why did he bother with those fool inventions? He had enough money." Tears flowed anew.

The sheriff snapped my arm and

sent me lurching five paces. "Now get out of here," he ordered. "You got a nerve coming here at a time like this. Mrs. Willard's just lost her husband. Beat it."

I felt the muscles ridge whitely along my jawbones. "Now look here," I said angrily. "All I wanted was to ask a civil question and—"

The chauffeur hit me this time. He caught me behind the ear with a blow that had all the bells of Notre Dame ringing in my head. I never saw him sneak up behind me and the next thing I knew I was looking up at him through glazed eyes from a sitting position on the grass.

I got up slowly. I balled my fists. A white sheet of anger blinded me. I moved slowly toward him. He tossed his cap to the ground and struck a fighting position. I plunged in.

"Richard!" Mrs. Willard screamed.

I damaged my knuckles against his teeth and took a glancing blow on the ear. I measured his chin and hauled off and the world fell on top of me. The earth pitched upward and smacked me in the mouth. I rolled over very slowly. My eyeballs felt as big as ostrich eggs and I got a hazy picture of Sheriff Steen wiping some blood and hair from my scalp off the butt of his huge forty-five Colt.

The chauffeur set his cap back at a rakish angle. "Get off the grounds," he ordered.

The sheriff stooped and got my wrists in his big paws, slung me over his shoulder like an empty meal sack, and dumped me back in my coupé. "Now get rolling," he said. "Get out o' Luden's Corners, buddy."

Schumaker was watching me with slitted eyes. Mrs. Willard had half the handkerchief balled up in her teeth. Richard, the chauffeur, kept clenching and unclenching his fists. Sheriff Steen twirled the forty-five with his thick index finger by its trigger guard.

It didn't take a blueprint to guess that they did not want me around there.

My skull was burning where Steen had conked me. My dignity was badly battered. My self-respect hung about me in tatters. Viciously I kicked the starter and careened the car in a U-turn over a flower bed and a small Australian hedge and back onto the gravel path.

Of one thing I had become increasingly certain. Schumaker really must have swiped that ring, or something even more valuable from the corpse in the wrecked car. How else explain his unreasonable anger at any mention of the ring? Certainly his local reputation must have been solid enough not to be injured by my implication of funny business.

I decided to have one more look at Schumaker's place. He was a bachelor and he had his living quarters above the chapel of his undertaking establishment. I parked the car around the corner and walked back.

### CHAPTER III

**I**T WAS a private dwelling converted to suit his profession. The upper floor had a living room and two bedrooms. They were all nicely furnished, in a practical bachelor fashion. I judged Schumaker hadn't got married because none of the local belles relished the prospect of living in rooms below which a cadaver or two often reposed. You couldn't blame them. A strange corpse in the house might produce chronic insomnia.

In the bureau drawer of the first bedroom I found a box containing cheap pearl studs and a fifth of Irish whiskey. I left the studs and stuck the Irish in my side pocket. Before this day was over, I felt, I would be badly in need of a drink.

I went through that room like an electric ray. The bureau, the mattress, the lining of Schumaker's clothes, every conceivable hiding place. I found nothing of interest. And then I lifted the linen cover on

the telephone table and saw the green oblong slip of paper.

It was a certified check for five thousand dollars, made out to Herman Schumaker, and signed by Jefferson Willard, the inventor whose remains now lay spread over the countryside around his craggy mansion.

I folded it neatly and put it in my pocket. It might subsequently induce Herman Schumaker to disgorge some information.

I turned and started down the steps and saw the two men coming up at the same time they saw me.

Schumaker let out a bellow of rage. Sheriff Steen produced his forty-five and turned its muzzle toward me up the stairs. From that angle I could look down the barrel and see the lead tip of the big shell and it was like staring into the gaping mouth of a Singapore defense gun.

I was caught and I knew it and they knew it and there wasn't one blessed thing I could do about it.

"All right, come on down," Steen said quietly, and backed toward the chapel, keeping the gun on me.

I walked slowly down the stairs. Schumaker was sputtering and fuming. The sheriff said: "House-breaking and attempted burglary. If you've got an excuse, let's hear it."

I gulped. "I took an order from Mr. Schumaker this afternoon for some coffins. He forgot to sign it. I came back looking for him."

"That's a lie!" Schumaker yelled. "I did so sign it."

"Too thin," the sheriff muttered. "You knew confounded well Herm wasn't at home. You knew he was over to the Willard place. Who is this fellow anyway, Herm?"

"He's a coffin salesman," Schumaker said.

Steen squirted a yellow stream of tobacco juice into a silver-plated cuspidor. "Search him, Herm."

And so of course they found the gun—the little .22 I'd taken away from the girl earlier in the forenoon



and dropped into my pocket. The bottle of Irish came out and the five thousand dollar check along with it. Schumaker tried to stuff it into his own pocket, but I forestalled that by saying to the sheriff:

"Ask him about that check, Steen. Five thousand kissers from Jefferson Willard. What's it for?"

Steen's heavy black brows came together in a jagged bar across the bridge of his nose. "What about it, Herm?"

Schumaker colored and gulped audibly. "Why, I—I— Mr. Willard gave it to me yesterday. He wanted me to take care of building him a mausoleum over at the cemetery." The words rushed out and he looked relieved.

Patently it was a lie. But the sheriff swallowed it. He hefted the .22 in his free hand, stowed it away. "Coffin salesman, eh?" he said. "With maybe a couple of side interests. You got a license for this weapon?"

"Sure," I told him. "But I left it home."

"Well, we can check on that later. Come on, buddy, I'm takin' you over to the jail. You're gonna have a nice long rest. Get movin'." And he shoved the snout of the forty-five into my spine.

"May as well ride," I suggested and led the way to my car, which was parked around the block. The sheriff sat beside me, resting his cannon on one knee.

**L**UDEN'S CORNERS possessed a small but compact jail. It had four cells, two on each side of a narrow corridor. They tossed me into one. Seated morosely on a cot in the opposite one was the village drunk, singing, "If I Had the Wings of An Angel," in a discordantly cracked voice.

I perched disconsolately on the edge of the cot and abandoned myself to some deep cerebration. I got a lot of figures but none of them added up to anything. I thought about

the topaz-eyed lass waiting for me at the Excelsior Hotel and began to gnash my teeth. Afternoon shadows lengthened through the barred window and I got up and began to pace nervously about.

A key grated in the lock.

I whirled. Sheriff Steen held the door open. His face wore a disgusted look. "Come on," he growled. "Get out o' here."

I stared at him. "What happened?"

"Schumaker changed his mind. He said he ain't goin' to make no charge ag'in' you if you get out o' town. He's givin' you one hour. If you ain't gone by then we're gonna hold you for trial by the circuit court on a charge of burglary. Now dust."

"Mr. Schumaker," I said, "is a very kind gentleman. If you see him, thank him. If I see him I'll push his teeth down his throat. Good day."

The coupé was waiting for me outside the jail. I climbed in and drove directly to the Excelsior Hotel. I knew that's where the girl was stopping because it was the only hotel of which the town could boast.

It was a ramshackle frame building, two stories high, badly in need of paint. Ancient potted palms drooped dejectedly in the lobby. Behind the desk a seed-looking clerk was reading a book on How to Become a Detective. I sneaked up on him and said: "*Hsst!*" and he jerked his eyes up and swallowed a wad of gum he'd been chewing.

"Have you got a room?" I asked.

He swung the registration book around. There was only one entry for the whole day. It read: *Anne Perrin, Cincinnati. Room 219.*

That had to be her.

I glanced up at the clerk. "Sorry. Don't think I'll stay in this fire trap." And I walked out on to the porch while he ogled me through eyes the size of quarters. Through the window I saw him shrug and go back to his book.

I sneaked across the lobby, danced up the single flight to the second

floor and knocked softly on the door of 219. There was a muffled gasp, a soft inhalation of breath, then silence. I knocked again. After a wait I rattled the door knob. I got no more response than if I'd been knocking on Napoleon's tomb.

"Anne!" I whispered, putting my mouth close to the door. "This is Todd—John Todd. Open up."

And still she refused to answer. That meant one of three things. Either she couldn't, or didn't want to, or somebody else was there in the room with her. In any case I wanted the answer.

I backed up three paces and let my shoulder smack the door. The wood around the lock was old and rotted and it wasn't much of a lock anyway, so the door flew inward at the first crack, carrying me halfway into the room. I came up short, staring into a tiny automatic.

It was the .22 Sheriff Steen had taken away from me at Schumaker's Mortuary. It was held in the slender, very lovely hand of Anne Perrin, the little queen ~~let~~ whom I had already gotten myself into some tough jams.

She wasn't wearing the wide-brimmed hat now, and her hair, black as polished gunmetal, was combed casquelike over her shoulders. Her face was even whiter than before, but her eyes—that's what got me. They seemed to shrivel with fear. Her body was literally frozen with terror. The veins stood out in delicate transparent blue against the white column of her throat.

She had hold of that gun, was pointing it at me, and her trigger finger, I saw, was tensed and quivering nervously. A lump swelled at the base of my tongue and wedged it down. I opened my mouth to speak and then I opened my arms as she collapsed into them with a soft, gurgling moan, out as cold as Siberia in mid-winter. The .22 bounced lightly against the frayed green carpet.

I picked her up, carried her gently

to the bed and settled her on the cover. I picked up the gun and started chafing her wrists. After a moment her eyelids flickered open and a little of the color returned to her cheeks.

"Anne," I said, "where did you get that gun?"

Her voice was small. "I brought it from Cincinnati."

"No, I mean where did you get it after I took it away from you this afternoon?"

She jerked bolt upright. Her fingers plucked frantically at my sleeve as something returned to her memory. Fear, stark abject terror, twisted her face. Her voice was like the crumpling of tissue paper.

"I—I found it here on the floor," she said. "After I'd gone down for some air. And I found something else too. *He* was here—that man—"

Suddenly I stiffened. My gaze riveted over her shoulder to the closet door. "Shh!" I hissed, and yanked her off the bed to the floor and dropped to one knee beside her.

**V**ERY slowly, a fraction of an inch at a time, the closet door was opening. The faintest squeak and I felt the flesh crawling between my shoulder blades. I was practically transfixed, watching that door, and I didn't even aim the gun.

It's funny, but at times like that you think of all the nightmares you had when you were a kid and you wonder strangely whether now some frightful and misshapen ogre will suddenly materialize.

Then my heart suffered a violent spasm as the door suddenly swung fully open and a figure plunged out. And only at that moment did I galvanize my muscles and point the gun.

But it was not necessary.

The figure had plunged forward, and down, hitting his face against the floor with a dull meaty impact. After that he lay quite still, the lumpy shoulders bunched under the coat. I glanced at Anne. Her mouth was open and her body was rigid and trem-

bling. Her knuckles were a gleaming bone-white around my arm. I unclasped them and got up and walked gingerly over to the fallen figure.

I prodded him over with my toe, but even before I did that I knew who it was. Herman Schumaker was dead, as dead as a bullet hole squarely through the left temple could make him. His lips were drawn flat against his teeth in a grimace of agony, as if he'd tried to beg for his life before the slug had pushed him over the brink of this world into the next.

I turned back to Anne and dug my fingers into her shoulders until the numb, glazed look vanished from her eyes. I touched the tip of the .22 to my nostrils and sniffed. There was no mistaking the sharp acrid odor of burnt cordite.

"Anne," I said slowly, "did you kill him?"

She shook her head. "Oh, no. . . no. . . . It was just like I told you. I came back here and found him on the floor. It—it was terrible."

"On the floor?"

She nodded wordlessly.

"He was dead, eh?"

"Very."

"How did he get in the closet?"

She swallowed and said, brushing her hands before her eyes as if she would like to erase the memory: "I was standing here, staring at him and then suddenly I heard somebody outside. I didn't know it was you. I wanted to hide the body. I was frightened—so I dragged him—I don't know yet where I found the strength to do it—to the closet and stood him up and closed the door, not tightly enough, I guess. Anyway the catch must have slipped open."

I chewed on my lip. "Anne, somebody has piled a beautiful frame around us. Steen had that gun and he let me out of jail, knowing I'd come here. They probably connected me with you because of the questions I'd asked. They can prove that I'd fought with Schumaker, that I was afraid he'd testify against me on a burglary

charge. They're out to get me, why, I don't know. They want to build me a gallows and stretch my neck so hard I—"

"John!" she broke in with a gasp, flashing her wrist to her mouth. "Oh, John, what are we going to do?"

"You're going to stay right here," I told her. "Me, I'm going to take Schumaker's body out of this hotel and hide it until I can knock some sense out of this thing."

"Why—why—don't you just dump him in one of the empty rooms?"

"Because I don't know which rooms are unoccupied and I can't go around breaking down all the doors in this joint. And because if I did it would be noticed and the body discovered. No, Anne, I've got to get him out of here—and right away."

Twilight had settled over Luden's Corners and I pulled the curtain aside and peered down into the street. It was deserted, this being the supper hour. The wound in Schumaker's temple had leaked a stain along his face. With a moistened handkerchief I wiped the blood off. Then I found his hat—a somber black Fedora—and pulled it down over his forehead, hiding the bullet hole. I got one chubby arm around my neck, straightened and let his loose figure dangle heavily at my side.

Then I started quietly down the stairs. The sweat was streaming in wide rivulets down my back. Behind the desk the clerk's nose was buried in his book. I started quietly across the lobby, choking back a grunt at Schumaker's dead weight, keeping an oblique eye on the clerk.

My toe struck a frayed thread in the carpet and I stumbled. I regained my balance immediately, but the clerk was looking up now, gaping.

I said querulously: "You fat rumpot! You never know when you've had enough. Always drunk—always hitting the bottle. . ." and I kept up like that, dragging him across the lobby with increased speed and through the door down the porch stairs.

I jerked open the coupé door and stuffed him inside beside the wheel. The baggage compartment would have been better, but I'd seen the clerk edging around his desk.

I hopped behind the wheel, kicked the motor over, and ground away from the curb, just as he came running out onto the porch, waving his arms and yelling: "Hey! Hey you!" But that was all I heard.

I took the next corner in a careening turn. Herman Schumaker slumped heavily against my shoulder and the blood curdled around my stomach. You think I'm squeamish for a guy who sells wooden night-gowns? Listen, brother, have you ever sat in your car with a corpse beside you, the murder gun in your pocket, and a hard-boiled sheriff on your tail so hostile he'd burst a blood vessel laughing if a lynching party broke into his jail to cart you off?

Run that around in your thinker for a while and maybe you'll know how I felt. Of course I could have ditched the gun, but something told me I'd be needing it badly before this night was over.

#### CHAPTER IV

**S**CHUMAKER'S MORTUARY was dark. I parked the car outside, saw that the street was deserted, slung the dead undertaker over my shoulder and lugged him into the reception room. I did not stop. I kept on going, groping my way through to the chapel.

Then, closing the door, I scratched a match, found the light switch, and gave the room a dose of soft amber electricity. I picked Schumaker up again and carried him down to the basement. Then I went back for one of the cheap pine boxes.

