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Vol. XLIV, No. 2

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October, 1944

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By **ROBERT WALLACE**

Taken from the Case-Book of Richard Curtis Van Loan

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13

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CRIME WAVE

Murray Leinster 65

Nolan passes the hat around—and collects a killer

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Big-time bank robbers think they can fool Constable Jed Holsum

AND

THE PHANTOM SPEAKS

A Department 6

Join FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM! Coupon on Page 80

Next Issue's Novel: The Phantom in MURDER OF A MARIONETTE

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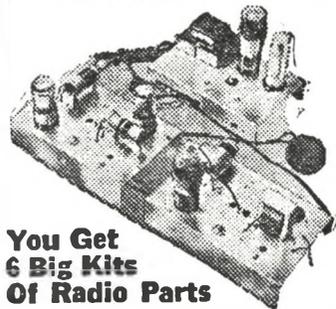
Broadcasting Stations, Aviation Radio, Police Radio, Loudspeaker Systems, Radio Manufacturing all offer good jobs now—and most of these fields have a big backlog of business that is building up during the war.

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The PHANTOM SPEAKS

I'VE always liked marionette shows. As a matter of fact I've found them to be interesting to people of all kinds and ages. That was one of the reasons I hired the Graselli puppeteers for an appearance at a Westchester orphanage. That's one marionette show I'll never forget, not only because of the lively antics of the costumed dolls under the capable fingers of Pietro Graselli and his aides, but because Death stalked through the grounds of the great children's shelter that day.

It was a weird kind of death. One moment a gay dancing girl, costumed in the real life rôle of "Rosalinda," flashing, scarlet-gowned, was helping prepare the refreshments for the laughing, shouting youngsters. The next moment she was a wilted thing on the fresh, green grass, a deeper scarlet welling over the bright hue of her gown.

Had this been the only assault of death upon the realm of youth and laughter, it might have been bad enough. But the murder of Rosalinda—who was Julie Severn in real life—was just the beginning of a crime pattern of murder and intrigue, a labyrinth into which I was to plunge in seeking a solution.

I didn't know it at the time, but Steve Huston, the capable young reporter of the New York *Clarion* who has worked with me on numerous occasions, was also enmeshed in the toils of the same gang at almost the same moment that the marionette murder took place.

Secret of the Puppets

How these parallel actions combined to send me on a crime chase that was one of the liveliest in my career supplies Robert Wallace with the material for the first-rate detective action story he presents in the Phantom novel in the next issue. It's called "Murder of a Marionette," and if its complexities give you half the thrill they brought to Steve Huston and myself in unraveling the threads and arriving at the

solution, you're in for some really exciting reading.

Julie Severn, who played the rôle of the marionette, Rosalinda, was a one-time dancer at the Casa Mojada.

On the face of things, the Casa Mojada was just another night spot where a fellow could get a fair meal and a bit of relaxation, with a glimpse of the kicking toes of the pony line.

But there were plenty of other things going on at the Casa that simply didn't show on the menu nor in the dancing under the colored spots.

I think you folks are going to get a big kick out of following me through the secret passage of the Mojada into the rendezvous of the chief criminal behind this orgy of crime.

A Grim Crime Pattern

You're going to find the meaning of the symbol of the marionette, and the grim pattern in which it was an important segment. You'll meet up with some of the underworld's most ruthless individuals, and at the same time brush elbows with social figures who would be out of place anywhere but in a drawing room, or a loge, or the Diamond Horseshoe at the Metropolitan.

These cross currents of human behavior and insights into individual tastes and demands make "The Murder of a Marionette," the type of story you like to read. I consider the whole set-up one of the most interesting of the many cases that have been turned over to Mr. Wallace for elaboration in his Phantom Detective stories. He has done a swell job, and I'm sure you're going to like it.

If you are looking for a clever crime puzzle, if you like plenty of bang-up action, and the laughter and gaiety of New York's night life combined, then "The Murder of a Marionette" in the next issue of THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE magazine is just

(Continued on page 10)



"Make Me Prove . . .

I CAN MAKE YOU COMMANDO TOUGH

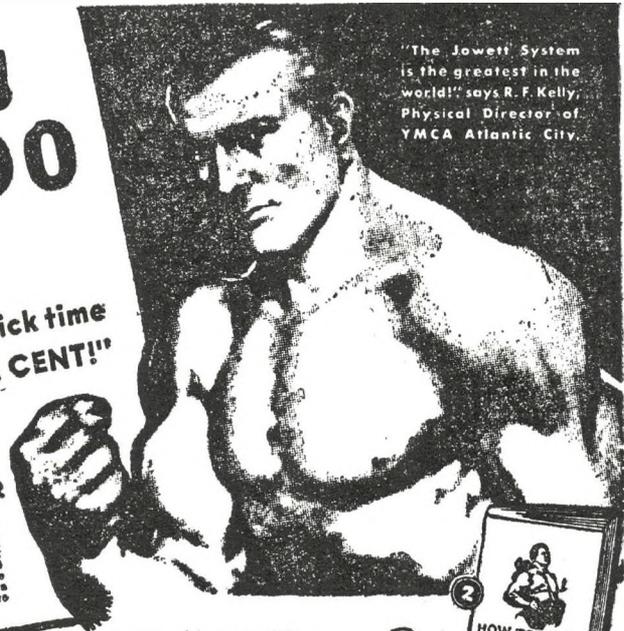
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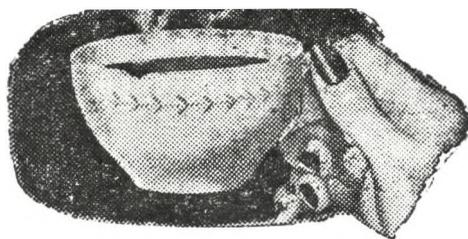
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— THE PHANTOM SPEAKS

(Continued from page 6)

the thing you've been looking for. It was one of my best cases, and it is one of Bob Wallace's best novels.

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ON THE occasions when I get around to your editor's office there are a number of things that give me a real lift, the buoyant feeling that every American has a right to have if he's doing his best to be a good citizen and help the War Effort. One of these things is the enthusiasm expressed in the letters that come in from readers.

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(Continued on page 80)



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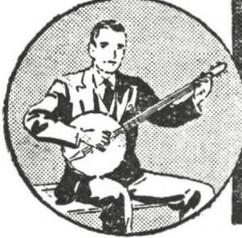
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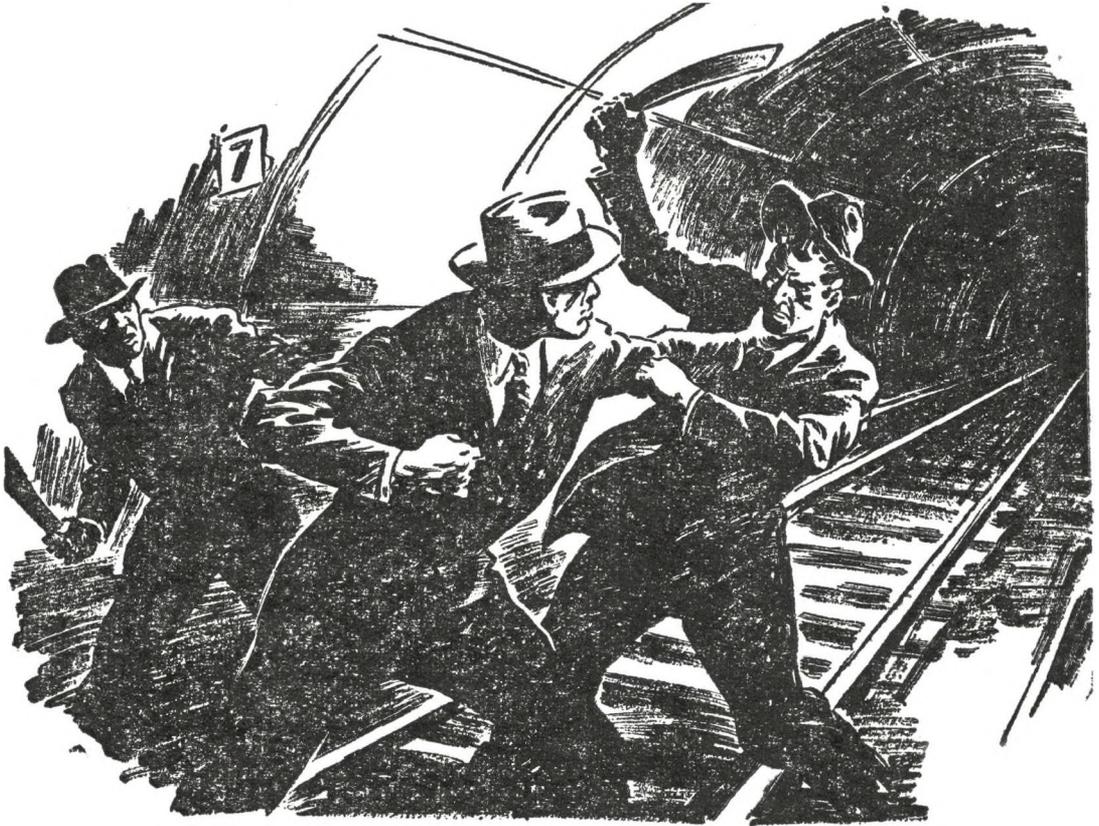


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As the killer made a quick slash, steely fingers closed around his throat? (CHAPTER IV)

Mansions of Despair

By ROBERT WALLACE

Upon the identity of an unknown man who claims to be Don Mallory, pioneer screen idol, hangs the fate of many marked for murder—and it's up to the Phantom Detective to unearth the startling truth!

CHAPTER I

MURDER OF A MISSING MAN

MRS. LANCE CARTER'S garden parties were always something to bring enthusiastic acclaim. People in the social whirl craved invitations to them. Once received, an invitation was not to be brushed aside either.

Especially an invitation to such a garden party as that Mrs. Lance Carter was giving now, and at which she was going to use her wiles and her influence to raise a huge amount of cash for the Red Cross.

Everyone of consequence, socially, was present. True, not a great many big cars pulled up to discharge mink-coated or top-hatted guests, for with many of the elite

AN EXCITING BOOK-LENGTH MYSTERY NOVEL

A Voice from the Grave Calls Richard

such things were out for the duration. But they came, these guests, and were greeted by Mrs. Lance Carter with her cool, but cordial hand-clasp.

Among those present were two men who smiled when they were supposed to, greeted people with the proper geniality, and generally conducted themselves as everyone else did. Yet these two men were bored stiff.

One was Frank Havens, gray-haired, and with dignified bearing. A noted and wealthy man, publisher of a string of prominent newspapers from Coast to Coast, he was a "must" on the list for any important gathering.

His companion was a tall, slender man who wore a pencil-striped suit at this evening affair with the same nonchalance he would have worn white tie and tails. He was a striking man, though not quite handsome, for there was something too rugged about him for that.

His name, Richard Curtis Van Loan, gave him entrée to any socially exclusive group, though perhaps he was best known as a wealthy man-about-town. He had no occupation, and appeared to care nothing for one, contenting himself with sports, hunting, fishing and the like. Always, however, he was in demand at social functions, as could be expected in the case of a bachelor so eligible.

One thing about Richard Curtis Van Loan, though, was a constant puzzle to his socially-minded friends. That was his propensity for making the most unexpected disappearances. Where, they wondered, did he go at such times? Sometimes he would be gone for a long while; sometimes for only a few days. But he never offered much more than a lame story to account for where he had been, casually turning aside curious inquiries.

People who took such an interest in Richard Curtis Van Loan's private affairs would have been greatly surprised to know the truth. The knowledge of Van's whereabouts, and what he had been doing during the time he vanished from their ken would have jarred them to their eye-teeth.

VAN LOAN nudged Havens, and they walked slowly toward a rose arbor. There they sat down and lighted cigarettes. Havens grinned at his younger companion. Plainly the same thought was in the minds of both men.

"Van," Havens said abruptly, "just as soon as Mrs. Carter orders dinner to be served, we'll make our donation to her and

get away from here. I'm one of 'these people', but they bore me to extinction."

Van Loan laughed. "Mrs. Carter gets ideas and backs them up with such logic a man can't refuse to come to her affairs. Tonight—and who but Mrs. Carter would think of having a garden party at night—we eat the most expensive dinner in history. Every nickel collected is going to the Red Cross. That's the only reason I'm here. I understand a cup of coffee will cost a neat fifty dollars."

"It will cost our soldiers and sailors and marines a lot more if the Red Cross isn't on hand to serve them," Havens said soberly. "That's why I came, too—and gave this shindig such a build-up in my papers. But as soon as we can, let's sneak away."

Van Loan nodded. "I notice there are some movie people present," he said idly. "Didn't I see Lyle Jackson, the director?"

"Ex-director," Havens corrected. "You're behind the times, Van. He went out when talkies came in. Or at least they started him sliding downhill. Smart fellow, though. Held onto his money and does as he pleases. Yes, he's here. So is Paul Ross, that handsome matinee idol of about twenty years ago. The talkies scorned him, too. Perry Dixon is also present. Know him, Van?"

"Only of him," Van Loan replied. "I know he used to be a Lon Chaney type in the old silent pictures. Heavy make-up and all. Pretty good, too, they say, and anyone who has mastered the art of make-up wins my esteem."

"He was good," Havens said. "There were few character actors any better than Perry Dixon. . . . Well, let's go back. There are going to be a couple of speeches, I think. We'll be expected to listen."

They returned to the part of the garden where lights had been dimmed except for those illuminating a small band-shell. Mrs. Carter used it to stage amateur plays, produced strictly for the benefit of her friends. Van Loan had seen one and believed it a good idea that the audience was restricted to friends.

Someone stood on the rostrum, making a plea for funds for the Red Cross. Behind him sat a sailor and a marine who also would speak and do much more to empty pockets and checkbooks with their stories than a thousand civilian speakers. This whole affair was being given for the distinct purpose of obtaining money—colossal sums of money—from wealthy people. Mrs. Lance Carter meant to turn in an astounding sum or die trying. It was an outstanding event for a most worthy cause.

Curtis Van Loan into a Baffling Case!

While attention was centered on this speakers' platform, another little scene was being enacted at the entrance to the big house, one hidden from those in the garden. Two footmen were bodily restraining a man with long, white hair which was tangled and matted. He wore a white beard, too, and his eyes were weak and watery. His clothes had seen better days—some twenty years ago, apparently—and the sole of his left shoe flapped every time he took a step. But there was determination in his mien



THE PHANTOM

and actions, even though the strength behind it was weak.