In a way it was kind of ironical. I'll bet he never expected to be laid out in his own place so soon. A long wicker basket rested on the table with its lid off and as I passed it I glanced inside and started to gag. A

sleazy feeling twisted my insides.

In that basket, exactly as Schumaker had left him earlier in the day, were the remains of Mr. Jefferson Willard. There had been no attempt to arrange the mangled fragments in some semblance of human form.

I slapped the lid back into place. Then I opened the pine box and picked Schumaker off the floor and was just about to lay him out inside the coffin when the voice behind me said:

"Never mind, Todd. Just drop him."

Schumaker fell soggy to the concrete floor. I turned slowly. Sheriff Steen was at the base of the stairway. His forty-five was lined against my ticker. His mouth was snagged down at the corners. His eyes were like frozen puddles of mud water. He hadn't made a sound coming down those stairs.

"So you didn't get out of town," he said softly.

"How—" I started.

"Did I know you were here? By your car. You left it parked outside. That was dumb, Todd. If you wanted to kill Schumaker you should've sneaked back without it."

"I didn't kill him."

"No?" Sarcasm laced his voice. "Maybe you'll tell me who did."

"Sure," I said. "You."

"What!" He almost strangled on the word.

"You killed him," I went on. "He was shot with the .22 you took away from me. You let me out of jail, knowing he was dead. You wanted to frame me back at the hotel. Only I got him out of there too soon."

For the space of several heartbeats he was dead silent. There was no more expression on his big wedge-shaped, shovel-chinned face than there was in the gun he clasped.

"You think you can make a jury believe a crazy story like that?"

"I can try. I'll find the evidence."

"How?" He showed yellowed teeth in a tight grin, "You're going back to

jail and you're going to stay there. This is a hangin' state, Todd. And we got hard-headed juries in this county. No smart lawyers from back East will do you any good. You're practically walkin' up those gallows steps now. Herm Schumaker was my friend an' I'm gonna see you get what's comin' to you."

I wet my lips and moved my hand toward my pocket.

"Easy, Todd," he snapped, his eyes hardening. "I'll get that gun myself."

He came around behind me and his big paw plucked the .22 out of my pocket. He came around and faced me again.

I said: "Mind if I smoke?"

He shrugged. "Go ahead."

I got out a cigaret and lit it. I kept it in my mouth, pulling it in with the tip of my tongue and biting off a piece. The smoke curled up around my eyes.

"About the gun," I said, "what happened to it?"

"After I took it away from you I loaned it to Schumaker. He said he might need it. He was scared you might break out of the jail. I guess when you sneaked back here he grabbed for it, but he wasn't fast enough. You took it away from him and shot him."

I bit off another piece of the cigaret and prayed that Steen wouldn't notice how fast it was being smoked down.

I said: "Didn't it strike you peculiar that he got so sore when I asked him about that ring?"

"He had a right to get sore. You were practically callin' him a ghoul, accusing him of robbin' corpses."

**I** TOOK a last bite of the cigaret, arranging the loose tobacco on my tongue. He stepped aside and waved his gun toward the stairs. I let my shoulders slump dejectedly and walked toward the passage. When I was right next to him I acted. Fast.

At the very instant I spat the to-

bacco into his eyes, I left my feet in a running dive at his stomach. He knuckled his eyes wildly with his left hand and triggered with his right.

The roar of the forty-five almost caved in my eardrums and I felt the heat of its muzzle blast scorch my hair. The bullet whined over my head and slapped viciously into the wall, sending a cascade of plaster to the floor. I didn't see that then, I was too busy slamming my fist into his midriff.

Steen went back with the impact and triggered twice more, but my lunge had thrown the barrel of his gun upward. Yet even as he fell he brought the gun down at my head, like a club. I didn't see it. I only guessed that was what he might do. And I threw my hand up in a gesture of protection and the gun barrel hit me squarely in the center of the palm. I closed my fist over it and with a wrenching twist jerked it out of his grasp.

We both hit the floor then, me on top, and I heard the ugly thud of Steen's skull smashing against the concrete. He went lax under me. I got up slowly. His eyes were squeezed tightly shut. They must have been burning like the fires of hell. Tobacco does that.

I didn't waste much time looking at him. He was out and he was going to be out for some time. I grabbed the .22 out of his pocket, kept the big Colt just to make sure, and left the three of them to do what they wanted: Willard, Schumaker and Steen.

The coupé was where I'd left it. I patted the fender. Good old coupé. It had been running me all over Ludden's Corners, from one tight spot to another. And if my hunch was right, this last spot I was going to hit would spell the difference between success and disaster. I use the word "disaster" advisedly because now more than my freedom was involved. My very life itself was at stake. If they didn't hang me by the neck until I



was dead, Sheriff Steen would put a slug through me on sight.

The great Willard mansion with its round turrets was a foreboding shadow set in weird relief against a hazy lemon-yellow moon that hung low in the sky like a porthole. The front gate was open and that was a good thing because I'd never have been able to scale that wall with the broken bottle fragments cemented to its upper ledge.

A light glowed in a second floor window and except for that the rest of the house was as dark as a beetle's eye. I patted both guns and bolstered my courage.

Somewhere in this house, or around these grounds, I hoped to find the evidence that would clear me of suspicion of murdering Herman Schumaker.

Near the rear I found a round iron manhole top, set in the lawn about three feet from the house. It was the coal chute. A dungeon like this probably used as much fuel as the *Queen Mary*. I tugged it out and rolled it to one side. I perched on the edge of the hole and let my feet dangle into the chute. Then I took a long breath, closed my eyes, gritted my teeth, and shoved off.

I went down that hole as if I were a roller coaster, about a pound of coal cinders swirling into my nostrils. It was a straight narrow ride and I got set to hit the floor. But I didn't hit it.

Instead, my legs jammed up against something that had been stuffed into the mouth of the chute and I came to a stop so short and sudden it almost sank my thighs through my pelvis. For an instant I lay there flat on my back in that well of blackness and then the blood went ice cold in my veins, congealed there, and a vacuum sucked at the pit of my stomach.

What if I was trapped here in the coal chute? There was nothing to grab onto so that I might pull myself back up again. The other end seemed blocked solid. I could scarcely

breathe; the air was dank and somewhat foul. And in that fleeting moment of stark terror that sent my heart pounding like a mallet against my ribs, I knew what it must be like to be trapped or buried alive.

But not me. I wasn't giving up without a struggle. I jacked my knees as high as the roof of the chute would permit, kicked out with all my force. I felt the obstruction move slightly. I tried again. It gave another fraction of an inch. I kept that up, kicking frantically, tearing my trousers, working my way slowly down the narrow passage.

**A**BRUPTLY the obstruction fell through the other end and I came sliding down, landing upon it. I knew I was in the coal bin. I got out another match and got a tiny flame burning, and twisted sideways with an oath. I twisted because the thing I was lying on top of was a young fellow about my own age and he was dead.

Even at that very moment I knew who he was because I spied the large Indian-head ring on the third finger of his left hand. It was Vic Perrin, Anne's brother, the guy who'd cracked his car up outside the town. Nobody'd bothered to shut his eyes and they were open and staring, rimmed with coal dust.

So Herman Schumaker had been lying. My guess was right. He had never cremated the guy at all. He had merely sold him to Jefferson Willard.

I pulled the Indian-head ring off his dead finger and stowed it away. I used half of the remaining matches finding my way through that labyrinth to the stairway leading to the ground floor of the house.

My feet sank into a rich-piled rug that lapped my ankles. Marble busts of Greek mythological characters graced deep niches in the walls. Dull-faced guys with ruffled collars stared down from oil paintings set in massive gilt frames.

I picked up the telephone and made

one call, giving instructions in an urgent whispered voice.

Then I tiptoed up the stairs and crept silently down the great hall until I came to a door under the crack of which a bar of yellow light glittered like a strip of gold on the carpet. I stuck my ear against the door and heard voices, but could not distinguish the words. Very slowly I turned the knob, got out the Colt and kicked the door wide open.

You never saw two people jump apart so swiftly. Mrs. Willard stood rigidly watching me through great molten eyes dripping with mascara. Richard, the chauffeur, crouched slightly forward, like an animal poised to leap. I grinned at them, but it was not a pleasant grin, more of a leer.

"Well, well," I said. "So you've got free rein in the house, eh, Richard? You didn't wait long after the demise of your late beloved employer, did you?"

Richard's face was set in the hard mold of a bronze cast. His eyes were burning at me, his long fingers hung like hooks at his sides. "They never learn," he said more to himself than to anybody in that room.

The woman drew herself up to her full regal height. "What do you mean by this outrageous intrusion?" she cried haughtily. "How dare you break into my room at night!"

It was a good act and for a second it almost got me, and then I could see the apprehension that seemed to shrivel her eyes in their sockets. I realized then what a sight I must have presented with my torn, grimy clothes; my face caked with soot; the huge gun leveled right at them. I remembered, too, her husband's remains lying in a cheap wicker basket in Schumaker's embalming room. And I knew that she knew what I'd found in the coal chute.

I said: "Come off your horse, Mrs. Willard. The game is up, finished. The song is ended, but the melody is going to carry you right up the thirteen

steps of the gallows as an accessory before the fact to a charge of murder."

SHE exchanged one frightened glance with Richard, then uttered a deep moan and threw her hands out and sank to the carpet. It was a beautiful act and it accomplished its purpose. For an instant my gaze wavered to her alone, stuck there. And that was when Richard fired the shot through his pocket.

It was timed miraculously and the bullet slammed against my arm, knocked the Colt to the floor and spun me halfway around. It was the first time I'd ever been shot so I didn't try to stay on my feet.

Mrs. Willard snatched the forty-five and leaped to her feet with the agility of a jungle cat. Richard strode over and planted a kick against my ribs.

"Accessory to a murder," he growled. "Whose murder, Todd? Yours?"

My whole shoulder was numb, bereft of any feeling whatever, but I knew it would start hurting like the hammers of hell itself before long.

"Maybe," I said, "but more specifically the murder of her husband and of Herman Schumaker. I also know who did the actual killing."

Richard took the gun out of his pocket. It was still smoking, a grey thread wisping up from the muzzle. He blew it away and let the gun hang at his side.

"Keep on talking," he said. "I like the sound of your voice."

"The way I see it," I told him, "Mr. Willard was probably in a bad way financially. He needed money and he decided to collect on his own life insurance policy. He must have carried at least a hundred grand. So he entered into a scheme with Schumaker to defraud the insurance company. Schumaker was to supply the body. Willard was to supply the explosion. They would put the body in Willard's laboratory and when it blew

up nobody could say it was not Jefferson Willard. His wife would collect, sell the house, meet him in Havana, and they would live comfortably on the proceeds of the deal for some time.

"When Vic Perrin cracked up outside of Luden's Corners, Schumaker had his body. He gave out the story that it was a hobo in some jalopy and claimed to have cremated the body. I saw some dirt and stone fragments in Schumaker's valise. That's what he probably put in in place of the body. The body itself he turned over to Willard."

The chauffeur hiked up his brows. "Very interesting. And quite accurate. You know, you've really got a brain, Todd. Go ahead."

Mrs. Willard was breathing heavily, her lips showing grey under the thick layer of rouge.

I looked at her, said: "You were willing to collect that hundred grand from the insurance company, but you didn't want to share it with your husband. You had a better idea. So you enlisted the chauffeur's help in double-crossing him. You probably knocked your husband out, had Richard place him in the laboratory and detonate the explosive that had been arranged for Vic Perrin's already dead body."

Her tongue darted snakelike over her lips.

"Precisely," Richard said. "And we hid Perrin's body in the coal chute. I presume you already know about that. We'll have to stuff him back up there—and you with him. You see, Todd, we didn't plan on selling this house. Nobody's crazy enough to buy it. So as long as we were collecting from insurance companies we decided to set it on fire. There won't be much left of you—or Perrin. The fire fighting apparatus in this town is very bad. And a good soaking in kerosene does wonders."

I sucked in a long breath. "What happened to Schumaker?"

RICHARD shrugged. "He was like you, Todd. He noticed too many things. Like the size of Willard's shoes. He guessed there'd been a double-cross. So he admitted it, and he was scared. I had him call the sheriff and get you released, told him it would be safer if you got out of town.

"Then I lured him into the girl's room and put a bullet through his skull and left him there. It made me laugh because I used the same gun Steen had loaned him for self-protection. I wanted you out of jail as a first-rate suspect."

"It certainly worked like a charm," I said. "Steen is looking for me now."

I was squatting on the floor and so of course he could not see me slip my hand into the pocket of my coat farthest away from him. They stood there, very grim and businesslike, the two of them, with a couple of murders under their belts and a third coming up, and they didn't seem to be troubled about it at all. Then Richard started to lift his gun. His eyes were like bits of wire, suddenly hard and glinting and expressionless.

"You knew," I said quite casually, "it was the five-thousand-dollar check Willard gave Schumaker that first gave me the connection. It's really funny your shooting Schumaker with the .22 because I've got it in my pocket right now. You should have looked for it, Richard."

And I shot him twice, not taking any chances.

Richard's jaw fell slack and his eyes opened as wide as saucers. Surprise rioted across his face and he swayed back and forth, teetering on his toes, and suddenly collapsing like a deserted marionette.

Then I started to swing around to cover Mrs. Willard because she still had hold of the forty-five. But I was too late. She had it in both hands, aimed point-blank at my face and her trigger finger was bone white.

The shot rocked through the room and I stiffened against an impact

that never came. And while I watched, Mrs. Willard's face suddenly contorted, became hideous with shock, and the Colt slipped out of her fingers and bounced on the floor. I saw the spurt of blood against her shoulder and then she staggered back against the edge of the damask-covered bed.

I'd had no way of knowing for sure that Sheriff Steen had arrived, but I'd been banking on it. He came into the room, carrying an ancient six-shooter and gazing at it in surprise, as if he hadn't expected it to work at all. A wad of chewing tobacco ballooned one cheek and his shovel-chin was pumping furiously.

"Came right after you called me, Todd," he drawled. "Was standin' outside the door all the time. Heard

everything. You got a lot of guts, buddy, yes, sir."

He looked anxiously around for something in which to dispose of his tobacco juice, failed to locate it, and swallowed with evident distress.

He shook his head. "They must be nuts to think they coulda got away with it."

"All murderers are nuts," I told him, "including A. Schickelgruber of Berlin, Germany. I hope Luden's Corners has a good doctor. I think I'm bleeding to death."

He put his head back and laughed. "Ain't got a doctor at all," he choked. "He's away on a fishin' trip."

It was like I told Anne later—I don't mind selling coffins. I just wouldn't like living in one.



## "I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do—well—there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and now—?—well, I own control of the largest daily newspaper in our County. I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine. I own my own home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God, and when you do if there is poverty unrest,

unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be—all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a post-card to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 442, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was.—Advt. Copyright, 1939, Frank B. Robinson.

# Death Is a Traitor

By Charles Larson

|| *Homicide is a short cut to big money.* ||  
|| *But it's a shorter cut to the Big House.* ||



THE last jurymansat down, put one hand on each knee, and stared at the judge. No one in the courtroom spoke; the only sound was the whirring rustle of an electric fan, like the sound of a woman crossing her silken legs.

The judge said, "Will the defendant stand and face the jury?"

The young man's lawyers helped him up. He stood, on tiptoe, frowning at the jury box. Frightened, awkward. On tiptoe.

"Why is he standing like that?" someone in the audience asked . . .

It was on a Friday evening late in September, while he was sitting across from his brother in a booth in the Palace Bar, when Harley Jackson decided to murder his stepfather, and to frame his brother for it.

A juke box was playing "Rocking Chair," and a girl with a whiskey voice was singing. Up front two waitresses were giggling at something a soldier was saying; in the opposite booth a drunk was having a messy time with a bowl of chili.

Hot, the evening was, and sticky, and not quite clean, as though it had been left over from noon. In bedrooms, people were pushing off sheets, and sticking bare legs over the edge of the beds, and hunting restlessly for cool spots on their pillows.

Hot. A night for crime and evil.

Harley's brother, George, blunt and stocky and hairy in his open-necked,

rolled-sleeve shirt, said: "Buy you another drink?"

Harley shrugged his shoulders and raised his eyebrows.

George slapped the table with his open hand and bawled, "Honey, some service down this way." He sighed and leaned against the back of the booth, pushing out his lower lip and blowing his breath up over his face. "Hot," he said. "Too damn hot to live."

His words were mushy. He'd had four drinks. He opened his moist eyes and looked across the table at Harley. "The old boy's gonna have a tough night," he said. "This damn heat makes him sweat, and cancer must be a hell of a thing to have when you sweat." He paused. "Incidentally, I seen you talking with the doctor. What's he say?"

Harley crushed his cigarette in an ashtray. "That he'll live a long time yet. That you and I should stop our worrying about getting it. That if I didn't stop worrying, he'd send me away." Harley laughed. "He also gave me a long sermon on the delicacy of the human mind. He said that rest homes and asylums are filled with loyal sons who had too much worry on the brain."

"He'll live?" George said. "Holy cow, how long? It's been three years. He shouldn't have to live. Somebody ought to put him away." He moved his arm suddenly. "Kill him."

Harley said, "Um," but he wasn't listening. He was watching the waitress who had come for their order. Watching her eyebrows raise and her eyes widen. She hadn't heard everything George had said, only that last,

"Somebody ought to put him away. Kill him," and she was looking at him as though he were something crawling.

Up front the soldier put another nickel in the juke box and Bing Crosby began singing. The drunk across the way swabbed ineffectually at his shirt where a chili bean had dropped. A girl passing outside laughed shrilly.

"What'll you have?" Harley asked.

"Eh?" George glanced at the waitress. "Oh. Oh, Scotch." He held up his hand, fingers spread. "Scotch," he said. "I like Scotch."

"Two Scotches," Harley said. He watched the waitress' legs as she walked away. But he was thinking of her raised eyebrows, and her abruptly shocked face, and he was thinking—

IT WAS twelve-thirty when Harley got George home and in bed. The night had cooled suddenly, as nights in early fall are liable to do, and George resented it.

While Harley pulled his socks off, George stared at the ceiling and mumbled: "Damn weather. Damn city. Damn state. I'm cold. Cripes, I am cold. Whee!"

Harley shushed, and George shushed back, and kept on shushing because the sound pleased him. Bubbles formed and broke at the corners of his mouth.

Outside, a roof-high hollyhock brushed against the window, and somewhere a cricket croaked off-key.

Suddenly George started singing under his breath. "God bless A-mer-i-ca, land that I love. Stand beside her, da-da-da-di, da-da-da da-da-da from above." He paused reverently. "That's a beautiful song, Harley," he said. "Beautiful thought."

"Yes. Go to sleep. Don't sing any more tonight; you'll wake up Pop."

"Uh? Pop. Don't wake up Pop, Harley. Sssh."

Harley hung his brother's pants over a chair, and laid his shirt on the foot of the bed.

"Good ol' Pop. Too bad. Nice fellow. I like Pop. Lots of character."

Harley walked across the room to the bureau, opened the top drawer.

"Harley."

"Yes?"

"Harley, I'm no good. I'm no good, Harley."

Moonlight from the window glistened on the metal of George's gun as Harley lifted it from the drawer, broke it to notice that it was fully loaded, and slipped it into his hip pocket.

"Yes, you are," he said. "Go to sleep."

"No, I'm not." George's voice became hoarse, and wetness glistened on his cheek. "I'm no good. What if Pop could see me now? He'd be ashamed of me." He swallowed. "I'm no good. I'm no good," he said.

"You're all right," Harley said. He closed the bureau drawer and moved back to the bed.

"No, I'm not."

Harley bent to the floor and picked up George's shoes. He sat on the edge of the bed, and removed his own and put George's shoes on his feet. Then he stood up. "Good night," he said.

"G'n . . ." George raised one hand and let it fall again.

The floor creaked as Harley wandered to the door, opened it and stepped into the hall. A thin band of moonlight caught the handle of a gun sticking out of his hip pocket, and flashed across George's face . . .

His stepfather's room was on the ground floor, directly under George's. It was long and narrow and it smelled of sickness. Harley closed his eyes until the nausea in the back of his head quieted, then slowly he closed the door behind him and moved to the foot of the bed. A breeze trembled like a caught butterfly in the curtains of the one open window, and the dark rich smell of moist earth was plain on the air. Again moonlight sparked, tinder-like, on the metal in Harley's hand.

The bulge on the bed grunted, and



one white hand pushed out of the covers.

*That thing is my step-father, Harley thought. And I'm going to kill him. Why? Because he's useless. Because he suffers and should die anyway? Or because he's making our money melt as fast as his body is melting? Our money. My money. My money. Mine by right. Not his, or George's. Mine. His insurance is still great. He hasn't bored into that yet. I've got to live, haven't I? I've got to eat and buy clothes, haven't I? My money. My money.*

The bulge on the bed stiffened, and a white head rose, and two eyes glittered in the darkness. "Hmn?" the old man said. His voice was heavy with sleep.

Harley said, aloud, "My money," and pulled the trigger of George's gun. . . .

**A**FTER it was all over, and the old man lay curled like a scared caterpillar on the bed, Harley put the gun back in his pocket and walked to the window. He leaned his hands on the sill and let the breeze sweep across his hot face. The ground outside was broken and spaded, waiting for new grass, and it smelled young. For just a moment Harley waited, hanging his head downward, wondering if he were going to be sick. Then, grunting a bit, he hoisted his legs through the window and dropped to the ground outside.

He folded his thin arms across his chest, and slowly, without glancing back at the window, began walking toward a break in the laurel hedge on the opposite side of the newly smoothed ground. He moved crookedly, as a drunk might, and he pressed his weight firmly on each foot. His brother was a heavy man.

At the break in the laurel hedge, he turned, without moving his feet, and looked at the marks he had made in the dirt. There were several shoe prints, some quite plain. He felt satisfied.

He turned back, and, still pressing firmly with each foot, made his way around the laurel hedge, past the side of the house and up the front steps. Muddy prints followed him, like a swimmer's when he walks on concrete.

In his brother's room, he removed the shoes he had on and put on his own once more. He took his brother's gun from his hip pocket, wiped it carefully on the bed clothes, and placed it in his brother's open hand. Gently he closed George's fingers about the gun and left the room.

Fifteen minutes later, when he had put on his pajamas and slippers and had carefully mussed up his bed, he called the police. . . .

The police were more than efficient. They listened attentively to Harley's story of waking in the night, hearing a shot, and seeing a man jump from his father's window and run across the yard. They measured the shoe prints and told Harley the murderer was a big man, heavy, and either crippled, nervous, or drunk. And they arrested George. It was over as quick as that.

Harley was in the yard, clicking his tongue over the line of shoe prints, when they brought George to the scene of his crime. A young patrolman, very proud of handling a murderer, pushed him to the window and said, "Here he is."

George looked sick and confused.

The proud patrolman raised his hand, showing the mud-coated shoes Harley had worn. "Also I found these," he said. "And this." He turned half around so they could see the butt of George's pistol sticking out of his hip pocket.

"What the hell goes on here?" George asked.

One of the policemen had taken George's shoes from the patrolman and was examining them. "We'll have to check the mud later," he said, "but I'll bet my life these are the shoes that made the tracks." He turned his head to one side and looked at George. "Your shoes?"

"Yes, but—"

"Is this the guy you saw?" The policeman had turned to Harley.

"Would someone mind—" George began.

Harley said, "George, why the devil did you do it?"

George stuck his chin out and drew his thick eyebrows down. "What the devil did I do?" he asked.

"You killed Pop."

"I—" He paused. "Did I?"

"What is this?" The detective's mushy voice was irritated.

George was rubbing a hand through his bushy hair. "I can't remember a damn thing," he said.

"At the Palace you kept saying someone ought to kill him, but I didn't think—"

"Oh, my God!"

"I saw you jump out of the window. You looked up at me, and waved the gun, and started running. I tried to stop you, but you only ran faster."

Harley watched his brother's face, and felt very good. The policemen were also watching George.

**B**UT George's next action was so unexpected and so theatrical that even the proud patrolman wasn't aware that George had taken his gun until he felt it rammed into his back. The patrolman raised his hands, moaning, and avoided the detective's eyes.

In the yard, the men scattered like frightened tropical fish when their tank is tapped. All except Harley. It seemed he was living one of those dreams that have you crawling on your hands and knees while someone is shooting at you. He felt alone and naked and guilty as Judas Iscariot. Silently he watched George's eyes over the shoulder of the not-so-proud patrolman.

"George," he said.

George raised the gun. "You first," he said. "Then me. Maybe I killed him. Probably, if you saw me. I was drunk. But my brother—my brother—" he paused. "Pray, Harley."

And Harley started running. He whirled and ran like a frightened rabbit toward the break in the laurel hedge. Behind him he could hear the sharp snicks on the ground where bullets hit. Sobbing, he ran into the arms of the patrolman at the laurel hedge. Then he turned.

The proud patrolman had disarmed George and was holding one arm crossed behind his back.

And, parallel to the shoe prints he had made across the yard after he had murdered his step-father were the prints he had just made. That was all he could see. All in the world. Just those two sets of prints.

"Holy Joe!" a mushy voice behind him murmured. "Don't you see? I knew those damn prints weren't right. The little one testified he'd seen the murderer running across the yard. He made that very clear. But look at the prints he made while he was running. Not whole prints by a damn sight. Just toe prints. See? He made the other prints himself, with his brother's shoes, and he had to walk so they'd be nice and clear. If a murderer had run across the yard, fast, trying to really get speed, there would have been only toe prints. Not the whole shoe. We'd better check for loose threads from the little guy's socks on the insides of those shoes. . . ."

. . . . In the courtroom, people held their breaths. Reporters stood by the open doors, waiting.

"Have you reached a verdict?" the judge asked the foreman of the jury.

Knees cracking, the foreman stood up. "We have, your honor. We find Harley Jackson—guilty."

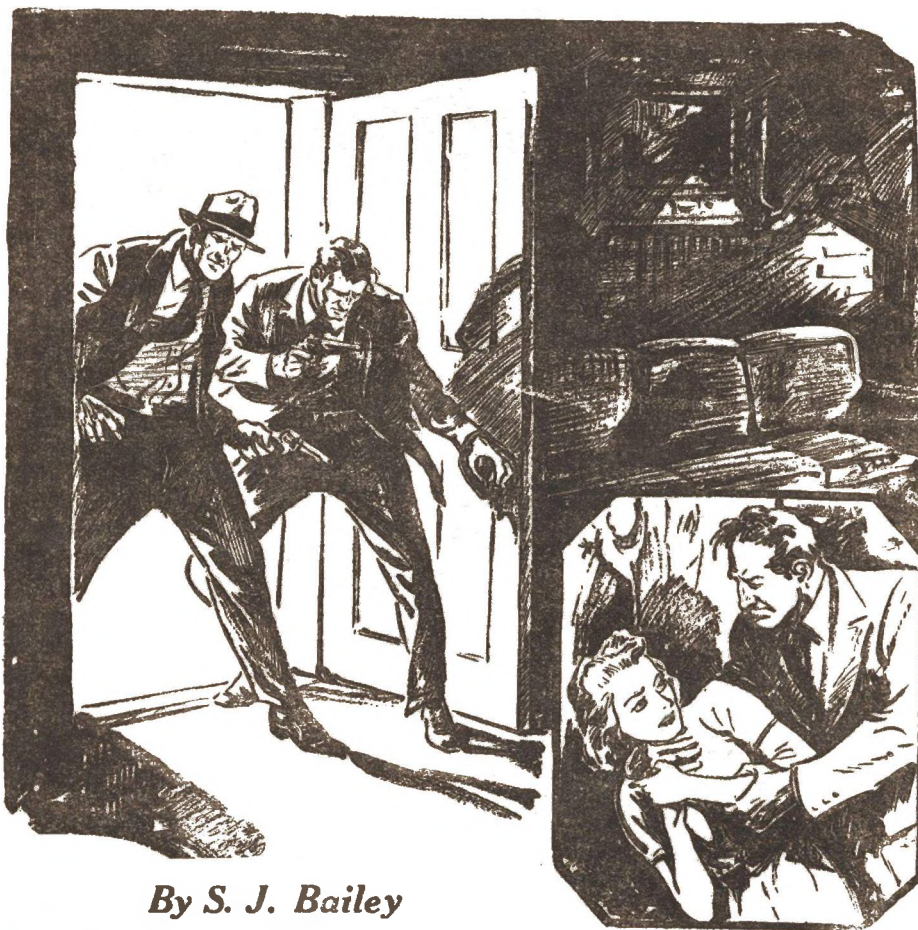
The reporters ran; the audience rose and shouted.

"Guilty," someone whispered. "He'll get life. Life in prison. Nothing worse."

And he shook his head as the police led Harley away. Harley walked slowly, jerking along. Awkwardly.

On tiptoe.

# The Devil's Handmaiden



By S. J. Bailey

|| This detective team pulled a Bowery bum act in a scheme to write finis to the sinister chapter of a shakedown specialist. || P

ED RANDALL'S cigarette moved in short, jerky arcs. His stocky figure shifted nervously in the hot, murky doorway. The glow of his partner's butt hung steady; Ed Randall knew that his partner, Joe Selby, had it pasted as usual to his big, easy-going lip.

"I hope she comes soon," the glowing tip of Selby's cigarette bobbed as he spoke.

Randall tensed. He managed with

an effort to sound unconcerned. "Yeah."

"She ought to be along, unless Borden headed her off."

Randall's butt jumped. "Whadda you mean, headed her off?" he demanded thickly.

"Now don't get jumpy, Ed. All I said was—"

"Okey, okey. So you said it," grated Randall, feeling something in his stomach doing a back flip.

"I hear high heels," said Selby, leaning tensely forward. "A dame is coming."

"It isn't her," snapped Ed Randall.

"It's a dark night. How can you be so sure—"

"It isn't *her* walk. She doesn't waver along like a blind man tapping. She taps along like she knows where she's going."

"You sure been studying this dame." Selby's tones showed disgust.

"I'm a detective, ain't I? I'm supposed to study suspects."

"Yeah, and I'm a detective too, but I want hear the sweet music of you calling me 'sergeant' if you gum this case."