"Look, pop," one of the footmen, wanting to avoid any disturbance, tried to explain in a kindly voice. "I don't care who you know inside. This is a private affair. Wait on the sidewalk if you like and wait for the man you want to borrow from. I can't stop you from doing that, but getting in here—nothing doing."

The old man stepped back and mechanically drew his badly-worn coat firmly against him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I suppose I don't look as if I fit in here, do I? But I do want to see Lyle Jackson. I know he is inside, because I read in the papers that he would be a guest here. But as you say, there is no

especial hurry. I'll reach him when he comes out."

"Certainly." The footman nodded. "You're being sensible. We've got nothing against you, but orders are orders."

The old man agreed. "Yes, indeed. I've given plenty of them myself in my day. However, there is one favor I will ask. It's been a long, long time. . . . Say, this is Nineteen-forty-four, isn't it?"

The footman laughed. "Ever since January first."

"I couldn't believe it at first." The old man wagged his head slowly from side to side. "Seemed incredible to me. Well, the point I was getting at is this. Lyle Jackson's appearance may have changed radically since I last saw him. When he comes out—if I am at the curb—will you indicate just who he is for me? Simply point at him and nod. I shall pay you for your trouble, of course."

THE old man reached into his pocket and removed a fat roll of bills that made the eyes of the servants grow wide. The size of the roll was one thing—the size of the bills another. They were the old-fashioned kind. The old man peeled off two of them and handed one to each servant.

"If I'm not at the curb, keep these anyway," he said. "You have been very kind. Thank you again."

He turned and walked slowly away. His steps were hardly more than a shuffle, accompanied by the flapping of that loose sole, but he held himself erect, head high and chin out. The two footmen were engrossed in watching him. Then one of them looked at the bill in his hand. He let out a brief, half-smothered yelp.

"Joe—look! A hundred dollars! In old-fashioned money. I hope it's still good."

"It is, all right," Joe answered. "My word, you never can tell these days what kind of a man carries a lot of money with him. There must have been fifty thousand dollars in that roll."

Joe was wrong, of course. The old man had only nine thousand, eight hundred dollars in that roll.

The old man, however, was not content merely to lounge at the curb, wait for the party to break up, and have the still-astonished serving men put the finger on Lyle Jackson. He required more direct methods for his purposes. They were going to let him into a lot of trouble and bring the whisper of death into his ear, but he didn't know that—not then.

He made his way to the side street which

bordered the big, hedge-enclosed garden of Mrs. Lance Carter's property. He could hear music and voices. For a moment a rapt look came over his prematurely age-wrinkled face. Then resolutely he tried to squirm through the hedge.

It was impossible. The hedge had been especially constructed to keep out people, and the old man made no headway. He began skirting the hedge, looking for a likely place. He found one, far to the rear of the festivities, and although he ripped his clothes in several places, he got through.

There were no guards or servants here to stop him. He plodded along a winding path, wholly oblivious to the flowers that bordered his route. Only grim determination was in his eyes now. He had something to do and he meant to do it.

Soon he was directly back of the little band-shell which Mrs. Carter used for a stage. There were people on it. He could hear their voices. Someone was telling about some war or other. The old man recalled reading headlines about it, but he was not especially interested. It did complicate things though, because in that prior life of his there had also been a war. But this was 1944, not 1918, and two wars confused him.

He moved to the edge of the band-shell and peered over a low bush at the audience. He smiled, for before him were the kind of people he knew. This was where he belonged, despite his matted hair, long beard and worn clothing. He wanted to tell them so, and since he had always been direct in all matters, he walked boldly onto the stage.

A marine who was speaking faltered, then stopped his speech. A man seated behind the speakers' table arose hurriedly and went toward the bedraggled stranger. The old man brushed him aside, went to the center of the stage and faced the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "it is good to be back. Really good."

His voice was cultured, his words precise and clear. He showed no fear. In fact, he was far more at ease than the other speakers had been. He went on talking.

"It seems that I have been away a long, long time and yet I haven't. It was only in my mind. It didn't progress with the passing days and weeks and months. You see, my friends, I was ill. Then someone attacked me. I was struck on the head. In brief, I had been suffering from amnesia and the blow I received brought my memory back.

"I see some friends among you. Paul Ross—I hope I won't look as old as you do when I get these whiskers off. Perry Dixon, you old rascal! And Lyle Jackson. I wasn't sure I'd recognize you after so long, but I do. People don't change much, I guess,

when they have their health."

Lyle Jackson, ex-movie director, elbowed closer to the band-shell, peering intently at the old man who was speaking. Jackson was fifty now, and turning gray, but he had the shoulders and muscles of a much younger man. His eyes were good, too.

"I'm afraid," he said arrogantly, "that I don't know who you are, sir."

The old man laughed. A ringing burst of mirth.

"The whiskers and hair are a good disguise, eh, Lyle? I am Don Mallory!"

"Don Mallory!" Lyle Jackson shouted. "Don Mallory! But—but he is dead! He was pronounced dead twenty years ago."

Mallory laughed again. "My flesh is warm, my heart beats and I breathe quite regularly. My senses respond to a hard pinch. I'm very much alive, Lyle."

JACKSON turned to face the assembled guests who were a plainly startled group of onlookers.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced firmly, "this man is a fraud! I don't know what he is up to, but he is not Don Mallory. Mallory was a famous actor. There were few better, and all of us here who are old enough to remember him, knew him as such. This man is trying some scheme or other. I say the police should be called."

"Perhaps it's a publicity stunt," suggested Kurt Otley, a Hollywood columnist, always on the lookout for stunts.

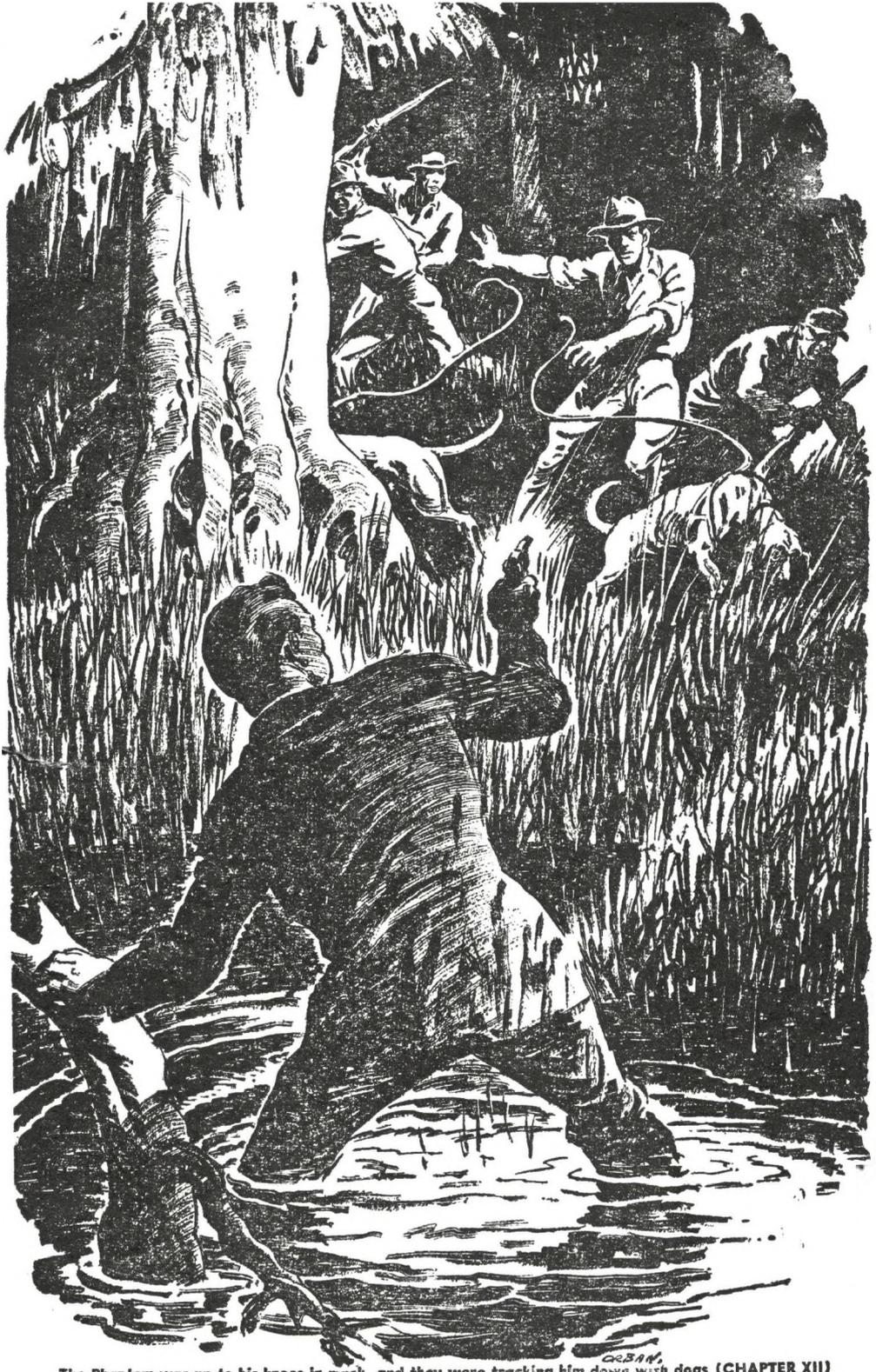
Otley, tall and rangy, was no more than thirty, but he was certain he knew every movie star of modern or pre-talkie vintage. He was studying the old man on the platform curiously.

Mrs. Lance Carter decided to put an end to speculation, or any curiosity about the uninvited guest. She summoned her butler and asked him to call the police.

The old man who had announced he was Don Mallory went on talking. Whoever he was, he knew the old silent movies, for he expounded upon them and named every picture in which Don Mallory had acted.

Then a patrolman from a radio car skirted the throng and stepped up on the platform. The old man saw him coming, but made no move to escape. He knew what it was all about though, for now as he faced his spellbound audience his voice turned bitter.

"So you think I'm crazy. Wait! Wait, I tell you. When my story is told, it will tear some curtains away from Hollywood. It will expose the whole rotten scheme of certain crooks and murderers who have hidden behind the screen of a great business. I have the evidence! At Luana—it's all there. They tried to kill me once. I came here because I thought I would be welcome,



The Phantom was up to his knees in muck, and they were tracking him down with dogs (CHAPTER XII)

once I had told who I was, and let it be known I am still living. I'm not welcome, I see, so I shall willingly go with this officer and explain to the authorities."

"That's the stuff, pop," the policeman said, as if coaxing an obstreperous child. "This bunch believes nobody or nothing. You come along with me and talk it over with the lieutenant. He's a sympathetic guy and if there are any killers after you, leave that to us."

"Precisely what I intend to do," the old man cried, as his head lifted proudly. "I only hope I will live long enough. One attempt on my life failed by a narrow margin. Come, officer, I am ready."

The bluecoat took his arm and marched him off the stage. As he went down the little flight of steps, the officer's glance took in the assembled guests and he winked broadly, indicating that he hoped none of them would spoil his neat method of getting the intruder away.

Once off the platform, he snapped handcuffs on the old man and they threaded their way toward the house. They didn't enter, but followed a walk around it and finally reached the wider walk which led to the street. A radio car was parked at the curb..

The walk was quite long for Mrs. Carter's house set well back from the street. The radio car man and his prisoner were half-way along this when they were stopped as by a bolt from the blue. There was no sound—not until the arrow struck the police officer squarely between the shoulder blades. It made a flat, rather hollow sound.

The bluecoat toppled forward. The old man whirled around, looked at the house and gave a bleat of terror. He began running. Another arrow slashed through the air.

It struck the old man in about the same spot that the police officer had been hit. Even before he toppled, two men swept out of the bush beside the path and raced toward him.

The whole business was accomplished in nearly complete silence. The whack of the arrows was not loud enough to carry. The yelp the old man gave was weak, and strangled by terror. The two men who pounced on him had an easy time of it, even with the police radio car and its dozing driver at the curb not more than thirty yards away.

They picked up the white-haired, white-bearded man, paused long enough to yank the arrow from his back and drop it from gloved hands and unlocked the handcuffs. Then, between them, they carried the old fellow into the shrubbery and vanished.

Not long after, an alert listener might have heard a car starter whir on the side

street bordering the house and grounds that were the home of the wealthy Mrs. Lance Carter.

CHAPTER II

ARROW ROOM



RICHARD CURTIS VAN LOAN had watched while the bedraggled old man was on the stage, had taken in all the by-play, and listened to what the old fellow had to say, with a rapt expression on his face.

Havens shrugged when the policeman led away the white-haired man who had declared he was

Don Mallory.

"Crazy duffer, wasn't he, Van?" Havens remarked.

Van Loan rubbed his chin. "Mr. Havens, my memory isn't too good about Don Mallory. Can you refresh it? Just who was the man?"

"Don Mallory," Havens replied, "used to be one of the most famous character actors who ever went to Hollywood, Van. Years ago, at the height of his popularity, he disappeared. Later a body was found in some Florida swamp and identified as Mallory's. There is an imposing monument in a Hollywood cemetery over his grave."

"Hmm," Van Loan frowned. "Interesting wasn't it, how this old man who said he was Don Mallory picked out Paul Ross, Perry Dixon and Lyle Jackson? He must have known them. And that outfit he wore. It was old enough to have belonged to the real Don Mallory. A good quality of cloth too, as worn as it is. I noticed that as he passed close by under that light. I wonder—"

Havens eyed Van Loan with curiosity: "What do you wonder, Van?"

"If that man wasn't the real Don Mallory—as he said. Mr. Havens, would you mind if I left now? Just to satisfy my own curiosity, I'd like to see that old man again."

"Run along," Havens consented. "But I think you're wrong."

Richard Curtis Van Loan didn't get far from the garden. In fact he had just entered the path when he saw a uniformed servant running as if an assortment of devils were after him. Van stepped directly in his path. He almost sensed what disturbed the servant so badly.

"What is it?" he asked quickly. "What has happened?"

"I—don't know—for sure. There's a policeman—lying across the walk. He's dead. There's an arrow in his back—and I yelled

to another officer in a radio car—as soon as I saw him when I opened the door for a minute. . . . Got to tell Mrs. Carter!”

Van waited to hear no more. He raced around the house, quickly located the scene of the murder when he saw two other serving men and the radio car driver standing over the body. Van, without hesitation, dropped to one knee beside it. He didn't have to make an examination. He could see at once that the arrow had ripped through the heart and that death must have been instantaneous.

He arose and nodded at the misty-eyed driver.

“Your partner had a prisoner when he left the garden,” he said. “A white-haired old man. Have you seen him?”