"Ah, who's gumming the case?" Randall's voice had a slight tremor.

"Look, just play your part, see? Do whatever you want, while you're planting that card in her room. But don't go studying the way she walks. Hell!"

"Aw, quit hanging crepe. Me, I want promotion, too."

"Yeah, but you got ten years ahead of me and my leaky valve. If I don't get stripes soon I never will."

"Don't worry, you ol' lepsided turkey, you'll get stripes." Randall tried to sound gruff, but something shook him below his ribs.

"Ssh! I hear more high heels."

"That's her now." Randall tried to sound casual.

"Okey, here I go do my stuff. Roll out, bum." Selby was making a pitiful attempt to throw a cheery note into his husky voice.

Two cigarettes went under heel. Two shadows broke from the doorway.

**S**ECOND Grade Detective Ed Randall, short, stocky figure rigged as a Bowery bum, shuffled across the street and draped himself on the steps of the brownstone building.

He saw his burly teammate, First Grade Detective Joe Selby, simulating a drunk, intercept the girl. Her high heels tapped faster. Randall

felt his stomach tighten into a hard knot.

"I'll scream if you don't let me alone!" Elva Shaw and her tormentor were almost opposite Randall now.

"Don't play hard to get."

Selby grabbed her and his big paw cupped her mouth, pushed her head back. He sank his lips into her throat. Her silk-clad figure glistened in the dull red glow from the big neon chop suey sign downstreet. Her heels clicked the pavement in desperate signal.

Ed Randall weaved to his feet, simulating a bum groggy from five-cent smoke. He was supposed to fumble around and break them apart and feint at Selby's jaw. Selby was supposed to pretend the blow had landed and stagger back, then crawl off downstreet.

But Randall saw Selby pawing the girl's body. His big, clumsy hand had ripped her dress. Randall forgot his part, reached out and spun Selby around and clipped him with his left.

Selby staggered back, recovered his balance, glowered at Randall in surprise. Randall stood his ground, chest heaving.

"Why you dirty little—" Selby dived at Randall, fists flailing.

Randall took the body blow, but sidestepped the heavy chin thrust. His own fist looped up and caught Selby under the ear. Selby whirled and pasted a quick jab that squeezed blood from Randall's nose. Randall plowed under Selby's guard and pushed him over the iron railing into the cellar areaway with a body blow that happened to hit a spot over Selby's heart.

When Randall heard the sickening thud of Selby's head striking the rubbish-strewn cement, he remembered the part he was supposed to be playing. He began to sway giddily.

Elva Shaw caught his arm. "Steady, now. Lean on me. Say, you're pretty weak for a guy that just landed a ten-dollar wallop."

"I—I saw him pawing you and— and I forgot I was so hun—" he broke off, pretending to be ashamed.

"Say, you've got muscle. How long've you been on the bum?"

"Not—long. I lost my job and—"

"Come on upstairs. I'll make some hot soup."

Randall leaned over and looked down at Selby's body. It hadn't moved.

**T**HE girl opened her door and the glow from the neon sign down-street lit the room dimly. She leaned against the inside of the door and Randall got the crazy notion she was waiting for him to kiss her. But he moved over to the window. A siren was screaming and he knew that somebody had called copper.

Elva Shaw turned on a small bulb in a cheap bridge lamp and her slim body disappeared behind a Japanese screen to reappear in a flowered cotton zipper robe that fitted her snugly in the right places. She bent over the electric plate. Ed Randall watched tensely the stray wisp of hair that had escaped the bun at the nape of her neck.

A few minutes later he was sipping the steaming tomato soup, looking down at the ambulance being loaded. The form on the stretcher was very quiet. Randall had a queer feeling, as if his stomach, his head, everything was wound up tight.

Elva Shaw turned off the lamp and knelt by the window. Randall sat beside her and for a while they talked of little things, but Randall's mind kept going back to Joe Selby, lying there so quietly on the stretcher.

After a time a man came up the brownstone steps. Elva Shaw got up and turned on the bridge lamp. "That's my brother Rod, coming."

A key fitted into the lock and the man pushed into the room. He had a youthful swaggering manner. His jaw dropped a notch when he saw Randall.

"Rod," said Elva, "this is Ed. A friend of mine."

"Oh." Rod scissored his long legs across the room. "Pleasta meetcha." He disappeared behind a cretonne curtain which barred Randall's view of the inner room. Randall heard the singing sound of a tie being ripped down under a starched collar.

"Well, I guess I'll be going."

Elva Shaw watched him to the stairs. He had a funny feeling that she wanted him to come back and say good night in a different way.

"I hope you get a job soon," she called after him softly.

Randall got down to the next floor and balled his fist and punched it into the wall—

Joe Selby was propped up in bed in the hospital and there was a half empty bottle of beer on the tray at his elbow. His eyes narrowed when Randall came in. "You plant it?"

Randall's eyes lowered. "Her brother came in. I didn't get a chance."

"Ah! Was a time when you could arrive at a beautiful understanding with a dame quicker than Riley could peel a banana. But this dame, you study the way she walks."

Randall eyed the beer bottle, morosely silent.

Selby held out his hand. "Gimme the card, bum."

Randall handed over a dog-eared three-by-five filing card. It was a printed form of the Northside Foundling Home describing a foundling which had been received and later adopted by a family named Brown.

"All you needed was to plant this so we could find it," scowled Selby.

"I didn't have a chance."

Selby stuck the card under the beer bottle. "Okay, Randall. Captain Pardue wants to know how I got all battered up. I'll tell him you landed one over my ticker, knowing it was acting up."

Randall stared at the beer bottle, twirling his hat.

"I told you I wanted stripes. But

you—you study a dame how she walks. She's guilty. She's *got* to be. She's the only one Borden could get his dope from. She works right in the Northside Foundling Home. We haven't a thing that would stand up in court against Borden, and the only way we can get it is to break her down."

"Maybe," said Randall listlessly.

"So if you got any compunctions about us planting this card record from the foundling home on her, remember it's only to make her talk because she's guilty."

"Suppose she ain't?"

"Listen," ground out Selby patiently. "We know Borden took her out, don't we? We know she has access to the records in the Home, although it's strictly against the rules to take the cards out. We also know her brother Rod drives for Borden. It stacks, don't it?"

"All except there isn't a thing directly connecting her with the smart racket Borden is running," stated Randall glumly.

"That's why we got to plant this card," said Selby. "We know Borden is a slick shakedown artist. He don't play for high stakes. He bleeds people here and there for a half grand or so at a time. He's strictly an angle man. He made a big mistake when he conked Carstairs—"

"That'll drag her into murder," interrupted Randall, trying to keep his voice down.

Selby glowered. "Don't interrupt me. He conked Carstairs but he's got himself so well covered, we can't hang a postage stamp on him. So—"

"You can laugh," broke in Randall, his mouth working, "but I know her pretty well now. I was with her quite a while last night. She's not a kid you'd find mixed in murder."

"Hell's bells," snorted Selby. "I've been trying to overlook your passes at that dame, but enough is enough. You're a detective, see? What would happen if detectives let themselves go for every crooked dame they saw?

Now, get this straight! You got a plain choice. Either you get kicked back into buttons for socking me to help a dame beat a rap or you get a chance to make First Grade."

"You—you called it," said Randall glumly.

The next night, when the girl came home, they went up and knocked and she recognized Randall right away. "Oh, hello! You look like you'd got a job or something."

Randall said, "This is Joe Selby, a—a friend of mine."

"Friend, my eye," cut in Selby, shouldering Randall into the room. "We're from headquarters, sister."

"You!" gasped Elva Shaw, backing away from Selby.

Randall licked his lips. It took Elva about thirty seconds to figure it out and when she did, she didn't open up on Randall. She just looked at him as if he were an insect in her coffee. She put her hands on her hips and her high heel tapped the bare floor. It echoed in Randall's writhing brain.

Joe Selby breezed around for a quick onee-over, pushed past Randall and seized the girl's handbag. He fumbled inside, his back partly turned, then whistled. The girl stopped tapping. Selby held the bag open for Randall to see, then held up the three-by-five card.

"Give me my bag!"

"Sit down," said Selby.

"I want my bag!"

Selby pushed her into a chair. He got the bridge lamp and tilted it so her profile was thrown on the wall. He waved the card under her nose. "What are you doing with the files of the Northside Foundling Home?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're a nurse and investigator for the Northside Foundling Home. You knew Jim Carstairs, didn't you?"

Elva Shaw paled. Her lips trembled. "Certainly. I went to the house to check up on them before they adopted the baby."

Selby stuck his face closer to



hers. "We know your pal Borden killed Carstairs!"

She recoiled. "My pal? You're crazy!"

"You know Borden. He picked you up in his car."

"Only once!" she gasped. "I told him I didn't want to go out with him!"

Selby glowered. "Don't give me that. You're the one Borden gets his dope from about the kids that are adopted by well-fixed people. He wants only the well-to-do ones so he won't have trouble getting a half grand out of them by pretending he's the baby's father, sick with grief. To get rid of him and his sob story and the possibility of his taking them to court, they pay off. Borden was once an actor and he's still a half-baked ham."

Elva's lips trembled. "I don't know anything about him."

"The only trouble was, he'd already bled this Carstairs on another of his slick, small-time shakedowns. Carstairs recognized his telephone voice and made a date to trap him. Carstairs notified the cops but by the time we got there, Borden had got wise, shot Carstairs with his own gun and escaped. We know damn well Borden did it, but we haven't got a court case. You're going to help us build one—if you know what's good for you!"

"I won't stand for this!" Elva Shaw cried, her chin jutting out. "I've got rights! You haven't any evidence!"

Selby waved the card under her nose. "We've got this."

"You—you planted it!" she gasped, frightened eyes going from Selby to Randall. "You're framing me!" Her bosom heaved.

"You got one chance. Spill on Borden and you'll maybe get a light rap."

"I won't tell you anything! You can yell all you want—"

Selby reached out to slap her mouth. His paw threw a big shadow on the wall. Elva Shaw's heels beat

the bare floor as she steadied herself for the impact.

Randall grabbed Selby's arm, pulled him around and swung at the same time. His right caught Selby on the side of the jaw, staggering the first-grade detective against the lamp. It danced, its chain clinking on the bulb, throwing Elva's profile up and down the wall.

Selby reached out and grabbed a handful of Randall's vest. He balled up his fist. Randall stood there, breathing heavily, his arms angled, fists doubled. Selby was panting a little. They stood eye to eye for a full minute. Then Selby's fists relaxed.

"That does it," he said.

"You got the evidence," said Randall. "You don't have to slap her around."

"She's got to implicate Borden, or we got nothing but a mouse in a bear trap." Selby headed for the door.

"Hey, where you going?" called out Randall.

"You know damn well."

"Captain Perdue?"

"You guessed it."

"You mean that last sock?"

"I don't mean last Tuesday's hamburgers."

"Listen, Joe. I want promotion, just like you. Maybe even more—"

"You just threw away your chances, kid. I want stripes and I want to live to wear 'em. Teamed with a doll-crazy fist-slinger like you, I wouldn't last a month." He went out.

Elva pushed away the lamp. "What did he mean, doll-crazy?"

"Oh, he's nuts," gritted Randall. "Just plain nuts."

"Why'd you hit him?"

"I'm quick-tempered."

"That sock last night. You—" She got up and took a step toward him.

"Baby," he told her, jaw tightening, "you're going to give me the lowdown on how you fit into this murder picture, or I'm going to take you apart, a pound at a time, until—"

There was a slight scraping sound

at the door. Randall whirled. Borden stood just inside, clad in pearl gray spats and Homburg. A grin hung lopsidedly on his freshly shaven face.

"Still trying to hang that Carstairs killing on somebody?" Borden closed the door with a silent thrust of gloved fingers. He turned to Elva. "I'm just in time to keep this dumb flattie from roughing you up, eh?"

"N—no—he—" began Elva.

"Never mind, kid." Borden faced Randall. "You got anything on her?"

"Why, you ten-cent punk—"

"Because if you want to book her," mouthed Borden softly, "I'm hiring the slickest mouthpiece in town, see?"

Randall glanced at Elva. She was staring at Borden. "So that's how it is," said Randall. "Okey, sister, he's all yours."

He slammed out the door and groped down the stairs. He found Selby leaning against the squad car, cigarette pasted to lip, ear cocked to the radio.

"You call Captain Perdue?"

Selby shook his head. "I saw Borden going in and I hung around, thinking maybe he might pull a gun or something and give us a break."

Randall looked gloomy. "This case is flatter than a pancake. You better go call Perdue and get it over."

Selby eyed him hard. "She go for Borden?"

Randall's arms hung limply. "His tongue was hanging out to hire a mouthpiece for her."

"I see."

The radio had been droning routine instructions. Suddenly the words came out of the loudspeaker with the impact of bullets. "The river crew have identified the body as that of Rodney Shaw, a private chauffeur. . . A bullet hole in forehead. . . Homicide has been notified. . ."

Selby straightened slowly. He looked at Randall. Randall was feeling his holster. "If you're thinking what I'm thinking—"

"I'm thinking that when your accomplices know too much, sometimes

you got to bump them off, one by one."

"One by one—" Randall broke off. "Come on, what are we waiting for?"

"I'm right with you," puffed Selby, as they reached up the stairway. "But if—I fall behind, don't—wait—for me."

A scream pierced the door panel as Randall breasted the landing of Elva's floor. He pounded. "Open up!"

He waited. No answer. He thought he heard a low, whimpering sound. He began to shoot the lock out.

Shots answered his assault. Jagged openings appeared in the panel. A splinter grazed his chin.

He threw his shoulder at the door. It gave abruptly. He plowed into the room, brought up short. Save for the quivering of the cretonne curtain over the inner doorway, there was no sign of life.

"Come on out, Borden," he called.

"Come and get me," came the smooth voice from the inner room.

Randall sidled to the opening, grabbed the curtain and yanked. Slugs fanned his wrist. The cheap material shredded. The rod came tumbling down. He heaved the debris into a corner, leaving the opening free for clean footwork.

He saw Borden in the mirror of the dresser. Borden was crouching behind the bed, gun aimed across a neatly folded quilt.

Borden looked up. He saw Randall. There was a twisted grin on Borden's face now. "What's the idea, flattie, comin' in shooting?"

"Where's the girl?" demanded Randall. He felt a coldness, an emptiness inside him.

"She's right here," mouthed Borden. "You let lead fly and you'll hit her sure."

"So what?" grated Randall. "She's in the Carstairs killing with you. Better take a slug than burn."

Randall saw Borden's face harden into a taut mask.

Selby came puffing into the room. Randall waved him back. "I got him

cornered," he said. "I'm going to take him now."

"Take me? For what?" piped up Borden. "I surrender. I didn't do anything."

"You were just going to knock off the girl, like you knocked off her brother," said Randall.

He heard Elva's shocked gasp. She was in the corner, behind the dresser. He saw Borden's face contort with rage and his gun jerked toward the girl. Randall knew then that Borden had been keeping her quiet on threat of a slug.

Randall jumped into the doorway. The movement of Borden's gun toward the girl had given him a split-second opening. He pumped lead across the bed.

Borden sprang to one side, his gun flashing. Randall felt lead tag him, felt himself go heavily against the door jamb. He pressed the trigger again. The slug was aimed nicely. It punctured Borden's gun wrist.

Randall was vaguely aware of Elva Shaw crawling out from behind the dresser.

Selby was sitting on the floor, his head leaning against the door frame. He appeared to be oblivious of the shooting or of the muttering of excited voices out in the hall. A siren wavered, blocks away.

Selby grinned up aimably at Randall. "Good work, bum," he said.

Randall got stiffly down on his knee. He frowned. Then he put his hand on Selby's chest.

"It's—it's okey," said Selby, wincing. "I'll get up in a minute. It doubled me up just as I got in the door. Those three fights—took them too fast."

Randall didn't look at the girl. She got a glass of water and offered it to Selby. "S-sorry I roughed you up, kid," Selby said. "I didn't know Randall was so daffy about high heels."

The girl held the glass to his lips. Randall manacled Borden, then wrapped a handkerchief carefully

around Borden's gun. He held the other half of the manacles patiently, waiting for Elva to finish giving Selby water.

Randall grabbed the girl's wrists, started to manacle her.

Selby said, "Shackle Borden to me. It's safer. You can take her in. You won't need bracelets."

Randall eyed his partner dully. "If you think I'm going to let her escape me, you're nuts."

Selby grinned. "I just figured out how Borden got his shakedown dope. We thought the only way he could get it was from Elva, through Rod, his chauffeur. But we were wrong."

Randall frowned, holding the manacles as if they were hot potatoes.

"The way Borden worked it was to pretend to Rod that he was in love with Elva. So it didn't seem funny to Rod for Borden to want to trail Elva whenever she went out on a call. He just put it down to jealousy. Rod didn't realize that what Borden was *really after was the addresses that Elva went to*, so he could check the districts to figure if the people had dough. If you remember, Elva always went out *after* the babies were placed, to check up on how they were getting along. So it was possible for Borden to get his dope from Rod, through Elva, without either of them knowing anything about it until the Carstairs killing. Rod probably began to get wise then, because he had tailed Elva to Carstairs' place. So Borden had to shoot Rod. Then he came up here to get rid of Elva, making out there was sweet stuff between her and him to get rid of you."

Randall thought it over for a moment. Then: "It sounds okey to me, Sarge."

Selby steadied himself, grinning through the pain that tore up and down inside him. "I love to hear you call me that," he said softly.

"I still say," went on Randall, "if you think I'm going to *let her escape me, you're nuts.*"

# Frame for the Phonies



By  
*Edward James*

¶ *When Barney Sutton got a preview of a counterfeit classic, he decided to make a quickie that would bring in Big-House customers.* ¶

**A**ROUND six o'clock in the afternoon business in the movie houses is usually at a standstill. For three hours I'd been lounging under the marquee with one eye on the box office. I removed my gaze from the cashier, an alert determined-looking wren, and slipped into a luncheonette for a cup of java.

It took me only five minutes, but when I emerged there was trouble. The manager was in the box office, frantically counting the receipts.

Louise Mandley, the cashier, had simply up and beat it without warning or notice.

I went into the office, mopping my brow, and called the chief. The wires crackled and the insulation almost melted from his opinion of guys who needed nourishment while on duty.

"Get back there, Barney," he howled, "and keep your eyes peeled."

Twenty minutes later they had a relief cashier on the job, a redheaded kid with a mousy face. I gave her

careful instructions and took up my position as a lobby loafer. There was a Garbo preview and by seven-thirty the crowd was jamming the box office.

Precisely at eight I stiffened to swift alertness.

The kid in the box office was giving me the signal. She raised her left hand and patted a flaming curl nestling against her temple. I moved forward.

The guy to whom she'd just sold a ducat was a skinny, hollow-chested specimen, dressed in a manner calculated to create envy along any street in Harlem. He made no move to enter the theater. Instead he prowled idly around, gazing at the coming-attraction posters, sucking on a cigaret pasted against his lip corners. A couple of moments later he had melted into the crowd and was drifting inconspicuously along the slow-moving stream of pedestrian traffic.

I pedaled up behind him, wrapped my fingers around his arm, just above the elbow. His thin face shot around, startled, and he showed his teeth. As I had expected, the type was familiar. Two hundred bucks on his back and he hadn't been to a dentist since Hoover's first administration.

"I beg your pardon," I said pleasantly, "but I noticed you buying a ticket at the Castle Theater which you didn't use. Would you like to sell it, half price?"

He tried to wrest his arm away. "You're nuts!" he snarled. "Leggo my arm before I slug you."

The crowd was beginning to take interest so I yanked him into the hallway of a building and put my back against the door. I extended my hand, palm up.

"Let's see your dough."

"What dough?"

"Come on," I said impatiently, "this is government time. Don't waste it."

What color there was in his face rapidly faded. "You—you're a G-man?"

"Sort of," I murmured. "Let's see that load of queer you're pushing."

"Okay," he gulped, and stuck his hand into his pocket. Perhaps I should have expected it, but I didn't. He fired a single shot from his pocket without warning. The explosion was muffled and the blast burned a hole right through his suit. The bullet caught me an inch or two under the heart with jarring impact.

I stood there, staring at him through eyes that were suddenly burning in their sockets.

THE guy hauled the gun out of his pocket. It was a short-barreled Iver Johnson Protector. His teeth were bared and his face pulled taut, almost inhuman. At that moment, his thin pinched face looked more ratlike than any human countenance I have ever seen. He jerked his eyes around, seeking another exit, failed to locate one, and then leveled the gun at me again.

"Get away from that door," he grated. "Get away or I'll blast you clean through it."

I didn't move.

He triggered twice in rapid succession and both slugs were spaced against my chest. You could hear the dull thud of them as they pounded home. I shook myself and started to walk slowly toward him.

The cigaret fell out of his mouth. His eyes bugged dumbly at me. Sickly yellow splotched his flat cheeks. His eyes seemed to shrivel up and his breath came whistling hoarsely through spread nostrils.

The last three steps I took in a fierce lunge, cracking my fist against the side of his jaw. His feet came off the floor and before he hit it with his back I had snatched the gun out of his lax fingers.

He crawled back against the marble wall and stared at me with unbelieving eyes. He'd drilled three shots at me, had seen my frame shudder with the shock, yet here I was looming over him, very much alive, and cuffing his right wrist to the radiator pipe.

I knelt beside him, unlaced his shoes

and pulled them off. Pressed flat against the soles I found a double wad of bills, all twenties. I held them against the light. They were beauts, the kind that were flooding the city and it would take an expert to distinguish them from the McCoy. The redhead at the Castle Theater who'd signaled me had recognized the bill he'd changed with her from the serial number.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Wharf," he grunted, "Jimmy Wharf."

"Where'd you get these bills?"

He wet his lips. "I—I found 'em—in an ash can."

I grabbed his chin and lifted it. "Don't give me that," I said. "You've been pushing phony money for a long time. I can tell the way you operate. Who's printing this stuff?"

"The government."

I glared at him, got up and slipped into a phone booth that was in the lobby. I dialed a number and when I heard the chief's voice I said: "Hello, Haviland?"

"Yeah, sounds like Barney Sutton. That you, Barney?"

"It is," I told him, "and reporting that the case is beginning to break. I picked up one of the lads who's been pushing those phony twenties."

Haviland's voice carried excitement. "That's fine, Barney. Can you make him talk?"

"Not unless we pull his toenails out with a monkey wrench. He's a vicious little gungel. Took a couple of shots at me soon as he learned who I was."

There was swift concern in Haviland's voice. "You're not hurt, Barney?"

"Not even scratched. Those bullet-proof vests you're making us wear work fine. He plugged me three times and burned a hole in his own suit."

"The devils!" growled Haviland.

He sounded grim. I could picture the ridged muscles along his flat jaws. Just one week ago the bodies of two of our boys from the Treasury Department, working on this case, had been

found in a dark alley riddled with lead. Since then Haviland had compelled us to don these steel-ribbed vests. It had turned out to be a damn good idea. The men behind this counterfeiting ring had proved themselves a cold and brutal lot.

"All right," snapped Haviland. "Bring him in."

I loosened the handcuff link from the radiator pipe and rimmed it around my own wrist. Outside I flagged a cab and told the driver to head for the U. S. Customs Building where we had our office.

Having heard about the steel vest, some of Jimmy Wharf's superstitious fear had vanished and he was now darkly sullen. I gave him the evil eye, trying to build up a nervous tension in anticipation of the dire things about to happen, but I doubt if I was very successful.

**H**AVILAND is a man of sixty-odd, iron-haired, blue-eyed, built low and stocky like a granite monument. He walked around Jimmy Wharf's chair several times, examining him from all angles. We'd been working on the guy for two hours and all we got was some extraordinary profanity.

I made one last try. "Look, Wharf, this isn't only a rap for pushing queer. You might get off with a year or two for that. But we've got you on other charges and we've got you good. Resisting an officer, carrying concealed weapons, attempted murder. And maybe that rod of yours will check with the slugs taken out of two Treasury men already killed.

"Uncle Sam can be a mighty tough old gent when he's crossed. But he can also be lenient. We'll make a deal with you. Tell us who's printing and distributing this stuff and maybe he'll go easy."

"How easy?"

"You can't bargain with Uncle Sam. You've got to leave that up to him. This is your last chance. Talk up."

A grin twisted Wharf's pinched face. "The guy I'm working for is



tougher than the old boy with whiskers. He'll take care of me."

I looked at Haviland and threw up my hands. When they come as dumb as that there's no sense arguing with them. The chief had Jimmy Wharf taken away and I sank into a chair.

Haviland sat behind his desk, opened a folder, perused it a moment, then glanced up at me. His brow was corrugated. "You said the name of the cashier was Louise Mandley?"

I nodded. "That's right."

"Then we're off on another lead. Six months ago an engraver in the printing office of the Treasury Department disappeared. His name was Arthur Mandley. Foul play was and is suspected. The belief is that he was kidnaped by a ring of counterfeiters. With this new load of privately printed currency that's been appearing, that belief is now solidly substantiated.

"Only an expert who's made plates for the government could turn out such bills. Matter of fact, the only way they can readily be distinguished from the genuine is by the paper stock they're using."

"Do you think there's any connection," I asked, "between the cashier and Arthur Mandley?"

Haviland nodded briskly. "I checked as soon as you called. She's his daughter."

"Now *she's* gone. What do you make of that?"

"You answer it," snapped Haviland.

I averted my eyes a little sheepishly. "I believe that while I was—er—fortifying myself with a little coffee, one of the counterfeit bills came along. And when she couldn't locate me she started to trail the pusher herself."

"Exactly."

"She's liable to get into trouble. These lads are the coldest killers we've ever encountered."

Haviland placed both palms flat on the desk and eyed me stonily. "Then what the hell are you waiting for? Hop back to that theater, Barney. Maybe she'll call in for help."

I stood up and planted the Stetson

back on my head. "About that Wharf rat—"

"We'll take care of him," Haviland spoke in a quietly ominous voice. "And if the slugs that burned our two agents came from his gun, then heaven help him." Haviland held up thick spatulate fingers that were tightly hooked. "I'll tear him apart with my own hands."

**I BELIEVED** he would at that, too. I made tracks back to the Castle Theater. The redhead in the box office announced that no more queer had come in. Well, two in one evening were enough. These boys were smart and they wouldn't try to rush things. Mr. Korn, the manager, she said, was waiting for me.

Korn, a bustling little man with a porcine stomach, was holding the bill with which Jimmy Wharf had bought his ticket. Louise Mandley, I learned, had neither returned nor called back.

"We gave that man good change for this twenty," the manager pointed out. "I hope you'll get it back for us."

"Sure," I said, "only it'll take some time."

The door to the office suddenly banged open and a whirlwind in the person of a lean young chap blew in. A tall wiry specimen, his face was pulled taut with anxiety. Ignoring me, he heaved to a stop in front of the manager and the words came out of him in an undammed rush.

"I heard Louise disappeared, Mr. Korn. What happened to her? Where is she?"

"Now take it easy, Ed," Korn placated. "I want you to meet Mr. Sutton. He's the Federal agent who's investigating this thing. This is Ed Graham, our projectionist."

Ed Graham swung worried eyes in my direction.

"What are you doing about Louise?" he pleaded. "She'll need protection."

I sized him up and found the total satisfactory. "First," I said, "your interest in the girl is what?"

"We're engaged. We'd be married

only she's been too worried about her dad."

"The government engraver who disappeared?"

He nodded. "That's right."

I perched on the edge of Korn's desk. "Suppose you tell me something about Louise."

Ed Graham opened his mouth, then was suddenly reminded of something. He glanced at his strap watch and snapped his fingers.

"I've got to hurry back to the projection room. There's nobody watching the machines. That's against the rules, you know, only I had to find out about Louise when one of the ushers gave me the news."

I got up off the desk. "I'll come along."

We climbed the balcony and up a short steel-runged ladder into a room that was guarded by a metal door. A blinding bluish white light glowed and crackled from the carbon arc in one of the great projection machines. Its twin was silent, waiting for the end of the reel which was almost at hand.

Ed Graham had his eyes glued to the screen, waiting for the cue. Suddenly with a swift and deft motion he snapped off one machine and set the other in motion. Through the peephole I could see that there was no change in the continuity of the story on the screen way down below.

**A** GAINST the back wall stood a table with a splicing outfit. Beside it, in a leather case, sat a small but expensive Bell & Howell movie camera. Seeing my eyes on it a prideful smile flitted momentarily across Graham's face.

"My hobby—home movies," he said, and then he was frowning again.

"What about Louise?" I prodded.

Ed Graham said: "Ever since her father disappeared she's been searching for him, spending her salary on newspaper ads and even hiring a private detective to look for him. That was too expensive, however, and she had to drop it. And now with the ap-

pearance of these new counterfeit bills she's been hoping the trail might lead back to him.

"She probably spotted a phony bill this evening and went after the guy herself." His eyes clouded. "She's in trouble. I know it. I feel it in my bones."

"Suppose," I queried, "she follows this guy to some hideout. Wouldn't she call back to contact help?"

"Ye-es, I suppose so."

"All right. Then the only thing we can do is wait."

I promised to let him know immediately something came through, climbed down the ladder and descended to the orchestra floor. The audience was dribbling out; the last showing finally concluded. It was late and I'd been on the jump for some twenty hours and my eyes felt as though they'd been rubbed with a potato grater.

I called Haviland and gave him a report. He told me to go home and catch some sleep. The suggestion was welcome. . . .

It was not until the following day, long after Jimmy Wharf had been booked, arraigned, and incarcerated, that I learned he'd been sprung. The chief gave me the news over the phone. I could scarcely believe it.

"But the judge set bail at fifty thousand dollars," I yelled. "Who'd put up that much dough to spring a hood like Wharf?"

"A bail bondsman by the name of Borliss. Go over and have a talk with him, Barney."

"Any news from Louise Mandley yet?"

"No."

I pronged the receiver and took a cab to the courthouse. The office I was looking for was across the street and occupied a store front. The name in huge gold letters made an arc across the window. It read: *Gregory Borliss, Bail Bonds*. In front of the office loafed a group of assorted grifters, small-time shysters and bookies. I plowed through them and entered the store.