“I haven't seen anybody,” the driver groaned. “Mike told me he could handle things okay so, like a fool, I let him go alone. That guy he arrested must have killed him.”

“Now wait!” Van Loan cautioned. “The old fellow he arrested couldn't have done this. Not unless your partner let him get away, find a bow and arrow and shoot it. I doubt that is possible. I. . . . Look! Three or four yards ahead. More blood. Not from this dead officer either. It's smeared, as if someone had been dragged along. And there's a second arrow—blood-smeared! **Officer**, you'd better get on a telephone right away. Have a dragnet thrown out. The man who knows what this is all about may be dead, but dead or alive, he's old, with long white hair and a white beard. Have a search made for him. Act quickly!”

The commanding note in Van Loan's voice sent the radio officer scurrying for the house. One of the two uniformed footmen stepped up to Van Loan.

“Horrible, isn't it, Mr. Van Loan?” he said, his voice unsteady. “And when I think how Joe and I could have prevented this, it's worse!”

“Just how?” Van Loan asked quickly, eyeing the man sharply.

“Well, you see, this old duffer you say was being taken away by the police, came to the door earlier and wanted to get inside. We shunted him off, but he asked us to watch for Mr. Lyle Jackson and indicate him as he came out. The old man gave us—a hundred dollars apiece, sir. I hope Mrs. Carter won't discharge us because of it.”

Van Loan whistled softly. “Quite probably she will,” he said. “May I see the money?”

“Certainly.”

Both men swiftly produced the long, large bills that had been given them. Van Loan took them, chewed on his lower lip a moment, then glanced up at the two footmen.

“Both of you know me,” he said. “You're aware that I wouldn't hamper the law in any respect, but if Mrs. Carter learns you accepted a bribe to tip off the old man about one of her guests, she won't like it. Suppose I take these two bills, give you new, modern currency for them and you can forget all about it.”

“We'd be grateful, Mr. Van Loan,” one of them said. “A hundred dollars is a lot of money to men like Joe and me, but I wouldn't want to get into any trouble for accepting it. This job is too good to lose. I'm not young any more, and even defense plants don't want me because I don't know anything about machines, and— Well, a man trained to be a butler or footman knows little of anything else, sir.”

“You will get into no trouble,” Van Loan told them.

HE EXTRACTED his wallet, exchanged several new bills for the old currency and carefully tucked the two old bills away.

The radio police officer was coming out of the house, and in the distance Van could hear the faint sound of muted police sirens. Van Loan quietly moved away. He took a little time to prowl around in the shrubbery on either side of the walk and, finding nothing, he walked briskly back toward the house.

The front door had been left open by excited servants so Van Loan walked in. He examined two rooms at the front of the house, found nothing, but in the third he discovered a heavy bow placed across the arms of a straight-backed chair. On the floor, beneath an open window, were three arrows. The window looked out onto the walk where the murder or murders had been committed.

Van Loan glanced around the room. It contained sportsman's trophies, some old flintlock rifles, ancient dueling pistols and a rack for the bow and the arrows. The killer then, had not been prepared in advance for the old man's arrival, but when the opportunity was afforded had merely taken advantage of the fact that murder weapons happened to be at hand.

That old man, wounded or dead, had been spirited away, indicated help of some kind, for the murderer—if among the guests, which was Van's belief—would hardly have dared leave the garden party. However, it would have been a simple matter for anyone there to slip away while the old man was talking, or while the police were on their way, to locate a telephone and call for someone associated with him to be on hand to remove the old man or his corpse.

Van Loan examined the trophy room for clues, and he did it in a professional manner belying his status of man-about-town. **A**

wealthy sportsman without constructive interests. Instead, he went about in the manner of a professional hunter, which he was—one of the best.

For Richard Curtis Van Loan had two separate identities. As Dick Van Loan he led the life to which he had been born. His second identity was that of the mysterious Phantom Detective, an able, courageous crime fighter, and as such his fame had spread until it was not only nation-wide, but world-wide. Police in all corners of the globe knew the successful work of the Phantom, and at all times were ready to cooperate with him.

It was Van Loan's work in the guise of the Phantom Detective that accounted for his strange and unexplained trips. He always made such disappearances when he began work on a case. Van Loan, the dilettante, would vanish, and the grim, domino-masked Phantom would come into being.

Many people whom the Phantom had aided, as well as members of the underworld who feared and hated him, associated him with the mask he often assumed. But he did not always wear it, for long ago he had become extremely proficient in the art of disguise.

His mastery of make-up, however, was only a part of the program he had laid out for himself in order to have no equal in his chosen field of battling crime and criminals. In every manner he had studied the science of crime detection, and had mastered it.

He had considered it one of the first requisites to keep his body trim and fit, and no professional prizefighter was ever in better condition than Van Loan was constantly. He had become expert in the manly art of self-defense, and also was a past master of ju jitsu, *la savatte*, or any other form of fighting in vogue in other countries than his native America.

He had learned languages, and not only had a long list of foreign tongues at his command, but also a collection of dialects, many of them so obscure that rarely had any other American sought to learn them. But he had; and had found them invaluable at times, just as success for him often had turned on his ability as a ventriloquist.

Van Loan's crime library, and his extensive files on noted crimes and criminals were those with which no private investigator could compete. Few, indeed, outside of the F.B.I. in Washington, could come anywhere near them. And those books had aided him in the study of crime in all its branches.

He knew psychology as well as he knew poisons. He knew weapons in use in all countries, and was himself expert in the use of all of them. He was a chemist, par ex-

cellence, and did all his own work along those lines, as well as photography which he handled with a professional touch.

Uptown, in an abandoned warehouse in the Bronx, he maintained an elaborately-equipped laboratory that would have been the envy of officialdom, could they have glimpsed it. There, under the disguise of Dr. Bendix, an old scientist with hermit leanings, he did most of his scientific work. He had a private telephone line there, but only Frank Havens knew the number.

IN VAN'S penthouse atop a smart Park Avenue apartment house, were other essentials for his work. Make-up materials of all varieties, a hundred different kinds of suits for various disguises, hats by the score, shoes—from patent-leather dancing pumps to broken-down brogans of a workman. He could outfit himself in a disguise to match almost any personality at a moment's notice.

If he had been a crook, the police would have found their match, for the Phantom Detective knew all the tricks, as well as being a dead shot, and a well-trained fighter in all lines, from Queensbury to knock-'em-down and drag-'em-out.

In his work in the character he had chosen for himself, Van Loan was untrammelled by the red tape that ties the hands of a regular detective. The Phantom, for instance, could sweep aside such things as search warrants. If he wanted to search a place, he went at it without preamble or fuss.

Partly because of this, but mostly because of his dogged determination to seek out and punish criminals, the Phantom had become the feared and hated enemy of the underworld that he was. There was a price on his head—naturally—but no one had ever earnestly attempted to claim it.

Frank Havens, who had been a close friend of Van's father, alone knew his secret, and acted as contact man for the Phantom. It was Havens, in fact, who had been responsible for the existence of the crime Nemesis. Soon after the death of young Van Loan's father, the publisher, who had come to look on Dick Van Loan almost as a son, had become aware that although Van had inherited a tremendous fortune, he was bored and unhappy.

The young man had tried many things to ward off ennui, but it was not until Havens made a suggestion that was to alter the whole course of Dick Van Loan's life, that the wealthy young dilettante found anything in which he could work up the slightest interest. That suggestion had been that Van try his hand at solving a crime mystery which had completely baffled the police and alert newspapermen.

Van had jumped at the chance. He had solved the case, and the Phantom Detective had been born when some admiring reporter had so spoken of the mysterious detective who had broken the case, but had modestly refused to make his identity known, or to come forward and accept acclaim.

That had been the beginning of the Phantom's successful career, and now he was known from pole to pole. Many sought his services, but he accepted only cases where it seemed that justice might not triumph. Many, time and again, did all that was possible to meet the Phantom in his real identity—but none ever had. To get in touch with him at all it was necessary to reach him through Frank Havens..

But never was a real appeal for help ever turned down. Money was no object—justice was all.

It was the chance that justice might not be meted out in the case of this old man who had intrigued Van Loan as he had spoken from Mrs. Lance Carter's band-shell, that the Phantom was interested now. Though, so far, he had little to work on.

He said as much to Frank Havens when he ran into the publisher soon after leaving the room from which the death arrows had been sped.

But his speech with Havens was brief and hurried. He left him then, to mill around the corridors, rooms and grounds, just like the other people present. And, like them, he discussed the crime and listened to all the fantastic theories submitted by the startled guests. One thing he noticed, however—that Lyle Jackson said but little.

The police arrived quietly. Mrs. Carter's standing warranted that, and wealthy people like her guests were always handled with kid gloves.

The men from Headquarters were efficient, too.

In something less than ten minutes, Frank Havens and Richard Curtis Van Loan, among the first to be questioned, were permitted to depart.

Outside, Van turned his car over to Havens.

"You take it," Van insisted. "And I'd consider it a favor, Mr. Havens, if you'd go to your office and get all the information you have in your morgue on Don Mallory. Pictures are important, and there must be some in your reference room, along with clippings."

"Don't be too sure," Havens warned. "Don Mallory is supposed to have died so many years ago that much of the data on him may have been cleaned out. I'll do my best, though. Are you going into this thing, Van?"



"As deeply as necessary," Van Loan replied. "There are a few angles the police don't even know, and they point to something big. The old man used the word 'Luana' in reference to a place—I'm sure that's what he meant. See if you can dig up anything about that. I'll be at your office soon. Not as I look now, though. Expect me."

Van Loan took a taxi to his apartment building. There he rode a private elevator to the penthouse, let himself in and locked the door behind him. In his bedroom he quickly removed his clothes, sat down before a triple vanity mirror and opened locked drawers. From these, he took an array of disguise materials and went to work.

HE ALTERED his medium complexion to one a few shades darker. Eyebrows were made twice as thick and a quarter of an inch longer.

Tiny metal cups went into his nostrils to widen the nose. These in no way interfered with his breathing.

An artful touch with an especially created pencil made his mouth seem slightly larger. He applied a few drops of colorless solution to his hair and this enabled him to comb it differently and never have to worry about its falling back into its accustomed place.

He surveyed himself finally and was satisfied with the result. Not even Frank Havens would have recognized this man as Richard Curtis Van Loan. A medium-priced business suit, snap-brim hat and a quiet necktie suited that facial disguise and

CHAPTER III
IN THE SUBWAY

helped to make the Phantom seem to be an ordinary person hardly worth a second glance.

He tucked a compact make-up kit into a pocket and armed himself with an automatic that fitted snugly into a shoulder holster.

A kit of specially-made burglar tools also became part of his equipment. No Raffles could ever hope to use those tools with the proficiency the Phantom possessed, for his skill was the result of long hours of patient practice.

Using the private elevator again, the Phantom descended to the ground floor, but not to the lobby this time. He had a private entrance to the building as well. These special privileges were not obtained through any concessions. Richard Curtis Van Loan owned the whole building, and could do with it as he pleased.

He came out on a cross street, turned west, and walked rapidly to the corner. There he took a taxi back to Mrs. Lance Carter's home and found it swarming with grim-eyed police who had augmented the men from Headquarters. The Phantom was stopped at the gate. Stopped and held by one arm.

THE patrolman on duty swung him around and looked him over.

"All right," he snapped. "Why were you trying to get in here, brother?"

The Phantom grinned.

"If you will allow me to produce my identification—"

"Produce," the bluecoat said. "And it better be good."

The Phantom took out a leather case and opened it. Flashing in the patrolman's eyes was a badge. No usual metal badge, but one made of platinum and set with precious jewels to form a domino mask. It was the shield of the Phantom Detective, known to practically every law enforcement officer in the nation.

A badge wholly distinctive and nearly impossible to reproduce because of its great value.

The policeman sighed. "Go on in, sir. That badge will get you any place. A radio patrolman was murdered in there, Phantom. If you find the killer, the whole Department will be grateful to you."

The Phantom nodded grimly and walked down the path. He skirted the covered body of the dead police officer, entered the house and looked for the detective in charge. He turned out to be a Homicide Squad captain named Anderson, a tall, lanky, blond Swede who was totally unimpressed by the swank of the house or the people in it.

Only one thing impressed Captain Anderson—a policeman had been killed.



FOR a few moments the Phantom stood aside, listening to the guests being questioned. Most of them had been allowed to go home, but he noticed that Lyle Jackson was still there. So was Kurt Otley, the Hollywood columnist, who stuck on the premises by dint of his gift of gab and a press card.

Otley was a slim, fast-moving young man. He was carefully dressed in expensive clothing and his clipped voice was a familiar one over the air. His reputation rested primarily on the fact that his reporting was accurate and that his exclusive stories were sensational. The Phantom had a canny idea that the reason for that might be because Otley knew where a lot of bodies were buried.

Paul Ross, the middle-aged actor who had played only leads, was slumped in a big chair and seemed totally unimpressed by all that was occurring. On the other hand Perry Dixon, the character actor, was quite obviously impressed. He kept pacing the floor nervously.

Captain Anderson's questioning, it seemed rather plain to see, was getting him nowhere, except to develop alibis. Everyone insisted he or she had been in the garden listening to the speeches when the murder occurred and there was nothing to indicate that any one of them was not speaking the truth.

The Phantom was mulling over an idea. A dangerous one, but he thought it necessary in this particular case. A murderer will strike again if he is endangered. The Phantom knew this. So long as the killer believed he was in the clear, he would merely stand in the background and do nothing, but if things seemed not to go his way, he would be bound to take action.

"Captain"—the Phantom stepped forward—"I'm wondering if I might help you."

He showed his badge and drew excited murmurs from those around Anderson. The Homicide captain smiled. He was genuinely happy to have the Phantom present.

"I know," he said, "that you handle nothing but big stuff. Only important crimes, and in this case—"

"In this case," the Phantom broke in grimly, "a police officer was murdered by a cowardly killer who shot an arrow into his back. That makes it important enough for me. Furthermore, I feel quite certain there is a great deal behind this. The matter may

turn out to be most vital, but the death of an officer, killed in the performance of his duty, is enough to make me eager to take a hand."

Anderson nodded. "We appreciate that all right." He glanced around. "Well, I guess I've done all I can here. No prints on the bow, none outstanding around the room where it was found. Prints in profusion, yes, but they mean nothing. Everybody I've talked to so far knew there were bows and arrows in that room. The house—or the front part of it—was empty when the murder happened. Even the servants had gone to the garden when the appearance of that old man drew the police, and it was only accident that one of them happened to go to the front door when he did, saw that dead policeman, and gave the alarm."

"I know," the Phantom said. "The murderer found it easy to slip out of the garden. The surrounding areas were fairly dark. Shrubs and plants lead straight to the house so his movements would be hidden from any casual passerby. It took only a few seconds to get the bow and arrows down, shoot them, then return to the garden before an alarm was raised."

"Don't I know it!" Anderson groaned.

"The answer to this problem won't be found here," the Phantom went on. "The one who knows it is that old man we can't be sure is dead or alive. It's his movements we must trace and his claim to being a movie actor who disappeared years ago. That is where I intend to start. Captain, I want to talk to you alone. I have already discovered a few clues which may lead us to the old man's trail."

The Phantom and Captain Anderson walked out of the room and entered the library down the hall. They closed the door and locked it, but everyone present knew by now that the famous Phantom was on the job, and that the killer might well tremble in his boots. For the Phantom was known for tenacity of purpose. When that man hunter gave up it was when the man he sought was under lock and key—or dead.

Half an hour later the Phantom and Captain Anderson emerged. Some of the other people had gone home, but Kurt Otley, the columnist, stepped up to the Phantom.

"I suppose you know who I am and what my work is," he said. "I'd appreciate a little advance news on this. You did say you had some clues."

"And I have." The Phantom nodded. "But at the moment they must be kept secret. Telling you would be tantamount to posting it on billboards all over the nation. I will say this much—the matter developed many miles from here."

As the Phantom walked away he noticed that both Paul Ross and Lyle Jack-

son close enough to overhear his conversation with Otley. Perry Dixon, the character actor, had disappeared.

The Phantom stepped up to Jackson, spoke to him softly and led the man into the study down the hall. "Mr. Jackson," he said, when the door was closed behind them, "I know everything that happened when that old man first appeared here. Even before you saw him on the platform he had come to the front door and wanted to see you. Can you tell me why?"

JACKSON shrugged. "No, I can't. Of course, if he really is Don Mallory, he would have wanted to see me. We worked together in many pictures and were good friends."

"Are you certain he isn't the real Don Mallory?"

"Well"—Jackson frowned darkly—"it's hard to believe he is a man whose funeral I attended as an honorary pall bearer. Whose grave I watched filled and whose obituaries I read in many newspapers and other publications. A space of twenty years is a long time, sir. A man changes in that time and this old person who appeared on the little stage was pretty well hidden behind a foliage of hair and whiskers."

"What of his voice?" the Phantom asked. "Actors often have distinguishing overtones."

Jackson leaned against the edge of a table. He seemed so ill-at-ease as almost to be bordering on a case of nerves, and holding himself together by sheer will power. He shook his head as he answered the Phantom.

"No, his voice wasn't familiar. He didn't sound like the Don Mallory I knew, but naturally, as you know, of course, a voice also changes with age. Anyhow, we had only silent pictures in those days and we paid little attention to voices."

"Ah, yes," the Phantom sighed. "I'd almost forgotten that motion pictures were not always as they are today. Thank you, Mr. Jackson, and if I need your assistance, I'll call upon you."

"I'll be ready—and glad to help, if I can," Jackson said. "This whole business has me worried, Phantom. The man's appearance and his voice were strange to me, but there were lights turned on on that small stage, and I saw his eyes. The more I think of them, the more familiar they seem to be and—Don Mallory had impressive eyes. They contributed enormously to making him the great character actor he was. Those eyes of his—I can see them yet. And the eyes of that old man—"

The Phantom walked beside Jackson toward the door.

"Mallory was quite an expert at changing

his appearance, wasn't he?" he observed.

"Only Lon Chaney was any better," Jackson said sincerely. "Mallory took all kinds of parts, from fiendish monsters to kindly old men. There wasn't a part he'd miff. Retakes with him were rare, because he was an artist, always giving his best."

The Phantom thanked Jackson and left him in the hallway. He sought out Captain Anderson, but the Homicide officer had learned nothing more. Any solution for the murder was bogged down completely.

"If it had been premeditated," Anderson declared, "we might find a clue or two, but the old guy who claimed to be Don Mallory appeared here unexpectedly. Even the murderer couldn't have known he was coming. The killer acted promptly, but he merely took advantage of things as he ran across them. He knew, of course, of this front room, and that his victim, being led away by the radio patrolman, would have to proceed down the walk. And he was aware that lethal weapons were ready and waiting for him."

"I'm afraid your only hope, Captain, is to locate this old man, either dead or alive," the Phantom said. "That is going to be a difficult matter, too, because the murderer had help and realizes there will be no clue to who he is unless the old man is identified. That is why the old fellow—or his corpse—was removed. If you run across anything in which I can be of use to you, get in touch with Frank Havens. I'm going to work on an altogether fresh angle."

Lyle Jackson was at the front door when the Phantom walked out and Jackson fell into step with him.

"Mind if I tag along?" he asked, smiling. "Just far enough for me to get the subway. I'm not using a car here in New York."

"Glad to have you," the Phantom said. "Any fresh ideas on that strange old man?"

"I wish there were. What really gets me is the fact that he wanted to see me. That he knew me. I'm associated with the movie industry, of course, but a director doesn't have his face flashed on every screen in the country. I'm comparatively an unknown so far as the public is acquainted with my appearance. Yet the old man picked me out and called me by name."

"Tell me," the Phantom asked, "under just what circumstances was Don Mallory supposed to have died."

JACKSON drew a long breath. "It happened in those good old days when Hollywood was only a blueprint. The movie industry was undecided whether to select Florida or California as permanent headquarters. Lots of us went for Florida, even going so far as to set up studios on the Florida west coast. Many of the

more important actors and actresses moved there.

"Then things changed. California seemed to be best for our highly specialized needs and we all trooped there. Behind us we left a whole community where the movie colony had built fine homes. I wonder what it looks like now."

"And Don Mallory?" the Phantom prompted.

"Oh, yes—he was in Florida too. We made some pictures there. Mallory didn't leave when the rest of us did, and later we in Hollywood heard that he had disappeared and that searching parties had been unable to find him. His staff of servants hadn't seen him, or heard from him. The sheriff and his deputies inspected his house. And it was a house—thirty-four rooms on an estate that sprawled over many acres of land and swamp. But the law officials could get no clue to Mallory's disappearance."

They were nearing the subway entrance and Jackson talked faster.

"Two months went by before a body was discovered in the swamp. It was unrecognizable by that time according to the police, but the man had been smooth-faced, like Mallory, and the clothes were like those Mallory had been wearing when he vanished. Items found in the pockets, some jewelry—all added to the conclusion that the body must be Mallory's."

They stopped directly outside the subway entrance. It was that of an uptown local station, unattended at this hour even by a change clerk. Jackson stared off at the lights in the distance.

"Now that I think seriously of it," he said, "that corpse that was found in the swamp never was positively identified. It could have been the body of someone else, I suppose. What do you think, Phantom?"

"Without facts to go on, I refuse to reach any conclusions," the Phantom said. "It interests me, however, to know that there is no direct proof that Don Mallory died in that Florida swamp many years ago, since the body that was found was unrecognizable. I think—"

There was a hoarse yell from somewhere down the subway steps and feet pounded up them. A wild-eyed man, poorly dressed, rushed out and began looking around. He saw Jackson and the Phantom and darted to them.

"Somethin' is screwy down there!" he burst out. "I was takin' a little nap on one of the benches when this guy who looks like Santy Claus staggers in. I figured he was drunk so I didn't pay any attention to him. Then, all of a sudden, he hops off the platform down between the tracks and last I seen he was running along the subway and headed north. I gotta find a cop!"

"The old man!" the Phantom exclaimed.

He raced down the subway steps, followed by Jackson. The seedy little fellow who had raised the alarm darted away, apparently in search of a policeman. At that moment a patrolman did round a corner, but the little man walked past him, moving slowly, and made no attempt to speak to the officer. There was a crooked smile on the runt's lips and a nasty gleam in his eyes.

When the Phantom reached the edge of the platform an express was roaring closer to the station, its lighted windows breaking the gloom of the tunnel somewhat. The Phantom saw a figure moving awkwardly between the local tracks, just as the runt had indicated.

"Stay here!" the Phantom told Jackson. "When the police come, explain who I am and what happened. I'm going after that fellow."

"Is it Mallory?" cried Jackson. "Or—the man who claimed to be him?"

"Can't say," the Phantom flung over his shoulder. "He's too far away and it's too dark. I'll find out though!"

CHAPTER IV

UNDERGROUND BATTLE



JUMPING lightly to the tracks, the Phantom began running fast. He expected to overtake the fleeing old man before he reached the next local station, which was quite a distance away. The chances of his getting away now, Van thought, were slim.

It was some time after midnight and trains were not too numerous. A local did roll toward him. The Phantom saw the old man move quickly toward one of the safety areas—a section cut out of the subway walls—and he flattened himself there. The agile way he moved was hardly to be expected of a man so old and decrepit, especially one who had been wounded with an arrow.

But the Phantom had no time to consider that for more than a fleeting instant. The local was roaring toward him. He leaped toward one of the safety niches and let the train pass by. Then he looked for the old man again and spotted him.

He was moving slowly now, actually staggering, and once he fell, dangerously missing the third rail. He got up again and lumbered on. The Phantom was rapidly gaining.

Then the old man tumbled again and this

time he didn't get up. The Phantom, however, slowed his pace. That shadowy figure had moved too fast a moment before, when the appearance of the subway train, startled him to be in a state of collapse so soon after. He had moved much too fast for an old man, even unwounded. This began to take on signs of being a trap.

The Phantom heard a train rumbling in the distance, an express by the speed of it. The sound served to drown out the movements of two men who emerged from the gloom at the other side of the tube. They carried heavy, curved machetes and were taking advantage of the noise created by the train. If the Phantom had not already become suspicious and so was alert for danger that might pounce on him from any direction, he might have been taken by surprise, with disastrous results.

As it was, in one of the swift glances he was sending over his shoulder, he saw the pair of machete-wielders, and one of them was close enough to raise his ugly-looking knife for a blow. The Phantom whirled around. There was no time to reach for his gun, even for a man as fast on the draw as he was.

His right hand shot out and, as the heavy weapon came down, he grasped the killer's wrist and gave a hard tug intended to throw his attacker off-balance. Instead, it was the Phantom who staggered backward. With his free hand, the killer managed to swing a hard blow that glanced off the Phantom's cheek.

The Phantom lost his grip on the killer's wrist. The blade swung upward for a slashing blow. But in that same tense instant, the Phantom regained his balance and hurled himself at the man. That move saved his life, for it threw the murderer off-balance for just time enough to enable the Phantom to get close—too close for the blade to be used.

Instead of making the one quick slash to dispose of the Phantom the killer had planned on, he found steely fingers closed around his throat, and he was being shoved backward while a fist hammered a tattoo of painful blows to his abdomen.

But the other man was closing in, now, making the Phantom's situation verge on the desperate. The second man held his machete as though he well knew how to use it.

It was a strange battle, there in the gloom of the now deserted subway tube. There were no witnesses, no interference. The Phantom's life depended solely on his skill as a cool, calculating fighter. He wanted at least one of these men alive—to make him tell who had hired him, or what sort of a murder outfit he worked for.

The second man swung his knife forward.

It missed the Phantom because, as the machete came down, the Phantom swung the first man around. As the point slashed the fellow's arm he dropped the knife and gave a muffled yell.

The Phantom gave him a hard shove, let go of his throat and turned to face his armed antagonist. He gave the machete-wielder no chance to get the blade into position, but charged him head-on. The blade made an ineffectual slice, missed, and a fist crashed against the killer's face. It drove him back, but he clung to his weapon, and raised it, to use it as a saber, and brought it whizzing down in an arc. Instinctively the Phantom was ready for that. He arched away from the murderous blow and closed in again.

Vaguely he was aware that the man who had lured him into this trap, the man who looked so old, was on his feet and moving toward the next station platform. But he saw that in one instantaneous glance and as immediately was engrossed again in saving his life. He had no further opportunity to see whether that fleeing figure really was the old man who had been at the garden party or just someone posing as him.

The killer the Phantom had wounded was trying to get up now and there was no time to lose. If both men attacked with blades, he would lose the battle which of course meant losing his life. These killers armed with naked steel were not fooling.

LUNGING forward in a dive, the Phantom got beneath the poised blade, grappled the legs of the man lunging at him and gave a mighty yank. The man went tumbling backward, but he held on to his knife. The Phantom drew back a hard fist and sent it home. It was a blow with a lot of steam behind it, but just before it landed, the killer made a supreme effort to move and his head rolled to one side. The blow landed against the cheek-bone hard enough to stun the man.

But now the other killer was up, ready to go into action. The Phantom saw him bend to pick up the machete and, in a flash, the Phantom leaped. The killer was ready for such tactics, though, and spun quickly to one side. The Phantom flashed by him.

With a triumphant cry the killer flicked the blade forward. It cut away part of the Phantom's coat and a small portion of flesh from his right shoulder. A painful, blood-letting slash, but the bite of the weapon only served to give the Phantom added strength.

He heard a movement behind him and whirled around. The other man was getting up. The Phantom cursed the set-up which had placed him between these two men, but there wasn't much he could do about it

now. He had to take them, one at a time.

The first killer was drawing back his blade for another thrust. It came, a fast, darting sweep, but even as it began, the Phantom made a pass at the blade. The back of his hand struck it, deflected the blow, and swooped along its length until he found the killer's wrist. Blood-smeared fingers closed around the wrist and twisted hard.

The killer was off-balance a trifle and this agonizingly painful pressure served to send him reeling sideward. He still gripped the machete, though, and managed to yank his wrist loose. As he did, he swung the weapon backward as he stumbled to his knees, and somehow the machete got beneath the protecting shield over the third rail. There was a hissing, bluish flash of electricity.

The killer's scream died on his lips. It died when he did, as heavy volts of electricity passed through his system. The flash blinded the Phantom temporarily, and when again his eyes became accustomed to the gloom he saw the surviving murderer running crazily up the tracks.

The Phantom drew his gun, leveled it, and fired. The bullet must have all but burned the ear of that killer, but he kept on going. The Phantom fired again. The killer gave a scream, his racing steps slowed up somewhat, but he kept moving.

The Phantom went after him, as fast as his long legs could travel. Ahead of the fleeing killer another gun barked. The Phantom was nearly hit, and knew at once that the old man had stopped to cover his ally. He was no slouch with a gun either, and the Phantom was compelled to dart for one of the wall recesses.

By that time the wounded killer was fairly close to the next station platform. The Phantom fired another shot and it was promptly answered by two from the old man. Then the wounded machete-wielder was painfully climbing onto the platform as the Phantom maneuvered closer.