A scarred desk, a filing cabinet, a few chairs, and a brand new safe comprised the furnishings. Deeply ensconced in a swivel-back sat a huge mountain of humanity. Chins cascaded to an expensive figured cravat upon which glittered a large blue-white stone. Small eyes were deeply socketed in folds of skin and a gold bicuspid twinkled at the side of a thick cigar.

Borliss was soft—but only so far as the meat padding his ample frame was concerned. The small eyes were almost colorless and diamond hard. His face wrinkled into a smile.

I gave him a swift flash of my government shield and the smile wavered. He glanced at me anxiously.

"What do you boys want with me?"

"Income tax," I lied firmly. "The one you filed last year was way off. Uncle Sam doesn't like that. He thinks you ought to come down to the United States Prosecutor's office and explain—or try to."

**B**ORLISS gave an audible gulp. He reached for the phone, dialed a number and lifted his eyes with an explanatory look.

"My accountant," he said. And then he spoke into the mouthpiece: "Hello, Sam? Borliss. There's an income tax man here. He says we filed a false report. How many times did I tell you not to hold out on the government? I don't want to save money that way. It's too dangerous. They canned bigger sardines than me for it. . . . Shut up and listen. If I get clipped for this I'll take it out of your hide. I'm not kidding, Sam. You better catch a fast boat to Honolulu. It'll be safer."

He slammed the phone into place and handed me a smile that was dripping with appeasement.

"I'll make good any way Uncle Sam says. Must be some mistake, though. I wouldn't gyp the government."

I kept my manner brusque. "There's no mistake. You filed a bond this morning for fifty thousand dollars. None of your returns even hint you

have that kind of money. Who got you to file it?"

He moistened his lips slowly. "Why," he said, "some mouthpiece asked me to file it. That's my business. I put up property, deeds I bought a long time ago."

"Who's the mouthpiece?"

Borliss tasted his palate gingerly and didn't like it. After a moment he answered: "Axtell—Morris Axtell. I got nothing to lose. He promises to have this Jimmy Wharf in court for trial. If the guy takes a powder, Axtell will make good."

A back door opened and a guy eased in. He was dressed in shirt sleeves and his face was smudged with grease. Borliss glared at him.

"I'm busy now. You finish cleaning those pipes later." The guy faded without a word.

"Axtell," I mused. "H'm-m. Now why would such expensive legal talent be representing a small-time rat like Jimmy Wharf?"

"You'll have to ask him." Borliss seemed upset and a trifle sulky.

"All right, Borliss—" I shrugged—"you send your accountant down to see us. And your books too."

Borliss' meaty countenance registered intense surprise at the speedy termination of what he'd expected to be a most unpleasant afternoon. I sauntered out of there and left him to stew in the worry I'd hatched.

Axtell's office was in the Lawyer's Building a block away and I made directly for it. His secretary admitted me immediately. Axtell was a smooth article, very glib, very oily.

"Yes?" he fairly purred.

I told him who I was and said: "About your client, Jimmy Wharf."

"What about him?"

"Who hired you to represent him?"

A set of black brows elevated slightly. "Why, Jimmy Wharf."

I scowled. "Slip it to me easy, brother. Shoving phony lettuce never gave Jimmy Wharf an income big enough to induce you to handle his

soiled legal affairs. Who's behind him?"

The lawyer pursed his lips. "You mean I'm lying?"

"It won't be the first time, and you can take that any way you like, Axtell. Jimmy Wharf is a cheap little killer. He's guilty as hell and you know it. He was caught with the goods, cold, and my testimony is going to send him to the freezer. That much is as certain as the fact that some day the Bar Association will catch up with you."

"So?" His voice was soft.

"So why should you spoil your record by taking a case that's lost before you walk into court? Unless, of course, somebody intends making sure I don't appear to testify."

**A**XTELL shrugged. "I admit Wharf is guilty. That, however, does not alter the fact that he is entitled to counsel. Such is his indisputable constitutional right."

"Sure," I growled, "and we'll wave the flag and sing the *Star Spangled Banner* while the judge is sentencing him. But that still doesn't explain why a man like you should guarantee a fifty thousand dollar bond for a punk like Wharf. I'll wager he's already taken a powder. You don't honestly expect Wharf to appear in court now that he's got a chance to dust."

It seemed as though the smile on Axtell's face was a permanent fixture. He rose slowly to his feet.

"Your attitude is rather unpleasant, Mr. Sutton."

"No," I mouthed sarcastically. "You expect me to act like a Boston deb at a coming-out party when a pack of cheap torps are prowling the city shooting at me from their pockets—when there are high-class shysters like you springing them so they can take a second crack at me."

The temperature of Axtell's smile dropped several degrees. "I'm a busy man, Sutton, so if you'll—"

"Yeah," I cut in. "I'm going." I

presented him with a withering look and strode out, slamming the door behind me.

Outside I found a phone booth and made my report to Haviland. I ventured the opinion that the U. S. was fifty thousand dollars richer.

He wanted to know why.

"Because it was worth that much to spring Wharf and let him jump bail. He'll never appear for trial."

"Did it ever occur to you," suggested Haviland, "that we couldn't convict Wharf of much if you were eliminated as a witness?"

"Certainly. But I don't think he has the guts. If he smokes me out the cops'll tie it to him."

"Not unless he has an iron-clad alibi which money can buy. Are you wearing your steel vest, Barney?"

"No, it makes me itch."

Haviland swore picturesquely. "Confound it, Barney. You get back to your apartment and put it on. I don't want to have to warn you again. That's an order."

I heard him slam the receiver down and the line went dead. Well, maybe he was right. I headed for my apartment. I was due to relieve another cop watching the Castle Theater in about an hour. So far as I knew, no more phony bills had been passed. They were evidently laying low for the time being, or else shifting to another part of the city.

I keyed open my door, strode through the tiny living room into the bedroom and stopped dead, making an involuntary motion under my coat. It was not necessary.

The guy was on my bed and he was fast asleep. I tiptoed around for a squint at his face and felt my mouth go dry. It was Jimmy Wharf and he was asleep all right, so fast asleep he was never going to wake up again on this planet. The single bullet hole had entered at the bridge of his nose and made a mess of his pinched, hollow-checked face.

**A** GUN was still clutched between his locked fingers. The lips were pulled flat against his wide open teeth as if he'd suddenly realized what was going to happen and had screamed out for mercy, a mercy which hadn't been forthcoming.

I stood there and stared at him for a minute and thought: There but for the grace of God lies myself. Obviously, somebody's plan had gone haywire.

A call to Haviland instructed me to notify the metropolitan police. This was, after all, their province. There was nothing Uncle Sam could ever do to Jimmy Wharf any more, and so far as his murderer was concerned, it was up to the State to seek revenge. I called police headquarters and scarcely had I replaced the phone before the wail of a siren came tearing along the street.

They swarmed all over the place, photographers and print men, an assistant M. E. and the shirt-sleeved cops waiting outside in the hallway with their wicker basket. I made a mental resolve to change my apartment.

Sergeant Fargo, a thick-necked, shrewd-eyed homicide cop, listened to my story with cool detachment. Then he looked down at Jimmy Wharf and began to chuckle, a thin, chilled trickle of sound.

"What's so funny?" I wanted to know.

He pointed at Wharf's remains. "The guy came up here with a pal to knock you off and instead the pal knocked him off. That's good for a laugh, isn't it?"

"But why?" I asked.

He gave me an oblique glance. "Come, come, Sutton, you're not thinking. Try again."

Suddenly it hit me.

"Sure," I said, "I got it. Whoever put up Wharf's bail made sure he wouldn't lam out on them. And since they'll be able to produce him—or what's left of him—at the trial, they'll be able to get their bond back."

"Exactly," said Fargo. "Only there's

one hitch. Why bail him out in the first place?"

"Easy. So he wouldn't spill his guts. He knew where the counterfeit bills came from, and the big shots behind this thing wanted to make sure the trail would never lead back to them. Neat, isn't it?"

"Too neat," agreed Fargo.

It was almost a full hour before he was through with me and I made tracks for the Castle Theater. I still didn't know what had happened to Louise Mandley. Sergeant Fargo had promised to put a tail on Jimmy Wharf's mouthpiece, although we doubted that would lead to anything. The lawyer, if grilled, would hide behind the immunity the law granted him in making the relationship between a lawyer and his client so confidential there was no way of making him talk.

When I reached the Castle Theater I failed to find the cop I was supposed to relieve. He was not lounging anywhere around the lobby or under the marquee. I spied the little redhead sitting in the box office and I drifted casually over. She was sitting a little stiffly behind the glass and grillwork, staring into the street.

I said: "Hi, kitten, any more phony paper come this way? And where's my colleague?"

**H**ER face was devoid of expression, as immobile as if it had been a plaster cast. And then I noticed the fine beads of perspiration that had formed along her upper lip and forehead. I stiffened and felt the hairs prickling along the back of my neck.

I shoved a hand through the half-moon opening in the glass window and touched her forearm and immediately snatched my hand back. It was like touching a piece of metal that had been lying in a cool dank cellar.

I marched swiftly into the theater and got hold of the manager. "Listen, Korn," I said, "get the cops here fast and better locate a new cashier."

He hoisted his brows. "What's up?"

"Your cashier, Helen Drake, is dead."

His chubby round face went lemon-yellow and his jaw fell slack. "D-dead?" he gasped.

I nodded curtly.

"B-but that's impossible. She's been selling tickets all afternoon. She hasn't complained of not feeling well."

"This is a different kind of sickness," I said tightly. "It's kind of a lead poisoning. Somebody put a bullet through her, probably with a silenced gun. Have you heard anything from Louise Mandley?"

He shook his head dumbly. "No. This is terrible. It'll ruin our reputation. The theater can't stand—"

He was cut short by a stream of whistles, stamping feet and catcalls. He groaned and bounced out of the office, with me on his heels. The picture was flickering darkly on the screen, out of focus, and the sound apparatus was a long off-pitch wail.

Korn began wringing his hands. "Everything happens to me," he moaned. "What's the matter up there with Ed Graham? Can't he—"

He stopped talking and grabbed my arm. The picture that was suddenly spashed upon the screen had never been made by master technicians in Hollywood. It was blurred and jerky and the lighting was bad.

I felt my spine go rigid as a lamp-post. I could scarcely give credence to my eyes. It was totally incredible, unbelievable. Even the catcalls and whistles ceased and a curious hush descended upon the audience.

Up front on the screen two men stood over a printing press which was slowly operating and stacking a pile of currency into the receiving rack. The huge mountainous figure of Gregory Borliss was unmistakable. In one hand he held a bill which he was examining under the glare of a naked overhead bulb.

Suddenly the picture flickered, became jerky, and then jumped off the screen which remained a bright white square under the powerful cone of

light from the projection machine.

I spun around and took the balcony stairs three at a time. At the top I grabbed the steel-runged ladder and climbed two steps and froze dead in my tracks. There was no mistake about the thing that was jabbing cruelly into the small of my back.

"Easy, buddy, easy," said a voice, "and maybe you won't get hurt."

I TURNED slowly and looked into the hard, taut face of a thin-lipped man whose .38 automatic had drawn a bead against the exact center of my chest. Atop that dark balcony, only dimly illuminated by the red exit lights, his eyes glittered like jet marbles.

"Look," I said, putting a pleading note into my voice. "I've got to get up there and fix that machine or this crowd will riot."

"You'll fix nothin'," he muttered tonelessly. "An' I'll take care of the crowd. Fold your hands behind your neck."

I started to do what I was bid when a scream came through the closed door of the projection room. There was the noise of a scuffle. My hands were shoulder high when I let the torpedo have it. It caught him by surprise. Every ounce of muscle in my body went into that blow and he folded like a piece of wet cardboard.

I dragged the .38 out of his fist and grunted as I laid one against the back of his skull with the heavy butt. I was taking no chances with these guys. The audience downstairs had started whistling again, probably under the misapprehension that the operator had mistakenly given them a glimpse of some old-time movie.

Scrambling monkeylike up the ladder, I twisted the knob and slammed headlong into the projection room. There was a struggle going on and I was surprised to see who the combatants were.

Louise Mandley, her face distorted with fear, was trying to hang onto a reel of film that was trailing out of



its spool as though it had been roughly jerked out of the projection machine.

The gorilla who was trying to wrest it away from her had decided to conclude the fight once and for all and was bringing his gun into play. His finger was already tensed against the trigger when I burst into that small chamber. So all he had to do was swing the gun in a small arc and fire.

I offered a silent prayer of thanks to Haviland for making me don the bullet-proof vest and then I lifted the gun that I'd taken from the torpedo. I triggered twice, aiming once for his heart and once for his stomach.

I was not taking any chances because these guys had probably been warned about the steel-ribbed vests we were wearing, and his next shot might tear my brains out.

The guy was dead before he hit the floor. He stood there, swaying slightly, the big Colt slipping slowly from his fingers, and then with a soft meaty impact he piled up on the cement floor.

Louise Mandley's face was deathly white and her wrist was squeezed against her mouth as if she were choking back another scream.

I said: "Can you work that machine?"

She nodded wordlessly.

"Then give them Garbo again or there's liable to be a riot."

She worked at the projector, stringing a reel of film into the sprockets. In a moment the noise downstairs had subsided and Garbo was once again emoting.

**I**T SEEMED to me that the worst was over, but I could detect no sign of relief on Louise Mandley's face. Her motions at the projection machine had been purely mechanical and now she turned her pale drawn face toward me.

"They'll kill Ed," she said numbly, "just like they killed my father."

"Where is he?"

"At that bail bond place—in the basement."

There was a phone on the splicing table which connected to the office. I put a call through to police headquarters and got Fargo on the wire.

"We work fast, Fargo. How would you like Wharf's killer—all wrapped up in cellophane and ready to deliver to the D. A.?"

"Don't be cute. Spill it."

"Right. Across the street from the courthouse is the bail bond office of Gregory Borliss. Beat it over there and take a picked squad of strong-arm boys, also a couple of tear gas bombs and some Tommies. Surround the place and blast the basement. Be careful you don't hurt a lad by the name of Ed Graham. He's on our side. Now snap to it."

I rang off and faced Louise Mandley. "Ed'll be all right. Maybe you'd better start from the beginning. Tell me about it."

Her voice was tired, leaden. The first part of the story bore out our initial deductions. She'd spotted a phony bill, had been unable to locate me, and had deserted the box office to shadow the pusher.

"I followed him all over town," she said. "Later he went into a tavern and I waited for him to come out. It was after midnight when he finally headed downtown and entered the bail bond office. I hung around in the street for about an hour and when he didn't emerge I grew suspicious and walked around to the back of the building.

"It was blocked by a high fence. I turned over an ash can and managed to get to the other side. There was a trap door leading to the basement and through a crack in the wood I could make out some men working at a machine. So I went to the front and called Ed from a phone booth."

"Why not the police?" I queried.

She shrugged. "For six months the police haven't done one single thing about my father. I'd lost confidence in them."

"Go ahead," I nodded.