The old man crawled up on it, too. Two people waiting there for a train were a couple of astounded passengers when they were held at bay by the guns of two killers who proceeded to adopt some Nazi fighting tactics. Each man grabbed a passenger and held that person as a shield. The Phantom's leveled gun sagged slightly. He had an excellent view of the platform now and quickly took in the appearance of the man he had wounded. And the Phantom knew he would recognize that man again anywhere.

He turned his attention to the man who had lured him into the tunnel. He certainly looked like the old man who called himself Don Mallory, in all respects—the long

white whiskers and hair, the seedy clothing—except that this man was not wounded. He could move too fast to be other than a man in first-class physical condition.

Slowly and grimly, the Phantom edged his way closer, his back against the tunnel wall. From time to time he glanced down to be sure he was not in danger of touching third rail.

But the "old man" seemed to be resourceful, as well as fast-moving. Suddenly he clubbed his gun, brought it down on the head of the elderly woman he was holding before him as a shield and stepped back to avoid her as she fell.

The machete-wielder let go of his hostage, too, took a couple of steps and fell to one knee. He was badly wounded. The white-whiskered man hesitated. Just as the Phantom raised his automatic for a quick shot, the fellow whirled around and rushed for the steps.

THE hostage still on his feet was a man of about forty, scared and confused. He milled about, getting between the Phantom and the man who was now running wildly toward the subway steps. The Phantom found no chance to send a slug that might stop this cold-blooded killer and when Van clambered onto the platform, the seedy man had escaped.

To the rattled and scared hostage, the Phantom gave crisp orders.

"Hurry up to the street and yell for a cop! Don't hunt one—just yell!"

The Phantom himself hastily set about attending the woman. She was not badly hurt, and he carried her over to one of the benches. The killers, he noticed, had selected their location for a trap very well indeed. This station was also one where there were no attendants during the early morning hours.

The man who lay on the platform was dead. The Phantom's bullet had found a vulnerable spot. The Phantom searched him, but found nothing. Not even a label on his clothes. Hurrying, he leaped to the tracks again and started back to where the electrocuted assassin lay between the rails. A train would cut the body to pieces.

This man also, he quickly found, had taken especial pains not to leave anything on him by which he could be traced. From the looks of the pair it was plain to the Phantom that their interest in this underground battle had been simply as hired professional killers.

Police came then, in droves—and so did



A terrific fight raged in which the Phantom baffled a row-boomed enemy who knew unfair tricks

(CHAPTER XV)

Lyle Jackson. The Phantom identified himself to the police to their satisfaction, gave a terse story of what had happened, then walked up to Jackson.

"Where were you?" he demanded.

"Why—why I didn't know you were in any trouble down there on the subway tracks," Jackson said lamely. "I waited for that other fellow to return with a cop. He didn't, so I went looking for one. Then I thought of the next subway station, and I figured the man you were after would try to escape there, so I hurried for the station. I ran as fast as I could and had just reached it when that long-bearded chap came out of it with a gun in his hand. There was a car parked across the street. Before I had any idea that meant anything he was in it and driving away fast."

The Phantom didn't say so, but in his opinion, Jackson had proved to be pretty helpless in an emergency. In fact, he seemed almost stupid—so much so that the Phantom wondered if Jackson hadn't deliberately allowed the old man to escape. Even been of assistance to him.

"I don't quite understand," Jackson said. "How did they know we would be at that subway station so they could arrange all this? Or wasn't the trap meant for you? It"—he turned deathly pale—"it might have been meant for me, come to think of it. I told several people at the Carter house that I was going home by subway."

The Phantom nodded. "Someone heard you. Perhaps the trap was meant for you. We can't be certain of that. You can go now, Mr. Jackson. . . . Oh, yes—you saw the old man pop out of the subway. Did he look like the old man who appeared on the stage of that band-shell?"

"Y-yes," Jackson hesitated. "Yes, I think so."

CHAPTER V

AN INTEREST IN REAL ESTATE



HALF an hour later, the Phantom was still uncertain whether or not the trap that had been set in the subway had been meant solely to ensnare him. He had discovered that the two dead men had no records and were unknown. Their proficiency with those machetes indicated they might be more than plain hired assassins. Quite obviously, the old man—whoever he was—had controlled these men and had arranged it all, even to using himself as a lure.

The Phantom frowned. The old man who

had appeared at the garden party had been hit by an arrow, and must have been badly hurt. This whiskered killer in the subway tunnel had at first given the impression of a man who had been hurt, but he had dropped that pose when an oncoming subway train threatened him.

Also, the old man who had been removed by the police had not been at the Carter house after the murder of the radio patrolman. How could he, then, have known that Jackson and the Phantom were headed for the subway? If he'd had an assistant planted in the group, that would answer this question. The Phantom sighed and headed downtown.

Not long afterward he entered the offices of Frank Havens' newspaper and gave a prearranged name which gained him admittance to Havens' private office. There the Phantom cleansed and bandaged the wound on his shoulder while he told his publisher friend what had happened.

"I feel rather complimented," the Phantom added. "I deliberately let it be known that I was interested in the case and it didn't take the murderer long to arrange for my sudden exit. He's afraid of me. Afraid of the statement I made about the case having angles that reached beyond New York. That was just a hunch then, but now I have proof I was right."

Havens shivered. "If that knife had been two inches further to the right you wouldn't have cared for the proof," he reminded.

"Forget it." The Phantom grinned. "It doesn't hurt much. Now what did you find?"

"A great deal," Havens replied. "I searched the morgue myself, and the entire story of the death of Don Mallory is right there before you. Also a thick batch of clips about his career as an actor. By the way, do you recall that the old man who addressed us at the garden party mentioned something about Luana?"

"Indeed I do." The Phantom looked up with considerable interest. "It sounded to me, as I told you, as though Luana is a place."

"It is. Luana is the name of a former movie colony in Florida where Don Mallory built a mansion years ago when the colony established itself in that state for a short time."

The Phantom's eyes glowed. "That's what I needed! Mr. Havens, this case won't be solved in New York. Everything that's happened here originated from that mansion in Florida. It all began there, years ago. What occurred here, tonight, was only a side issue."

Havens nodded. "You're probably right, of course. You usually are, but it's a rather

gruesome side issue. Two murders already, and we don't know whether another is dead or alive—a white-bearded old man. Or whether he is victim or killer. Do you intend to visit Florida?"

"I'll wangle a plane reservation," the Phantom said. "Even if I have to use my badge to do it. If I can get down there before interested parties return, I may pick up something. One item is clear—whatever we are fighting is headed by a ruthless person. One who doesn't stop at murder."

"Good luck," Havens said. "If I can help in any way, phone me. I'll do my best to take care of things from this end. . . ."

Twenty-four hours later, the man who alighted from the two-car local train in a small Florida town did not look like either Richard Curtis Van Loan or the man who had been almost murdered in a New York subway the night before. The passenger was the Phantom Detective, but in a new disguise.

Now he seemed to be a portly man of about forty-five with reddish hair, apple-pink cheeks and narrow, calculating eyes. He was well-dressed and carried two suitcases liberally plastered with the names of hotels from one end of the Nation to the other.

There was no porter service in this small town. Only a station agent stared curiously at the new arrival and nodded a greeting as the Phantom picked up his suitcases and headed for the center of town.

FROM the station platform he had been able to see a sign indicating that the town had a hotel, at any rate, and he trudged toward it. The hotel turned out to be quite a place, catering to brisk business during the winter months, but practically deserted now.

The Phantom registered under an assumed name and while he waited for his key, he stared out of the plate-glass windows at a granite building directly across the street. An imposing edifice for such a small town, but the big doors and high, arched windows were heavily boarded up.

"The old bank," the desk clerk explained with a laugh. "Used to do quite a business in the old days, especially when that land boom was in effect. When the boom crashed, so did the bank. It never opened again, but another one did, of course. That place was too lavish for any other use to be made of it, so it just stayed there, falling into decay."

"I guess it isn't the only one." The Phantom smiled. "Incidentally, can you give me the name of your most prominent real-estate broker? That's my line, and I'm trying to put over a deal."

"Well"—the clerk hesitated—"the most

prominent real estate man in town happens to be our only one. Some of the bigger firms from larger towns have offices here during the season, but right now the only man who could help you is Bill Harmon. His office is right down the street."

"Thanks," the Phantom acknowledged. "Have my bags sent up, will you? I'm going to see Mr. Harmon right away."

The Phantom strolled down quiet Main Street. He could see remnants of past glories which either the vast land boom or the advent of the movie colony had brought. Remnants which were seedy-looking now.

Bill Harmon, who had a small office about two blocks down the street, was an elderly, slow-talking man, with a characteristic Southern drawl, and was both friendly and cooperative.

"Glad to know you, Mr. Lake," he said, using the name by which the Phantom had introduced himself as he offered his hand. "What's going on, anyway, that the old movie colony is drawing so much attention? You're the second real-estate broker from up North who has talked to me about it today."

The Phantom raised his eyebrows expressively. "I'll be frank, Mr. Harmon. I was retained by certain parties who want to buy some of those old places. Personally, I know nothing about them and I thought you might be able to give me a hint."

"Gladly."

Harmon stoked a pipe, applied flame and looked through the first puffs of smoke at the Phantom. His eyes were keen and shrewd. This man was nobody's fool.

"Some twenty-odd years ago," he went on, "the motion picture industry contemplated moving to Florida and selected this town as a base for operations. They actually set up studios, and stars flocked here. They had money in those days." He chuckled a little. "More money than present day stars have after they get through paying taxes."

"Well, these movie people did everything on a lavish scale. They built houses in a colony they called Luana. Such houses—big enough to be used as barracks for an army. They lived in them a short time, then pulled out for California."

"Why didn't they dispose of this property?" the Phantom queried. "It certainly must have been valuable."

"That's the trouble." Harmon emphasized his words by waving the pipe and scattering ashes hither and yon. "Each estate is worth a fortune. We had a depression right after the movie people pulled up stakes, and then this land boom blew up. All in all, nobody here had money enough to buy a corner of one of these

estates. The years went by, the estates were unattended, and finally were completely deserted."

"I suppose the owners have kept up their taxes on the property, however, during all this time?" the Phantom wanted to know. "Well—no," the real estate man told him. "Not a cent, in fact."

"Then why haven't the estates been sold for taxes long before this?" the Phantom queried, puzzled considerably. "Even if no one cared to buy in such properties for the taxes, on account of the enormous amount of money that would have to be expended for upkeep, surely the state or county could have bought in and found some use for such estates."

HARMON shook his head. "That's where you're wrong, Mr. Lake. I don't believe either the county or the state would have wanted any one of those places as a precious gift. Anyhow, they couldn't have got them, unless the owners had wanted to give them away. They certainly couldn't have bought them for taxes because, you see, there's a law in this state that covers things like that.

"When these movie people bought their property in the first place, the county gave them the assurance that no matter what happened, the property would be tax-exempt for a certain period—more than twenty years, it was—because the idea was to get people in here and have them help build up the community. So that being the case, the estates couldn't be sold for taxes, and they've just been allowed to go to rack and ruin."

"I see." The Phantom nodded. "But aren't they valuable today?"

Harmon shrugged. "Who in the world could afford to operate one of those houses today? It would take a staff of twenty servants just to keep one of them clean. Then there'd have to be gardeners, caretakers and everything else. No, sir, as an investment for a place to live, those estates are liabilities."

"I see," the Phantom repeated. "Who takes care of them, supervises things?"

"Not a soul. Just as I told this Mr.—" Harmon fiddled with some papers and located a card—"Mr. Jerry Bacon, the other real estate man I told you had been around, that whoever bought one of those places would have nothing but the biggest white elephant in the world on their hands."

The Phantom arose. "Highly interesting," he commented. "I'm not free to start talking business at the moment, but when I am, I'll drop in again."

"Any time." Harmon waved his pipe again. "I don't get to have many visitors these days. Mind you, I'm not in charge of

the property you're interested in, but I know how to make certain arrangements."

The Phantom walked slowly back to the hotel. Those vast estates with their huge, many-roomed houses were more than just in the background of this affair. He had a well-developed idea that once things began humming, this sleepy Southern town would find itself wide awake.

Back at the hotel, the Phantom picked up his key and casually inquired about Jerry Bacon, the other real-estate broker who had been interested in looking over the movie property here. He was probably authentic. The desk clerk indicated that Bacon had arrived that morning, early, that he seemed to be a fine chap, friendly and conservative.

On his way up the stairs to the third floor where his room was located, the Phantom wondered about this Jerry Bacon's motives. Or the motives of those who had sent him. Interest in these estates showed quite clearly that matters were coming to a head faster and faster.

The Phantom was unpacking his bags when someone knocked on the door. He opened it and a raw-boned stranger stood there, smiling, and proffering a huge hand.

"I'm Jerry Bacon," he said. He spoke with the slow drawl of the Southerner. "Glad to know you, sir. I understand we're in the same business."

"Come in." The Phantom eyed his visitor closely. "I was going to look you up."

"But I beat you to it, sir." The stranger grinned toothily. "His 'sirs' came out as 'suhs.' If this man represented himself to be a bona-fide Northerner he was an obvious liar.

The Phantom contrived to brush against the man as he indicated a chair. Under that none-to-expensive coat was a gun. The Phantom sat down on the edge of the bed, determined to let this man reveal what he came for.

"Who is your client, sir?" the man who had called himself Jerry Bacon asked. "Maybe we can work together on this. I understand there's enough property up there for two parties. We don't want to get into arguments about it."

"Will you tell me the name of your client?" the Phantom parried.

"No, sir, I won't. Breach of confidence. I'm sworn to keep his name a secret, sir. Are you under a similar promise?"

"Look here." The Phantom leaned forward. "I may be just a real-estate broker, but I'm not a moron. Jerry Bacon, who you claim to be, is a Northerner, as I happen to know, and couldn't acquire that accent of yours in ten years. Also real-estate agents don't carry guns and, frankly, they dress better than you do. What's the game?"

The stranger threw back his head and burst out laughing. When he finally regained control of himself, he slapped the Phantom's knee violently enough to bring a gasp.

"You're a smart one. Yes, sir—you spotted me right away. I'll confess. My name is Cotesworth. I'm the sheriff here and I was just tryin' out a little game. You see, there was some trouble in New York yesterday. Seems they think a man who lived here many years ago and was reported dead, is alive. Not only that, but he seems to be a murderer, too. Now, when two real estate men arrive right after such a thing as that, I got suspicious. Law officers have a right to get suspicious."

"And you thought you'd visit me as Jerry Bacon and try to draw some information out of me," the Phantom said grimly. "You're quite a detective, Mr. Cotesworth."

"Ain't I?" Cotesworth didn't grasp the sarcasm in the Phantom's voice. "Yes, sir, I study a lot. A man has to better himself, especially in this business. Crime and criminals change."

"Anything else which inspired you to pose as a real estate man?" The Phantom decided to feel him out as much as possible. "Anything outside of the affair in New York, I mean."

"Well, sir, I guess so. Part of my job is to watch those estates and I drop around now and then. A week ago I saw lights in one of the mansions—a pink one; kind of like a villa, I guess. Small place as them houses go. Ain't got more than twenty-five rooms, I judge."

"Did you investigate those lights?" the Phantom asked quickly.

Cotesworth gave him a stern look as if to deride the Phantom for even insinuating that he might not have investigated the lights.

"I sure did. Didn't find nobody or nothin'. Just dust. Layers and layers of it. Now the Nancy Alyn place—she used to be a movie queen years ago—that was different. Saw lights there, too, last Wednesday. That's three days ago. I went over and found that Nancy Alyn's daughter, Anne, had moved in with her husband and a staff of servants. Nancy Alyn is busy making movies they tell me, and her daughter decided to live in the old house a while."

"Does anyone else live in Luana now?" the Phantom asked.

"Not a soul. The Alyn house sits quite a way apart from the rest of the estates. It's clear across the lake. Now, speaking as an officer of the law, I've got to know who wants to buy around that lake."

"And speaking as a real-estate broker sworn to secrecy, I can't tell you," the Phantom countered. "I haven't a word to

say. Not even if you tossed me into your local calaboose."

Cotesworth beamed and took his defeat cheerfully.

"Well, I got no right to hold you, I reckon," he decided. "I'm sorry I tried to trick you, but we police officers have to use tricks now and then, sir. You're a smart man not to let me deceive you. If I can be of any help, my office is in the town hall. Good day, sir."

His handclasp was just as sincere, his smile as broad and genuine as when he had arrived under false colors. The Phantom found himself half-liking the man, even though the small-town Southern sheriff did take delight in playing detective.

CHAPTER VI SINISTER HOUSE



IT WAS almost dark when the Phantom finished unpacking. He carefully examined his gun, make-up kit, and the burglar tools he had brought with him. Somehow, he had a firm hunch that he would need every available aid he could command before he was finished with the investigation

he now had in mind.

He left his room and proceeded to the room occupied by Jerry Bacon, the visiting real-estate dealer. He had mentally noted the number of the room from the desk register. He knocked and there was no reply. He tried the knob and found the door locked.

The Phantom examined the lock for a moment, took keys from his pocket and selected one. The third try did it. The door opened and he stepped inside. This Jerry Bacon might be here on a perfectly legitimate piece of business, but it would do no harm to check up on him.

The man's suitcase was empty. Bureau drawers held a few pieces of clothing. In the closet the Phantom found a spare suit. He searched the pockets without any material success, but the rear right-hand pocket of the trousers interested him. It was thinly lined with leather and the edges were worn down pretty well.

"Hmm," the Phantom mused. "Mr. Bacon also packs a gun. I wonder if he's another amateur policeman."

The Phantom left the room without being seen, then lingered in the lobby for a few moments. Finally he strolled down to a garage where he hired a cheap car by the day. As he began driving in the direction

of those huge, deserted estates he was wondering if they would be quite as deserted as the statements of several people had indicated.

The Phantom soon left the small town behind him, and before long drove down a winding, none-too-wide dirt road bordered by royal palms that towered high above him and gave the scene a weird, beautiful touch. Then the area where those estates were located was spread out before him.

Far to the rear was the big lake, bright blue and calm. Its banks sloped upward, a mass of tangled green underbrush. The Phantom could see several of the estates as he drove along, and realized that the descriptions of them he had been given had not been overdrawn.

One house—the nearest to him—was a sprawling place of two and a half stories that once had been pink, but now was rather dismal-looking. Some of its windows had been knocked out. The grounds around it were lavish with azaleas, bright enough to be almost blazing with color. There were huge trees, all heavy with Spanish moss. That hanging gray vine gave the whole place a dismal appearance, despite the flowers. It was an indescribably beautiful spot, yet the overtones were somber.

"This," the Phantom said, half-aloud, "is one swell place for murder."

He piloted the car behind a group of palms where it was well hidden. He sat there, killing time, until it became dark, smoking cigarettes and thinking deeply.

This matter of murder was taking some degree of shape in his mind. It had begun with the death of that radio patrolman, a wholly incidental detail. At the same time the mysterious old man who called himself Don Mallory had been wounded with an arrow, but had contrived to vanish, or had been taken away by someone else. The Phantom was strongly inclined to the latter theory.

But was this old man really Don Mallory, the movie actor who had been declared dead so long ago? If he was, where had he been all those twenty years? He had stated quite frankly that he had been suffering from amnesia, and recently had recovered after an attempt had been made to kill him. He was still unaware of all that had occurred during the twenty years, and was unable to keep up with current events. He even had World War I and this present cataclysm of World War II mixed up.

Presumably he had come to New York to locate Lyle Jackson for a reason even Jackson could not explain. Someone at the garden party had killed that policeman who had been taking the old man away. The only interested people were those connected with the movies—Lyle Jackson, Perry

Dixon, Paul Ross and Kurt Otley, the columnist. Any one of them could have slipped into the house, shot those arrows and returned before the alarm was given. Everyone's attention, before the murder, had been on the stage where the beginning of that strange drama was taking place.

THE man who had declared he was Mallory had mentioned the fact that the key to the secret was in Luana, and that had turned out to be the movie colony in Florida where Don Mallory had purchased an estate during those hectic months when movieland had flocked to Florida. Quite presumably, if Mallory told the truth, he had lost his memory, and quite as likely had been living somewhere in the Everglades, as a native, knowing nothing about Luana, or who he was.

Somehow, though, someone interested in him had finally discovered him, and tried to kill him. That must have been when, because of a blow on his head, his memory had returned, and with it such a burning desire to see Lyle Jackson that he had traveled to New York to find the movie director. Why hadn't he written or wired or telephoned?

And there was the business about the clothes the old man had been wearing when he had appeared at the garden party. They had been of fine material, as the Phantom had noticed, but of ancient vintage and badly worn. That could have been the clothing Mallory had been wearing when he had disappeared. Which, of course, wouldn't mean he had worn the clothes constantly for twenty years.

If he had gone native, he had likely worn the same sort of clothing the natives affected. He could have obtained whatever he wanted—he'd had money with him, still had it when he reached New York. Probably he had only worn his "good" clothes on special occasions, and had dug them up when he headed for New York. Even so, such garb would get pretty dilapidated—as it was—in twenty years.

All of which, however, gave the Phantom no answer to any of the questions in his mind—not yet. The real start of the investigation lay in determining whether or not the old man actually was Don Mallory, and whether or not Mallory was alive.

The Phantom was sure that what had occurred in the subway tunnel was part of a carefully-laid scheme to eliminate Lyle Jackson, or the Phantom himself. Could the old man have staged that? If so, why—when he had apparently been so anxious to see Jackson?

The whiskered old man who had acted as the lure might be the man who had appeared on the stage and claimed to be Mal-

lory, or he might have been someone else wearing false whiskers. If that were the case, the Phantom realized well enough that he might be fighting a criminal as adept at the art of make-up as he was himself.

Don Mallory had been a master of make-up. Perry Dixon was no slouch either. The Phantom had seen several of his pictures in which he had taken a variety of parts that called for expert make-up. Paul Ross was supposed to be a straight actor, but anyone associated with the stage for as long a time as he had been becomes proficient at changing his appearance.

When it was quite dark, the Phantom locked his rented car and walked to the road. He moved quietly in the direction of the nearest estate and now, from one of the houses near the lake shore, he could see lights. He knew they were candles, but in this eerie setting, they took on a ghostly appearance.

Now, with starlight the only illumination, the scene was even more dreary. There were no colorful flowers to offset the grim grayness of the overhanging Spanish moss. The long strands, like gigantic whiskers, moved softly in the breeze and threw unearthly shadows.

But one moving shadow was not caused by any moss. The Phantom saw a man's form silhouetted briefly, and that man was advancing toward the estates as cautiously as was the Phantom. He was a small man, wearing a derby hat.

The Phantom silently stalked him until the man stopped to examine a broken-down wooden fence, looking for the easiest place to clamber over. Deliberately the Phantom drew back the branch of a bush and let it snap forward.

Instantly, the small man whirled around and his right hand streaked toward a hip pocket. The Phantom walked slowly into the open.

"Hello," he said briefly.

The man seemed to relax a trifle and as the Phantom got closer, he saw that he was

quite bulky, with a wide face and beady little eyes. His right hand still lingered near the hip pocket.

"I'm Mr. Lake," the Phantom explained. "A real estate man."

The short man chuckled. "Well, well. Glad to know you, Mr. Lake. My name is Jerry Bacon. I'm in the same line."

He produced a card which the Phantom dropped into the side pocket of his coat.

"I've heard about you," the Phantom said, with a laugh. "The local sheriff came to my room, gave your name and tried to do some fancy pumping. I spotted him for what he was though, and he confessed."

Bacon laughed louder and then, with a side glance in the direction of the lake, he became quiet and even spoke in a half-whisper.

"He came to see me also and said his name was Lake, that he was a real estate man. Imagine, the dope! With his broad Southern accent, his clothes and his gun. I knew who he was right away."

The Phantom didn't comment, but he thought that Jerry Bacon was more than normally astute. He packed a gun, too, although now his hand didn't hover near the holster. Bacon seemed to have thoroughly accepted the Phantom as Lake, the real estate man.

"If I'm not violating any confidences," the Phantom said, "just who are you acting for, Mr. Bacon?"

BACON smiled at him.

"Would you tell me who has commissioned you?" he countered shrewdly.

"I guess not," the Phantom said. "No sense talking of splitting commissions, either. There seems to be enough property for the two of us."

"That's exactly the way I feel about it, Mr. Lake. We won't rob one another. If you want advice or we seem to concentrate on the same pieces of property, we'll get together and iron the thing out. Well, not

[Turn page]

SIGHT TESTER

THIRST BESTER

Guess which line is the longer—
but don't bet on it



ANSWER:
no fooling—measure them
Both are the same—



much use hanging around here at night. I merely wanted a look at the place. Desolate, isn't it?"

"But with possibilities." The Phantom nodded. "Light up those houses and desolation would be swept away. I see one of the places is occupied."

"Mmm—yes." Bacon pursed his lips. "That house, according to what I learned in town, belongs to Nancy Alyn, the movie actress. She's been retired for some time, I understand, married and all that, but is staging a come-back in Hollywood. Her daughter and a staff of servants have reopened the house here."

They walked back down the road until they reached Bacon's rented car. He offered the Phantom a lift to town.

"Thanks, but I've rented a car, too. It's down there off the road a bit. See you later, Mr. Bacon."

He watched the real estate man—or whoever he was—turn the car around and drive off. The Phantom regarded the vanishing tail-light with a frown. Bacon might be a real-estate agent, but on the surface of things he certainly didn't act like one. Yet the man was a likable sort. Nothing vicious about him and he was clever enough to have picked out Cotesworth as a law officer by the same deductive devices the Phantom had used.

With a shrug, the Phantom turned around and headed toward the lake once more.

He was puzzled about the arrival of Anne Alyn, the daughter of the actress. If her mother had been practically on the retired list for years, where had the money to reopen this house come from. Perhaps Anne's husband had money, or Nancy's husband might be a wealthy man. But even so, why should anybody want to move into a house so large that, under present day conditions, the operation of it was all but prohibitive? Also it didn't even have electricity and, after being closed up so long, the place must be in a sorry state.

The Phantom decided to have a look for himself. He stepped off the road and moved through trees and shrubs. Suddenly he heard a dog bay, and he froze in his tracks. Dogs were the bane of any intruder, whether he was honest, or was an intended burglar.

Soon the Phantom made out the form of a man with two dogs on a leash. The man was carrying a rifle under his arm. The Phantom grunted in exasperation and bewilderment.

Why should armed guards, with dogs, be posted on patrol? Clearly this man was walking a definite beat around the Alyn house. There would, in all probability, be others as well.

CHAPTER VII MYSTERY MEETING



NOW the Phantom felt that he had to inspect the premises of the movie actress and learn what secret it held to explain guards and dogs. It was going to be difficult, too. He crouched, waited until the guard had progressed well away from the spot, then stole forward.

He finally reached a row of trees close to the Alyn house. The dogs were suspicious though. Possibly the soft breeze carried his scent to them. They kept up an incessant yapping which must put the guards on the alert, sooner or later. The Phantom couldn't afford to tarry here.

He took his kit of burglar tools from his pocket, selected the instruments he would require and stuffed the kit back. Then he reached up, grasped the thick lower branch of a tree directly beside the house and hoisted himself up into the branches.

With acrobatic agility, he moved higher until he could reach out and touch the window. He had selected the second floor for gaining entrance because the faint light of candles shone from almost every window on the first floor.

He tested his weight on one bough, crawled along it and paused a moment to listen. The wind sighed through the trees, making noise enough to drown out any slight sounds his progress might develop. The dogs were still yapping, and once a guard and a pair of dogs came directly beneath the tree. But somehow the dogs missed the scent of his trail and the Phantom breathed normally again.

He had to reach one higher branch for his purpose and he stood up, grasped the branch above his head and slowly hoisted himself upward. His foot slipped off the lower branch and he hung there, secure only because of his physical strength and his excellent gym training.

Finally he managed to throw one leg over the upper branch and in a moment he straddled it, breathing hard and hoping he hadn't made an undue racket. Nothing happened, so he cautiously slid along the branch toward its tip. The branch sagged sickly under his weight, but it was strong and supple. It held. He could stretch both hands toward the window and easily touch it, but only to discover that it was securely locked.

From his pocket he took out a small glass cutter and proceeded to create a half-moon just above the window latch. With

the glass cut partially, he applied a tiny suction cup and began to pull slowly.

There was a distinct snap as the glass gave way. He had a hole large enough to reach through, manipulate the latch and carefully raise the lower sash.

He grasped the edge of the window frame tightly, swung out from the tree and quickly hauled himself up and into the room. He landed lightly and stood there, listening. Apparently he had not given his presence away. There was a low mumble of voices from somewhere deep within the house, but none unduly raised.

He was now in the east wing, some distance from the entrance and the main part of the house. Moving carefully, using his flash as sparingly as possible, he entered the long hallway and made his way to the center of the house where he found a wide, curving staircase which descended to a huge reception hall.

The furnishings, though now dilapidated, were as elaborate as the house, and apparently had all been left when the house had been deserted. Great hand-carved pieces, suits of armor in dark corners which startled him whenever he came upon them unexpectedly. A creaky floor didn't help either, and he stayed close to the wall where the flooring was joined and would be firmer.