"When Ed came he'd brought his movie camera with him. He worked at

that crack in the trap door till he could make out what they were doing. It was a printing press turning out counterfeit bills. He enlarged the hole a little and managed to fit the camera lens into it and began taking pictures. We knew that would be evidence good enough for any jury."

She paused to draw in a breath.

"What happened then?" I demanded.

"Suddenly somebody spoke behind us. It was a fat man with a gun. I'll never forget his face. It was all twisted with anger. Ed didn't say a word. He just threw the camera to me, jumped at the fat man and yelled for me to run. I saw the fat man hitting Ed with the gun and then I got away."

"Who developed the film?"

She smiled wryly. "It wasn't very good, was it? Ed had shown me how to develop the negative and enlarge the print so it would fit into one of these big machines. I'd spent a lot of time up here with him and I'd learned how to work the projector."

**I** NODDED, wondering how the gunsels had managed to locate her here. The fat man, undoubtedly, was Borliss himself. My ideas were verified shortly when I arrived at headquarters. Haviland was already there. Fargo had called him in as soon as they'd found the printing press and the fake currency.

Haviland looked quite pleased. An important counterfeit ring had been smashed and the plates confiscated. They'd be destroyed as soon as the case was wound up in court. Fargo too was goating. He had his killers less than three hours after Jimmy Wharf's murder had been committed. Borliss had confessed to that.

He'd sprung Wharf and lured him up to my place under the pretext of getting me out of the picture. Instead, Borliss had put a bullet through Wharf. In that way, Wharf would never talk and the fifty grand bail would be secure from loss.

"Where's Ed Graham?" I wanted to know.

"We sent him to a hospital," Fargo said. "He was in bad shape, but the doc says he'll pull through all right. Borliss worked him over plenty. They nearly burned his sides off to make him tell where the girl was."

"What about the kid who was knocked off in the box office?"

"They confessed to that too. After Ed Graham talked, Borliss sent two of his gunsels to the girl's apartment. They missed her there because she'd spent the rest of the night and all morning developing and enlarging the film at Graham's apartment, where he had a dark room and equipment. They were instructed to go there after her and she spied them through the window and ducked out the back way to the theater. She went directly to the projection room and hid.

"Borliss had told them to get the cashier so they knocked off the Drake girl who was in the box office. When they called Borliss and he heard they'd dispatched a redhead he told them they'd got the wrong girl. Desperate, they trailed her up to the projection room. She'd been showing the film because she knew Graham wouldn't be there and she didn't want him to lose his job.

"By that time she was a little mixed up and scared and didn't even think of calling us. Then when she heard them breaking into the projection room, she flashed the motion picture of Borliss onto the screen in order to get help. And from there on, Sutton, you know what happened."

"What about the girl's father?" I asked.

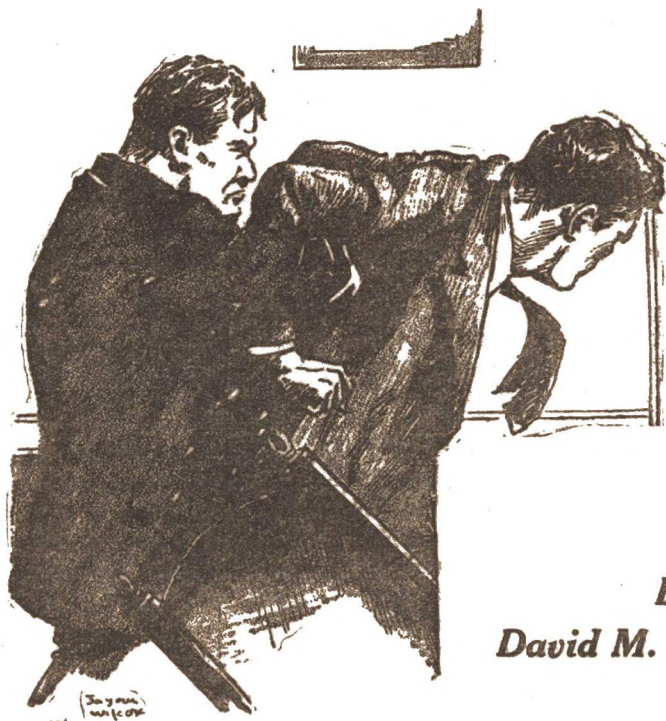
Haviland said: "Can't you guess, Barney?"

I nodded slowly. "I suppose after they'd tortured him into making the plates and he'd served his usefulness, they got rid of him."

That brought a nod. I glanced pleadingly at Haviland and said: "Please, chief, can't I take off that steel vest now? It itches like the devil."

*There were plenty of questions Detective Bull Brandon wanted answered — homicide information which could be found only in . . .*

# Murder's Quiz Book



*By*  
**David M. Norman**

**W**HAT a guy wouldn't do for money! That thought entered the massive head of Bull Brandon, private detective, as he punched the doorbell. Here he was, a licensed investigator who'd taken an oath to uphold the law, and now he was going to protect an ex-gangster. A man who deserved to die in the gutter, riddled with bullets, just as much as his victims had died.

Brandon was huge. He was also known as about the toughest, thickest-skulled private dick in the city. When he took a case he followed it to its limits, no matter how much danger was entailed. He'd handled big stuff, too. But there are off seasons in

that business, and the promise of fifty dollars, merely to guard Joe Caine from his house to the residence of one Professor Parrish, looked good to Brandon.

Caine opened the door, squinted at Brandon and then let him in. He stuffed an automatic into his dressing robe pocket. Caine was still leery of visitors.

"Hello, Brandon," he said sullenly. "This college prof is a dope. Hell, I don't need protection, especially from a man mountain like you. Not when I've got a gun ready for action."

Brandon sat down. "Yeah—well, I don't like the job either, but the Professor seems to think you might get

knocked off before you reach his place. Not that he gives a damn about your life, but if I understood things right, you got something he wants to buy. That's what worries him."

Caine opened a big wall safe, extracted a heavy book and dropped it on the table beside Brandon.

"That's what he wants. I picked it up a couple of years ago at an auction. Paid plenty for the damn thing because it looked like something to put in your living room, see? Make an impression on people."

Brandon grinned. "That's when you had aspirations about taking your place in society, eh, Caine? Before you found out society avoided you like yellow fever."

Caine swung around sharply and his hand moved toward the gun in his pocket. Brandon just sat there, grinning broadly. Caine shrugged and went upstairs to dress.

Brandon hefted the volume. It weighed about ten pounds and didn't look it. The covers were bound in brass, mostly eroded to a nice shade of green. The pages were thick, cumbersome things and handwritten. The hen tracks meant nothing to Brandon. They reminded him somewhat of a Chinese laundry ticket. He slammed the book shut and tried to figure out why certain people paid fancy sums for crazy things like ancient books.

Caine came down then, dressed and ready. He tucked the book under his arm.

"If I'd known the Professor was going to hire you," he growled, "I'd have reneged on the whole idea. You used to be a regular cop, Brandon. Yeah—and you were on my tail often enough. Promised you'd get me some day too, didn't you? Well—you nor anybody else ever even got close because I was smart. I still am."

"Yeah." Brandon wrinkled his nose. "But lots more lucky than clever, Caine."

"Think so?" Caine slapped the heavy book. "Take this, for instance. I paid four hundred bucks for it. If the

Prof thinks it's what he wants, I'm offered eight grand and I know he'll pay ten. That's more than you make in five years, flatfoot."

Caine led the way to the garage behind his home. There was an expensive car there—several years old, but still a nice job. Brandon kept looking around the dark yard. While he didn't think anything would happen, he had fifty bucks to earn and he meant to earn it.

Brandon transferred his automatic from pocket to lap after he settled down beside Caine.

"Go ahead and laugh," he challenged. "But when a guy pays me fifty bucks to take a thirty-block auto ride and protect a book, believe me that book is worth something and the Prof thinks maybe somebody will try to get it away. Remember, Caine—if there is an attempt, I'm taking care of the book, not you. There are agencies that specialize in protecting rats, but not mine. I exterminate 'em if I get half a chance and that goes for you. Now, drive—and keep to the busy streets."

Caine laughed harshly. "You're as batty as the Prof. Who knows I got this book? Or what it's worth? The damn thing stayed on my bookshelves for months."

"The Prof found out you had it," Brandon said slowly. "If he could do that, so could a crook."

Caine seemed impressed by that statement and he mulled on it as he drove. They rolled the full length of a busy avenue and then cut across town, traveling dark, deserted residential streets. They had to cross a wide public park, as empty as a graveyard at this time of night. Brandon was actually worried about that. If an attack was to be made, it would come then. He sat bolt upright, ready for action.

Caine kept looking around, too, as if he expected things to happen. Brandon yawned. It was a crisp night; the car windows were rolled all the way up and Brandon had locked the doors from in-

side just to be on the safe side. Now the heat seemed to be getting him.

He glanced at Caine. The ex-gangster's eyes were moving slowly up and down, as if he had to force them open. Brandon yawned again, settled back and would have enjoyed nothing so much as a nice, long nap.

The car swerved. Its front wheel hit a curbing and bounced the heavy vehicle back. Caine woke up with a jerk and swore softly. Brandon discovered, to his amazement, that he didn't even care if the car was wrecked. Nothing mattered except deep, blissful sleep.

"Something—wrong," Caine mumbled. "Can't keep—eyes open. Can't—drive—got to rest. Tired—"

Brandon punched him in the ribs. "Not here, in this dark spot, you dope. Step on it."

Caine did, reached a corner. Instead of turning with the road, he kept going straight until he was racing across the level grass spaces of the park. Brandon roused himself with an effort, grabbed the wheel and avoided a big tree. Then he turned the ignition switch and leaned over Caine to yank on the emergency.

He opened the door on his side, stepped onto the running board and discovered he was as weak as a two-hour pup. His knee hinges folded and he went sprawling on his face.

But the cool, fresh air revived him quickly. He reached into the car, picked up the gun he'd dropped and peered around. Caine was coming out of it, too. Brandon opened all the car doors and then ran around to the back of the vehicle, knelt and played the beam of a flash on the underpinnings of the car. He returned to the front seat with a serious expression on his face.

"Caine, you call the Prof a dope, but of all the dumb dodos you lead the parade. Why don't you have this bus looked at once in awhile? The exhaust pipe leaks. The end of the exhaust is plugged with carbon and old rags. The fumes came up through the floor

boards and we damned near got ourselves killed."

Caine gaped. "But listen, Brandon. I had this crate gone over last week. I drove it yesterday and nothing like that happened. Maybe—maybe somebody tampered with it. Maybe there are guys around here who want this book. We better scram."

**B**RANDON agreed, hopped in and locked the doors again, but he rolled all windows a third of the way down. Caine reached the road and really stepped on it now. They pulled up in front of Professor Parrish's house, a fairly big place set back from the street and shielded by tall, stately trees.

Parrish let them in, welcoming both with equal relief. He was a little man, with what hair he had left, very gray. He wore a smoking jacket and nose glasses that had a habit of falling off every few minutes. A piece of silken cord, draped around his neck, saved them from destruction.

"You have it?" He eagerly took the heavy book in both hands. "Ah—yes. I have looked for something like this for many, many years. I got on the track of this volume, traced it to you, Mr. Caine, and now it's mine."

"When you pay me for it—in coin of the realm and lots of it, too," Caine reminded him. "It's worth ten grand—ten thousand dollars to me."

"You shall have it," Parrish answered so promptly that Caine mentally kicked himself for not doubling the figure and then scaling it down.

Brandon started hedging toward the door. "I guess I'll be going now, Professor. You can mail me your check."

"No—of course not," Parrish protested. "I didn't offer fifty dollars merely to hire the toughest detective I've ever heard of, and then have him only guard the volume while it was transferred to my possession. The fifty-dollar fee calls for you to guard it all night. In the morning I'll have it placed in the college vaults."

Brandon sighed, threw his hat on the chair and nodded. He followed

Parrish and Caine into a cozy living room. Parrish laid the volume on a long table which already was loaded down with books. There were two sets, held together by massive bookends, on both sides of the table.

Caine said, "Say—what makes that book worth so much dough, Prof?"

Parrish looked up. "Why, don't you know? This is a Cabala! Yes—a Cabala. It was written hundreds of years ago by mystics. It can answer any question in the world. Of course, a scholar would have to do the translating and the research work."

Caine made a wry face and winked at Brandon. "It ought to be worth a million, Prof. Now suppose I ask it a question, huh? You could maybe get the answer."

Parrish nodded. "Oh, yes. It would take some time, but I'd have the answer. You see, there are only five of these volumes in existence. Each was written by a noted mystic of his day, and these men swore to guard the volumes forever. To remain within their pages until those who believed and appreciated their efforts, would come into possession of the book. You're laughing, Mr. Caine. And you, Brandon, I see a smirk on your face, too, but this is the truth. Believe me."

"Oh sure, Prof," Caine said. "I believe you all right, but how about showing us, huh? I'll ask it a question and you tell me the answer. You can read them funny marks okay."

Professor Parrish walked nervously over to the other side of the room. Caine and Brandon followed and they all sat down. The book, tightly closed, rested in the middle of the table.

Parrish said, "Very well. I wish to prove the reliability of the volume myself and if I can make skeptics believe, then I can be sure. You may ask your question, Mr. Caine. The symbols in the book will answer it, although it may take me hours to find the answer."

"I ain't in a hurry," Caine grinned. "Ask it how come this flatfoot and me were almost gassed to death in my car just a little while ago. I want to find

out if some of my enemies did that."

Parrish got up, turned and stopped. He gave a hissing intake of breath. Brandon whirled. Caine pivoted too and all three watched a phenomenon. The heavy volume, unobstructed on the table, with no visible hands near it, slowly began to open of its own accord.

**T**HE heavy cover made a slapping noise as it hit the table top. Then the pages started to turn, one by one. Sometimes rather fast, sometimes very slowly, as if a ghost studied their contents and looked for the right one.

Finally it lay open, flat. No more pages moved. Parrish licked his lips.

"It's true then—the only phase of the Cabala I never believed. The author does remain within it, over a space of hundreds of years. Gentlemen, the answer should be on the page now lying open. Come—we shall see."

Caine walked beside Brandon. "This is a screwy business. What do you think?"

"I'm not thinking," Brandon said slowly. "All I know is what my eyes saw. That book opened, the pages turned, and nobody was near it."

Professor Parrish bent over the book and, without touching it, studied the weird inscriptions. He pulled down a bright desk lamp closer to the page. Caine and Brandon were looking over his shoulder. Then, as they watched, a strange blot seemed to appear on the page. It spread and spread until almost the entire page was taken up by it. The thing had shape, too—like a profile cut out of black paper.

Parrish spoke, in a monotone, as if the whole thing hypnotized him and as if his tongue had become another's.

"Pipe in your car . . . stuffed. Leaks too . . . gas through floor boards. Some one is looking for revenge. That person's features appear on the page now. Look quickly, because it fades. It is almost gone."

Caine licked his lips. "I think you're nuts. That mark on the page—it didn't look like anybody."

"It did to me," Brandon snapped.