Then someone moved across the reception hall downstairs—a girl, and her beauty was enough to make the Phantom draw a quick breath. She moved gracefully, too—and she was coming toward the stairs.

He cursed his luck and looked for a room into which he might take refuge. He got a door open and as he stepped inside, a cloud of dust assailed him. He smothered an urge to sneeze and hardly dared breathe again until the girl passed by the room and he heard another door open and close.

Then he went back to the head of the stairs. A man, with a holstered pistol at his hip, strolled from one room to another. The Phantom broke out in a cold sweat. This was more than he had bargained for. If he was caught here, without an excuse, he might be shot as a burglar. If he could bluff it out, however, they would hardly dare take violent action because they would realize he would be missed and a party would certainly search this house along with the others.

The armed man must have opened a door somewhere for the Phantom heard distinct sounds of someone banging against something, then the sound was cut off as the door closed again. That recalled to the Phantom that he wanted to see these people who lived here. He wanted a chance to size them up and the only way to do that

was by coming face-to-face with them. He reached the bottom of the staircase and quietly moved toward the rear of the house.

LOCATING the kitchen, he slipped a bolt back, unlocked the door and left it open. He stepped outside long enough to find a good place to conceal his gun, make-up kit and tools. Then he walked rather noisily back onto the rear porch.

The dogs heard him and were baying again. Someone was running in the direction of the house. Inside, the Phantom could hear footsteps and voices. He walked into the middle of the kitchen floor, held his flash so he could easily be seen in its ray and cupped one hand to his lips.

"Is anyone home?" he bellowed.

The effects were astonishing. The voices ceased abruptly for about five seconds of intense silence, then someone issued authoritative orders.

"Cover all doors! Warn the boys outside! Whoever that is, he must be in the kitchen. Two of you cover me."

The kitchen door opened. A man stood there, holding a candle in one hand and a gun in the other. Behind him were two more men, with drawn weapons, and all three guns were pointed straight at the Phantom.

"I'm sorry if I startled you," the Phantom said apologetically. "I was looking over some property here in Luana. It got dark before I knew it and I was lost. I saw lights in your windows, and headed for them."

The man with the candle stepped closer and raised the flickering light a trifle so that it revealed the Phantom's disguised features. What this man saw didn't seem to impress him much. The Phantom had selected his present disguise with just that in mind.

"Who are you?" the man demanded.

"I—I'm a real-estate dealer," the Phantom said nervously. "I came here to look over some of these—ah—estates for certain clients."

"How did you get in this house?"

The Phantom gestured toward the back door. "That way. The door was ajar so I just opened it and looked inside. I heard voices, so I called out to announce my presence."

The man with the candle swiveled around and glowered at one of the other two men.

"I thought I told you to make sure this place was locked up securely."

"But I did, Scotty. I'll swear that back door was locked and bolted."

The man called Scotty went to the door and examined it.

"Then how did this man get in? The lock

and the bolt are okay. You forgot it, that's all, and next time that happens you know what to expect."

"I guess I'm causing a great deal of trouble," the Phantom said, apologetically. "I'll try to find my way back to the road. I've got my car parked alongside it."

Scotty walked up to him and smiled. Now the Phantom had a good look at him and didn't especially care about what he saw. Scotty was a sheik type, the kind that went out about ten years before. Black sideburns, greasy hair and a thin, sharp face were his distinguishing features.

"My name is Scott Henderson," he said. "My wife's mother owns this house and we came here to reopen it. The place is so spooky it got on my wife's nerves and she wanted all doors and windows locked. That's why I was a little put out when I discovered you had merely walked in. Come to the front of the house. Have a drink, and we'll show you where the road is. No hard feelings, I hope."

"Of course not," the Phantom said. "It's a most interesting house, but so big. I'm pleased to have seen it."

Henderson looked at him with slightly narrowed eyes. "Yes, all the places around here are big. So big—and costly to keep up—that I can't see why anybody would be interested enough to send a real estate man down here to look them over."

The Phantom shrugged. He was on dangerous ground right now. The slightest misplay would put him in grave danger. These men were not playing any game. Taking as many precautions as they did indicated that.

They all went into the living room. It was big enough for a regimental dance to be held in it. Although about thirty candles were burning near the front of the room, they didn't give off enough light to eliminate shadows lurking at the rear of the same room.

Light heels beat a quick rhythm on the staircase and the girl the Phantom had seen before hurried into the room. She seemed somewhat taken aback by the presence of the Phantom—or it might have been his rather sedate, middle-aged appearance. He quickly removed his hat and placed it on a table.

"This is Mrs. Henderson," Scotty told the Phantom. "As I told you, her mother owns this place."

She nodded coolly and sat down. Scotty gave a short laugh.

"We're going to just make certain you're not a burglar," he said. "Mind if I search you?"

"Not at all." The Phantom shrugged. "Go ahead."

SCOTTY did, quickly and efficiently. He found nothing but some real-estate papers with which the Phantom always thorough, had provided himself. He was grateful for the hunch which had caused him to secret his gun, kit and tools. They would have been a dead giveaway. His Phantom badge was still in his possession, but it would take a much more detailed search than this to find it.

"Sorry," Henderson said. "I just wanted to make sure. . . . Hey, Joe, will you take this gentleman to the road and show him the way back to town?"

One of the armed men nodded. The Phantom started over to get his hat, but the girl was quicker. She swept it off the table and held it out to him.

"We are curious, you see," she said, smiling. "My husband is a suspicious man, and I've been so afraid in this great, lonesome old house. I suppose I put everyone's nerves on edge."

"I know exactly what you mean," the Phantom said.

He was looking into his hat where a bit of folded paper lay. She had palmed this paper and dropped it into his hat when she had taken it off the table.

"I'm so glad," she murmured, knowing his words were a clear indication that he saw the paper.

He put the hat on before anyone else could notice anything was in it, followed his guide out the front door and to the road. The guide explained how to leave this area of huge estates, then turned back. The Phantom saw one of the other rifle-armed guards with his leashed dogs, standing in the shadows watching him.

The Phantom started walking quite fast until he was well out of sight of the house. Then he veered to where his car was parked, got in and drove away. Not until he reached the main highway did he stop, remove his hat and take out the folded bit of paper. It was a brief, mysterious note. All it said was:

Please be in your hotel room tonight. I will come there.

It carried no signature, but the writing was that of a woman and undoubtedly that girl had written it. The Phantom whistled softly. What now? He had seen right away that this girl who had been introduced as Mrs. Henderson had been completely out of place with those hard-bitten men. There was a new angle developing.

Back at the hotel he discovered still other fresh angles. There were some newly-registered guests, three of them, all of whom knew the Phantom in his former disguise, but could not recognize him now. And all three had been guests at Mrs.

Lance Carter's garden party when the old man who had insisted he was Don Mallory had made his dramatic appearance.

Kurt Otley, one of them, was in the bar, sipping a highball and munching popcorn. Paul Ross, another, sat primly erect in one of the lobby chairs. The Phantom went over to the desk, asked for mail, and contrived to glance at the register. Lyle Jackson was also here, according to the last entry.

The Phantom went to his own room, and the moment he stepped inside, he knew the room had been gone over. Nothing seemed to be out of place, but the straps on one suitcase, for instance, were in the third hole while the Phantom had left them in the second.

He was not especially worried about this for he had made certain there was nothing which would indicate he was other than a real estate man here on business. But the fact that his possessions had been disturbed indicated the suspicions entertained by someone.

The mystery of that girl—Nancy Alyn's daughter—intrigued him. Again he consulted the note she had written, then burned it. At least he was not going to get her into any trouble. She wanted him to remain in his room. She would come, he was sure, and then the mystery might be aired out.

He ordered dinner sent up, relaxed and waited.

CHAPTER VIII MURDER AGAIN



WHEN the scream came, followed by wild yells, the Phantom was dozing. He leaped to his feet and rushed to the window. Throwing it wide, he looked out. Men were running toward the corner, just down the street, and they were highly excited.

The Phantom put on his hat and coat, hurried downstairs and found the desk clerk in the door. Everyone else had rushed out. The desk clerk was a garrulous soul, a fact for which the Phantom was duly thankful.

"An auto killed a man," the clerk explained. "That's what they're shouting about. First fatal accident we've had in town in seven years. Old Mrs. Fogarty fell in front of a car one day, but that really wasn't an accident. She had a heart attack and just didn't pick her spot to drop."

The Phantom brushed past the clerk, ran

quickly to the scene and found Lyle Jackson on the curb, his face drawn and pale. He was talking to Sheriff Cotesworth and the Phantom moved close enough to hear.

"This man and I went to that bar down the street." Jackson pointed at a red neon sign. "We each had one drink. . . . Yes, that was all he'd had. We started back toward the hotel and when we were in the middle of the street, this car came tearing at us. I thought the driver was drunk—as much as I could think anything for a minute or so."

"Was the car weavin'?" Cotesworth asked, in his slow drawl.

"No, it wasn't. I ran in one direction, my friend in the other. The car veered then and it chased my friend right to the curb before it knocked him down. He landed with his head about five feet from the gutter. The car stopped, backed over him and then I saw the driver deliberately steer so the right wheels would pass over my friend's head. It was murder, I tell you!"

"What did the driver look like, sir?" Cotesworth asked.

"I don't know," Jackson groaned. "This is a rather dark spot and he had a hat pulled way down. There were no lights on the car. I couldn't even see the marker plates. It was a sedan—a heavy one. I'm sure of that. Sheriff, he is—dead, isn't he?"

"I never seen a man who was deader," Cotesworth answered dryly. "Nice fellow he was, too. I reckon there wasn't many nicer men than Jerry Bacon."

The Phantom barely restrained an exclamation of astonishment, for he hadn't seen the corpse yet. Jerry Bacon! Deliberately murdered according to Jackson's story.

And it was Jackson again. Death seemed to be his constant companion, for the Phantom had been with Jackson when he had himself flirted with death back in New York.

The Phantom recalled Scotty Henderson's sudden impulse to search him. He recalled that Bacon had given him his card and he had shoved it into the side pocket of his coat. The Phantom felt in that pocket, but the card was gone.

He looked grim and deadly as he turned away. Scotty Henderson had palmed that card and had believed he identified his nocturnal visitor by it. Then he had ordered his murder and the man he had sent on that gruesome mission, knowing only a name, must have had Bacon pointed out to him, and had selected the wrong victim. The game was getting more and more dangerous. It was about time to place some cards, face down, on the table.

The Phantom walked over and tapped Sheriff Cotesworth on the shoulder.

"Hello, Sheriff," he said pleasantly. "What on earth has happened?"

Cotesworth gave him a hasty account of the tragedy. Jackson walked away and for a moment the Phantom was alone with the sheriff.

"Thanks," he said to the law officer, then dropped his voice to a whisper. "Be at your office around midnight. I've got to see you."

Without waiting for a reply, the Phantom swung around and walked rapidly back to the hotel. He had no especial hope now that Anne Alyn or Mrs. Henderson, as he had heard her called, and she had not denied might appear, as she had promised. But he planned to be on hand anyway. In his opinion, she had either been seen writing or passing the note and her husband had taken steps to insure the fact that she would not meet the man with whom she made that appointment.

Jerry Bacon had died as a result of that. Bacon had been believed to have been the caller at the Alyn estate, and had been killed because of the mistake.

RETURNING to the hotel, the Phantom left his door open. Jerry Bacon's room was just down the hall. If Anne Alyn, as he preferred to think of her rather than as Anne Henderson, did manage to make her promised visit, she would look for Jerry Bacon's room. Perhaps she even knew the number of it. Bacon could have been in touch with her without her having seen him. It was obvious she could never have seen Bacon or she wouldn't have mistaken the Phantom for him.

A few minutes before midnight she had not put in an appearance, so the Phantom walked out of the hotel. He did not notice that the lobby was empty, the desk closed up so that anyone could come and go as he chose. Already he had found out where Sheriff Cotesworth's office was located and he walked briskly to the town hall. The only light in the building came from the sheriff's office.

The Phantom stepped in and Cotesworth awoke with a jerk that almost threw him off-balance. He had been tilted back in a swivel chair with his feet on the desk.

"I'm at your service, sir," he said, and blinked owlishly. "Don't usually stay up so late unless there's business."

"There is," the Phantom said grimly. "Jerry Bacon really was murdered tonight, you know."

"But I don't know." Cotesworth was suddenly wide awake. "The way I figured, some drunken driver did it."

"The man who ran down Bacon, backed

up and ran over him again, was not drunk. I'm going to make a little confession too, Sheriff. I'm not a real estate dealer and my name isn't Lake."

"Well, I'll be doggoned," Cotesworth grunted. "Maybe I'll tell you why I'm surprised too, after you get through explainin'."

"I'm an independent investigator. I'm known as the Phantom Detective, and here's my badge to back up that story."

Cotesworth looked from the badge into the Phantom's face, then down at the badge again. He shook his head slowly from side to side.

"Wouldn't Mr. Bacon have been surprised," he said sorrowfully. "He didn't think you were a real-estate dealer, any more'n he was. Wait'll I lock the door. We've some talking to do, Phantom."

When Cotesworth was satisfied there would be no interruption, he opened a steel filing cabinet and took out a plain envelope. This contained a California state license for a private detective.

"Bacon was here on a case," Cotesworth explained. "He didn't want his identification lying around, so he asked me to keep this. I'm mighty glad you came because I couldn't make up my mind just what to do—whether to wire Mr. Bacon's agency, call in the State Police or what. You know, Phantom, I'm only a small-town officer. My specialty consists of running out tramps and settling family rows."

"But you are ambitious," the Phantom chuckled. "You did try to fool Bacon and me. Quite cleverly, too. So Bacon was a private investigator. We may be able to get a lead from his office. I'll see about that in a few minutes. No further evidence has come in about the murder car?"

"No, sir, not a bit. Have you got any ideas?"

"Yes," the Phantom said. "But at the moment I wouldn't want to discuss them. They may be too remote and only confuse the issue. I merely wanted to let you know who I am. Don't call in help from outside. Not yet, because if too many police appear, they might frighten the killer or killers away. There are certain men here, Sheriff, who are after something. It has to do with Don Mallory, and when he lived in Luana. Have you any ideas on that score?"

"I reckon not." Cotesworth furrowed his brow. "I was sheriff in those days, too. The boom days for this little town. We thought we'd become the new Hollywood. In fact, I was one of those who found Don Mallory's body in the swamp."

"Tell me about it," the Phantom urged. "This matter goes far back. It's difficult to locate people who were on the scene. I want facts."