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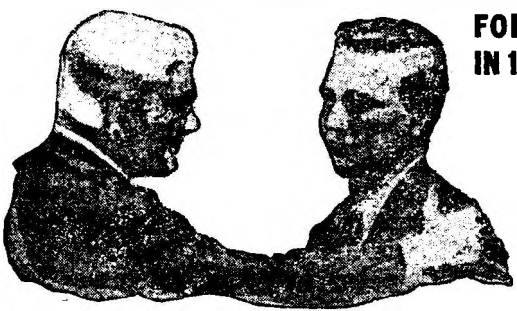
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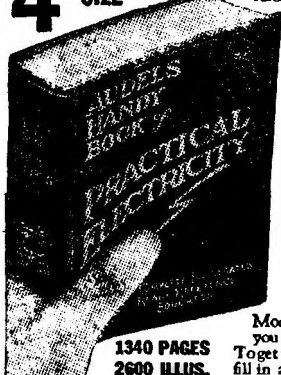
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"Only one guy ever had a profile like that. Skinny Hollis! You remember him, Caine. He used to hijack your booze in the good old days."

Caine made a derisive sound with his tongue. "Skinny Hollis has been dead for ten years. What are you trying to pull, Brandon? You even worked on the case."

"Yeah—yeah, I know," Brandon said slowly. "That's why I was so sure this was Hollis' profile. You saw how the nose of the profile was bent, like it had been busted. That's the way Hollis was found, beaten to death with clubs, his nose bent over to one side. I don't get this, Professor. What's it mean?"

Parrish walked away from the table. He rubbed his chin slowly.

"The Cabala answers any question truthfully. Sometimes only by inference and sometimes by such actual materializations as you just saw. I don't know how it is done. I'm only sure that it is possible. The profile of that face, the writing on that page, told me an attempt had been made to kill you, Caine. I even described the process because it was so written. The person responsible is the owner of that profile."

"But he's dead," Caine said nervously. "I tell you he's dead—for ten years. How could he do that to my car?"

"Shall I ask the Cabala?" Parrish queried gently.

Brandon poured himself a drink of water from a decanter and swallowed it in one gulp. He'd seen strange things in his life, but nothing like this. It sent shivers up and down his spine. Caine kept glancing at him and the ex-crook lit a cigarette with a match that shook so badly it almost flickered out.

"I—I guess I—I'll be going now," Caine said. "You—can send me your check, Prof."

"Wait a minute," Brandon snapped. "This is too good a thing to miss. Professor, ask the Cabala who killed Skinny Hollis. I'll stay here a week to get the answer. I tried, for months, and finally resigned from the force be-

cause I failed. Ask the Cabala who killed him."

**P**ARRISH didn't seem to be required to ask the questions. That huge book began moving again. Its pages turned slowly, then they were riffled through as if the invisible person handling them was in a hurry. Finally the action slowed again and stopped, more than three quarters of the way through the thick volume.

Caine suddenly rushed to the table and slammed the book shut. He put one thick hand on its cover.

"I changed my mind," he said hoarsely. "This book ain't for sale. You didn't give me the check, Prof, so the sale wasn't legal. It's mine. I'm keeping it."

Brandon's eyes narrowed. "Wait a minute," he snapped. "I think I know why you don't want that question answered, Caine. You killed Skinny Hollis. You're afraid the book will tell us. Maybe it will. I never thought I'd believe in things like this, but I know what my eyes saw. Take your hand off the book, Caine. Take it off or—"

Caine reached into his pocket with amazing speed, and brought out a snub-nosed pistol.

"Stand away, copper," he rasped. "I'm protecting my own property. You can't touch this book. I—Ow! Hey—help! Help me! I can't move my hand. It's being held against the book. I can't move it!"

Brandon rushed forward. Caine dropped his gun and the detective scooped it up. He grabbed Caine's wrist and tugged. The hand remained fastened to the cover of that book as though a ten-ton weight held it down.

Professor Parrish hurried closer. "Stand back, Brandon," he said. "Caine, you did kill that man. So long as you refuse to permit the Cabala to answer, you cannot get away from it. Agree, you fool. What if it does say you killed him? Is that evidence to present to a jury? Agree before it's too late."

Caine's eyes were bulging. His neck

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muscles were distended and he tried to talk, but only a wheezing sound came forth. Instantly his hand came away from the book. He gave a loud scream and jumped clear.

The cover of the Cabala opened immediately and, as before, the pages were slowly and then rapidly run through until the movement stopped when the same page was exposed.

Parrish approached cautiously, pulled the desk lamp down again and waited. Caine sat slumped in a chair, his face ashen. Brandon, jittery as a fifteen year old Negro passing through a cemetery at night, kept eyeing the volume apprehensively. He didn't know whether or not he liked this, even if Caine was revealed as the killer of Skinny Hollis—the only case Brandon had never cracked.

Parrish spoke softly. "It is here, Caine. You did murder Mr. Hollis. Oh, yes—it's very evident. Caine—"

The ex-crook jumped up nervously. "What is it? What else do you see?"

Parrish said, "You just asked the Cabala a question—not aloud—but mentally. It makes no difference. You want to know if you'll ever be made to pay for your crimes. Ah, yes, Caine. Indeed you will—some day."

Brandon walked over and looked down at Caine. "So you're the rat who knocked off Hollis. Had a pretty good alibi. Fooled me, anyhow. Well, I can't make a pinch on the strength of what the Cabala says. I'd be laughed out of the D.A.'s office, but remember this—I know."

"Look, Brandon," Caine said. "This crazy business has got me down. It's a trick of some kind. You're trying to make me say I killed Hollis. Well, I won't. And I'm getting out of here, too. Right now!"

"Wait," Parrish said, without looking around. "Come here, Caine. Look in the book. Look—at the fresh profile which is appearing. It predicts your very brief future."

Parrish bent the table lamp lower. Caine stared and sweated. Brandon felt a dry sensation that ran to the pit

of his stomach. This new profile was that of a gun—an automatic—and there was smoke coming out of its muzzle.

**W**HEELING, Caine ran out of the room. Brandon went after him, but Caine moved very fast. He flung open the front door, rushed across the porch. And then a gun roared. The bullet smashed into the porch pillar beside Caine's head. He did a nose dive off the porch and behind some thick bushes. Brandon landed on him.

Caine was shivering badly. "S-some of the boys. They been trying to gun me out for months. Brandon, I'll pay you a grand to protect me. A grand—right now. Another when you get me home."

"Not for ten grand," Brandon snapped. "I need the dough and those bums haven't any more right to kill you than they have some other louse. But there were three or four of 'em in that car which rolled by. I'm not shooting it out with a young army."

"Then—then see if we can get back into the house," Caine begged. "I—I'll stay there all night. Yeah, that's it. In the morning, I'll call the cops and confess to a little job I pulled a long time ago. It'll get me about a year in jail. I'll be safe there. Sure, it's the perfect answer. Help me, Brandon, and you can make the pinch, huh?"

"To put the collar on you," Brandon muttered, "I'd sell my soul. Okay—keep down while I check."

Brandon slowly stepped into the path. No bullets slashed through the darkness at him. No slowly moving cars came down the street. He hissed to Caine and they both rushed back into the house. Caine sat down, mopping his face.

Parrish reverently closed the Cabala and turned around to face them.

"Now do you believe? Or is another demonstration called for? Please realize the powers of the Cabala have not been completely exhibited yet. There is a chapter—at the end of the book—



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"Stop it," Caine shouted. "Don't ask that damned book anything. It's haunted. It's the work of the devil, that's what it is. But remember—it's still mine. I can do what I want with it and I'm going to burn the damned thing. Burn it, do you hear me?"

Caine made a mad rush over to the table. Parrish tried to block him, but Caine, much larger and stronger, brushed him aside. Brandon drew a gun and held it ready. In his present state of mind, Caine was likely to do anything.

Caine reached for the book and his hand froze midway. He remembered what had happened before, when his hand had been pinned down. He seized a pencil, gave the heavy volume a push with it and saw the thing move. He dropped the pencil and grabbed at the book. But his hands encountered nothing but air. The book was poised about eighteen inches above the desk—supported by nothing more substantial than air. Caine's hands were beneath it and he yanked them away in a flash.

The heavy book fell to the table top with a crash. Caine backed away, moving his arms as though to brush aside some invisible menace. He was muttering under his breath.

**P**ROFESSOR PARRISH stepped closer to the table. "There have been times in history," he said slowly, "when the Cabala has brought forth things no man should look upon. It has explained secrets no ears should hear, but I am willing to take a chance. I am going to ask the Cabala how and why my friend died. If necessary—to bring



him back. Such an opportunity may never arise again. I cannot afford to miss it."

Caine sat down beside Brandon. "Listen, copper, you get me outa this mess and I'll do any damned thing you want. You're just as scared as me. If you weren't, I'd say it was a trick, but—but it can't be. You—you better put that gun away. Your trigger finger is shaking like a leaf."

Brandon gulped. He stuffed the gun into his pocket, but never took his eyes away from the grim volume on that table. Professor Parrish stood just to one side of it. When he spoke, his voice was slow and he almost prayed his request.

"It's Nichols I want to hear from. Ernest Nichols. He was my friend—my student. He died—long ago—yet I am sure he wants to tell me something. How did he die? Why? Answer me."

The book flew open this time and the pages were run through very fast. Finally it lay open. Parrish bent over the book, but neither Brandon nor Caine arose. Neither wanted to see what was written or what would appear. Parrish straightened up and turned around.

"The answer is clear. Ernest Nichols is coming himself, to tell us. The Cabala has reached him. Listen—"

On the uncarpeted stairway in the hall, feet slowly descended. They clumped like those of a zombie, reached the landing and came into the room. The rug muffled the sound, but the footsteps could still be heard. A chair moved out from the wall and then a young man's voice spoke.

"It's good to see you again, Professor Parrish. I suppose I'm invisible to you. I usually am."

"Yes—you are quite invisible," Parrish said. "But you cast a shadow on the wall. A very good likeness of you, Ernest. Have we much time?"

"Very little. The forces of the Cabala reached me. You wish to know how I was killed and why. Or should I

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say, murdered, because that is what happened to me."

"Murdered!" Parrish gasped. "But you—that is, your body was found hanging by the neck. A verdict of suicide was given, but the cuts and bruises on your body were never accounted for."

"I was murdered and, before I died, I was subjected to indescribable horrors. I—"

"It's a lie—a trick!" Caine yelled. "You don't see anything, Parrish. Not one damned thing."

"Turn around, Mr. Caine. You too, Brandon. I'm not lying. See for yourselves."

Caine bit his lip and both hands gripped the arms of his chair until the knuckles gleamed white. Brandon turned quickly and let out a gasp. Caine moved much slower. He saw the outline created on the wall. It was the figure of a man seated in a chair—the same chair which stood about six feet away from the wall.

**S**UDDENLY the picture changed. The chair vanished. A tree was brought out in shadow. From its lower limb a body hung. It began to sway until it moved in wide arcs.

Caine gave a wild scream. "The kid! It's the kid! Make him go away. Make him go! I had to kill him. I couldn't help it. He knew too damned much. And he wouldn't co-operate. Take him away. Take him—"

Caine made a crazy dive toward the shadow on the wall. It vanished instantly. Caine moaned, closed his eyes and started to wilt. A gun prodded his ribs. He whirled. Brandon stood beside him, gun ready. Professor Parrish, a trifle pale, stood between two husky detectives.

Brandon said, "I don't know what this is all about and I'll admit I was as scared as Caine. But when he started yapping a confession to murder, I guessed this must have been a trick."

"You're quite right." Professor Parrish sat down like a tired old man. "Long ago—almost a year, in fact—"

my most apt pupil, Ernest Nichols, wrote an article on the conversion of gold bullion into its original ore. A laboratory operation in reverse. It was given a slight amount of publicity. Then Ernest disappeared. His body was found later on.

"The verdict was suicide, but I never believed it. Mr. Caine kidnaped Ernest—to force him to convert stolen bullion he had cached away. Hot gold, I suppose you might call it. If this was converted back into its original state, he could sell it easily. Otherwise, the appearance of so much pure gold on the market would have been regarded with suspicion.

"Ernest refused to help him and died for it. But Mr. Caine did retain the notes Ernest had made and got some crooked chemist to attempt the procedure. As a result, the stuff was placed on the market and I instantly knew what had happened. The police helped me trace this back to Mr. Caine. Then I worked carefully and slowly. I tricked him into purchasing a Cabala so I could make him an offer. Get him to my home tonight."

"And the whole business—with the book—was a trick?" Brandon asked.

"Oh, yes—a very simple trick. Those bookends, at both sides of the table, are really electrical cells. By operating them, the book and its pages could be moved at will. The detectives here, attended to that. It also was possible to lift the book into mid-air. You see, the book was actually forced on Mr. Caine at that auction. It was especially made.

"The covers are filled with metal, the pages contain very thin sheets of metal which are attracted by the current between the bookends. Mr. Caine's hand was firmly held down to the book by another current—one which gave no customary jolts of electricity. There is a steel plate concealed in the rug where Mr. Caine stood.

"Okay, Caine." One of the detectives snapped handcuffs in place. "Let's go. And, Brandon—I guess we were all wrong at headquarters about the Skinny Hollis kill. We heard Caine confess

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to it. A couple of our boys did that shooting out front too."

Brandon shook his head slowly from side to side. "I guessed that all right. And the profiles that appeared on the pages of the book—they were already there but invisible and only brought out when the professor moved the hot desk lamp close enough. The shadow on the wall was done by a projection machine, the footsteps by remote control. Probably a radio hidden under the staircase. All I don't understand is why I was inveigled into this thing."

Professor Parrish walked up to Brandon. "It was my idea. You see, Mr. Caine was a rather tough, hard-headed person. Hardly apt to believe my tricks unless someone else, even tougher, showed evidences of fear. You did—perfectly. I'm sorry I had to frighten you, but Mr. Caine needed that kind of persuasion. It was the only way we could make him confess. Mr. Caine—"

"Stop calling that rat 'Mister'," Brandon said. He grabbed Caine's arm. "Okay, boys, it's my pinch. You owe me that for scaring ten years off my life. Come on, Caine, and I hope your death cell at Sing Sing is packed full of ghosts."



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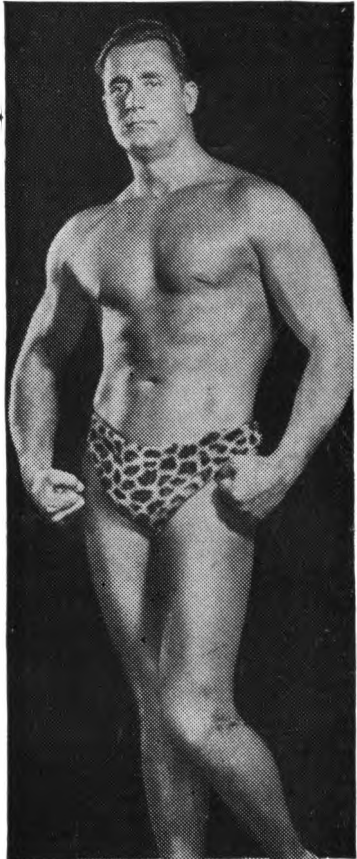
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