"There aren't so many," Cotesworth sighed. "Don Mallory didn't pull out of here with the rest of the crowd. Never did know why he stuck around. Then he just dropped out of sight. He kept his staff of servants in the house, but gave them notice after the rest of the colony moved away. That looked as if Mallory intended to follow the others, but instead disappeared, according to these servants."

"Could you tell me where I can find any of those servants now?" the Phantom asked.

"I reckon not," Cotesworth answered with a broad grin. "The last one I knew anything about was a hard-drinkin', no-account. He died ten years ago and it's pretty hard to say just where he located."

THE Phantom chuckled his appreciation. "Go on," he said. "About finding Mallory's body, I mean."

"Well, we searched those estates up there, twenty years ago, right after it happened. We opened the houses and went through every room, but no luck at finding anything about Mallory or where he'd disappeared to. We gave up finally and then one afternoon I was patrolling the swamps at the north side of the estates. Lots of quicksand up there. Dangerous if you don't know your way around. I saw what I thought, first off, was a thick log sticking out of the mud. But logs don't wear shoes, so I waded out and pulled up a corpse. It was pretty well shot."

"Identification was impossible?"

"Well, yez, so far as its appearance went. But we found lots of evidence in the clothes that it was Don Mallory's body. That's all there is to it. If there were any marks on the body to show violence, we couldn't find them. Not enough left, especially of the face. No bones broken though and the coroner said it was a case of drowning, the best he could tell."

"Then there is no indisputable proof that Don Mallory is dead," the Phantom said slowly. "That corpse could have been that of someone else wearing Mallory's clothes and carrying his personal effects. Since that time hasn't anyone ever lived in any of those mansions?"

Cotesworth shook his head. "No, sir. Some people have looked, but the size of the houses made them decide against them. They must be pretty good places though. None of 'em has fallen into ruin yet."

"They are good places," the Phantom commented. "Now hasn't there been even a caretaker around those premises all this time? Or even a tramp who nested there for a long period of time? Anyone, Sheriff. Anyone at all who spent considerable time there."

"Only Crazy Slade," said Cotesworth. "He showed up there after the folks left, and sort of made himself caretaker. Nobody cared. I guess it even got too lonesome for him, though, because he hasn't been around lately. Maybe he's dead."

"What did this Crazy Slade look like?" the Phantom asked quickly.

"Well, he was about medium build and he dressed in rags and . . . Did you ask me what he looked like? I don't know. Nobody does. Not how his face looked, anyhow—it was too well covered up. Crazy Slade had white whiskers way down to here and the longest crop of tangled white hair you ever saw."

The Phantom sighed deeply in relief. "Then Crazy Slade is the man who appeared in New York and declared he was Don Mallory," he said promptly. "He claimed to have been suffering from amnesia for a long time. He must have been your Crazy Slade. Perhaps he *was* Don Mallory, too."

Cotesworth seemed to be deep in thought and remained silent for a few moments.

"Reckon that couldn't be, sir. You see, Crazy Slade lived in those woods before the big houses were built. Mallory came here afterwards. Come to think of it, though, I saw Mallory and Crazy Slade together a few times. Yep, I used to think it mighty odd to see Mallory in his big Marmon—an expensive car in those days—riding down the street with Crazy Slade sitting alongside him."

Certain facts were trickling into the Phantom's brain, being churned with others and forming a continuous thread. He didn't express himself on these ideas however. The time was not ripe for that.

"You've been of great help," he told Cotesworth. "Now there are two things I need from you. Absolute silence as to my real identity, and I want you to pass off the death of Bacon as the result of some unidentified drunken, hit-and-run driver. Indicate you are trying to find the car and let it go at that. Will you help me that much?"

"I will be honored, sir," Cotesworth declared stoutly. "And if there is anything further, call on me. I'm at your service."

Cotesworth began to laugh as the Phantom walked toward the door.

"It's funny at that," he said. "Me, trying to fool the Phantom Detective. Shows what too much confidence can do to a man. Well, I'll be at hand day or night."

His phone jangled and Cotesworth looked considerably surprised as he reached for the instrument. Calls in the middle of the night were highly unusual. He spoke a greeting, listened, then grunted assent to something. He hung up with a puzzled frown.

"Phantom, maybe you'd better stay a while longer," he suggested. "That was Dr. Blake, our local medico. He says he was kidnaped by two men and taken to a place where he was forced to treat a wounded man. He's coming down here to make a report in full."

The Phantom glanced at a door to an adjoining room.

"May I go in there, leave the door open and listen? I don't want anyone to think the real-estate agent I profess to be has any interest in this matter. Not even your doctor."

"He'll be here directly." Cotesworth fumbled in his pockets for a key. "That's the door to my cell. Only got one and nobody been in it for near onto three years now. I'd be mighty proud to get me a tenant, too."

"You will," the Phantom assured him. "Now make the doctor go into detail, then warn him to say nothing about what happened to anyone else. Say you want to conduct an investigation before the news leaks out."

"I surely will do just that," Cotesworth promised. "You'd better get in there quick. I hear the doc's car stopping outside now."

The Phantom was well-concealed, but able to hear every word spoken when Dr. Blake entered the sheriff's office. Blake's clothing was disheveled and he was wide-eyed with exasperation and fury.

"It's time we elected a new sheriff!" he exploded. "You're too doggone old, Cotesworth. We need fresh blood. Somebody who can deal with crooks."

Cotesworth laughed softly. "Sit down, Doc, and cool off. They said the same thing about you when you came out of retirement to take Doc Bradbury's place when he went into the Service. Old coot, they called you, but I said give me an old, experienced man any time. You've made out pretty good. Well, so will I when I learn what this is all about."

CHAPTER IX

DR. BLAKE'S PATIENT



CONSIDERABLY mollified, Dr. Blake told his story. It was a strange one for a small, apparently peaceful town like this. Dr. Blake said that he had returned from a case, driven into the garage, and there two men had seized him. A hood was draped over his head and a gun poked against his ribs. At

least it felt like a gun, he claimed.

He was told he would be taken somewhere to treat an injured man, but if he ever made a report of the incident, he would live only a short time longer.

"I don't know where they took me," the doctor went on. "It was a long distance, but I think they doubled back and went around in circles a few times. Then the car stopped and I was led into a house, up a flight of steps and pushed into a room."

"Didn't you look out the window to see where you were?" Cotesworth queried.

"Look out the window?" the doctor derided. "Wait until I finish talking before you ask a lot of fool questions. When I got that hood off my head, I found myself in a room illuminated only by half a dozen candles. There was just a bed in it—nothing else. The window was boarded up. I saw a man on the bed. He was unconscious."

"Well, I hope you can describe him, anyway," Cotesworth said.

"I can't even do that. He was quite badly hurt and needed attention. Furthermore, his face was covered by white whiskers. You couldn't see much but the eyes and the forehead. Now let me talk, will you?"

"I ain't interrupting, Doc," Cotesworth said blandly.

Blake glared at him and muttered something about old fools. Then he went on.

"It wasn't hard to find the wound because somebody else had already bandaged it—looked like a doctor's job. The man had been stabbed with something—not too sharp. A wound in the small of the back and fairly deep. I cleaned it out, but there was, and is, danger of infection. The dressings should have been changed long before I got there. In fact, the patient was slightly feverish. I gave him some medicine, did what I could. He never made a sound, not even when I packed a drain into the wound. He belongs in a hospital."

"Now, Doc," Cotesworth reproved, "you've seen lots of wounded men. All doctors do. You must have some idea what caused that wound."

"Will you stop interfering?" Blake roared. "I'm exasperated enough as it is. Yes, I think I know what caused the wound, but that isn't important. I finished my treatment and tried to leave, but the door was locked. I knocked and two men came in so fast I never did get a chance to see them. The hood was put over my head again and they led me out. I told them the injured man needed further attention—and soon."

"Then they drove you home and you have no idea where you've been." Cotesworth shrugged. "Doc, I ain't misbelieving you, understand, but that's some story. We better keep it quiet until I land those men. Yep—good and quiet."

Blake nodded. "That's what I thought. Well, as long as I know you'll be trying to do something about it, I'm satisfied. Frankly, I think they'll come for me again and I don't like being treated that way."

"I'll keep an eye out," Cotesworth soothed him. "Now about that wound. . . . What's your idea about what caused it?"

Blake arose and jammed on his hat. "About fifteen years ago," he said, "young Tommy Jordan was hit by an arrow shot by another boy. I'd say the wound that boy suffered and the one that old man is suffering from now, were the same sort. Yes, he was shot by an arrow and that doesn't even make sense to me. Good-night, Cotesworth."

As soon as the doctor disappeared, the Phantom came out of the dingy little cell room and sat down again, opposite Cotesworth's desk.

"That was a real break," he said slowly. "Without any doubt Dr. Blake was kidnaped to treat the old man who said he was Don Mallory and who was hit by an arrow in New York. They've had time enough to get him down here and, for some reason, they want him to live."

"Seems funny to me that they tried to kill him once and now they take chances like kidnaping Doc Blake to cure him," Cotesworth observed.

"What happened in New York was an emergency," the Phantom explained. "Somebody was forced, for some reason we don't know, to silence him then. First they killed the policeman so he couldn't cause any trouble, then the murderer fired an arrow at Mallory and wounded him. Know anybody who has ever hung around down here who is proficient at shooting arrows, Sheriff?"

"No, sir, I don't," Cotesworth said.

"How about someone adept at using machetes for attack?"

COTESWORTH stared until the Phantom went into the details of his own experience in the subway.

"No news about that ever reached here," Cotesworth said. "Machetes, eh? They use 'em down here for cutting sugar cane. Now I'm not saying right away, but there may be something to work on there. I've got to get in touch with the sheriff in the next county and then maybe I'll have news for you. Reckon you're in no big hurry, sir."

"Not as far as those machete-wielding experts are concerned," the Phantom replied. "They are both dead, but I never did think they were city-bred hoodlums, even though they did look tough. I reasoned that the murderer hired them, perhaps down here, and they might be known if a good description of them should be given." Briefly he told what the men, now dead,

had looked like. "Take your time, Sheriff, and get the facts."

Cotesworth nodded. "That will be my job for the present. Got to keep busy so folks will think I'm working on the death of Mr. Bacon, and Doc Blake will believe I'm trying to find who kidnaped him."

"Good. Now, if I may, I'll use your phone for a call to the Pacific Coast and see what I can learn about Bacon."

The Phantom was soon connected with an official of a big city Police Department where he was well known. He identified himself and asked for information about Bacon. A great deal depended on what news he would receive and there was visible disappointment on his face when he hung up. He leaned back with a groan.

"Bacon," he said, "operated a one-man agency. He specialized in handling quiet investigations for movie people and was trustworthy and sincere. His office was in his hat, so there won't be any records. Our lead through him has flickered out, Sheriff."

"Sure has," Cotesworth agreed. "Too bad. I was sort of hoping you might get me a tenant for my little cell room. Ain't right to keep a place unoccupied for so long. They'll be calling it the Cell of Despair like they call those big houses."

"Mansions of Despair," the Phantom said slowly. "So that's what you call them down here. A good name."

He left Sheriff Cotesworth's office and returned to the hotel. It was deserted, as usual, and he proceeded to his room. He carefully locked the door and window before he retired.

He no longer entertained any hope that Anne Henderson would appear. He believed more than ever that in all probability her little scheme had been uncovered, and that Bacon's murder was the direct result. There was even a possibility that she was implicated in the whole affair, which to the Phantom had plenty of criminal possibilities, especially now that he had an idea that the white-haired mystery man might possibly be in the Alyn house. The girl might have written the note to make sure the man she believed to be Bacon would stay around the hotel.

Whatever the answers were to those observations, the Phantom meant to lose little time in worrying over them now. . . .

He slept well, and awoke feeling chipper and ready for action. He showered, shaved carefully, and freshened his make-up from spare materials he carried in one suitcase.

He had an excellent breakfast and saw that none of those people he had first seen in New York had put in an appearance. After breakfast he broached the desk clerk about them.

"Oh, they checked out early," the clerk said. "They went up to those mansions in Luana. Mr. Ross owns one, you know. So does Mr. Jackson. Mr. Otley went as Jackson's guest, I think. What in the world they want to go back to those cobwebby, desolate houses for is beyond me, when they could have been so comfortable right here. Besides, business in the hotel isn't so good right now, in this off season."

The Phantom had an idea the hotel's business might be surprisingly good before this matter was settled. Once the fact that movie stars, even those who were definitely "ex" were involved in something bordering on a mystery reporters and feature writers would descend upon the town like a swarm of locusts.

The whole scene of action seemed to have transferred itself to the estates and the Phantom decided to go over there. In the first place he was genuinely curious to see what reaction his appearance would make on Anne Alyn Henderson and Scotty, her husband.

On his way there, the Phantom found himself wondering how Anne could have married a man like Scotty. Not only was she undeniably lovely, but she seemed sensible and level-headed, while Henderson definitely was something out of the bottom drawer. Prisons all over the nation were full of men like Scotty.

THE Phantom left his car some distance from the estates and walked straight to the Alyn mansion. It seemed as deserted as the others. Those the Phantom could see, at any rate. They were spread over a considerable area and between them semitropical jungle had formed. In some places it was impossible to see more than a few yards on any side.

The Phantom stepped boldly onto the great rambling porch of the Alyn house and rang the bell. There was no responding peal inside, so he hammered the door with his fist.

Scotty Henderson opened it and the Phantom saw what was almost ludicrous surprise registered on the man's face.

"Good morning," the Phantom said warmly. "I hope I didn't startle you. You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"I was startled." Scotty recovered his wits with the greatest effort. "Having visitors in this forsaken place is enough to surprise anyone. Won't you come in? I . . . Oh, just one moment please."

He slammed the door in the Phantom's face, but returned in less than three minutes and he was smiling suavely.

"I wanted to be sure my wife was dressed. She'll be down directly. Come in, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Lake." The Phantom smiled. "Lake is my name. I guess I neglected to introduce myself last night. I did want to thank you for your hospitality last evening and apologize for the rather unconventional way I barged into your home."

"Think nothing of it," Scotty said. "Glad to have been of help. Incidentally, do you know a man named Bacon who is in the real-estate business?"

"I knew him." The Phantom accented the second word. "Only casually. Poor fellow was killed last night."

"Killed?" Scotty asked blankly.

"Yes, indeed. The victim of some drunken hit-and-run driver, according to Sheriff Cotesworth. I certainly hope the sheriff gets that driver. Bacon was a pleasant fellow. I liked him very much."

Scotty seemed greatly relieved, and for the first time he smiled broadly.

"I understood that Mr. Bacon was trying to buy up some of these estates," he commented.

"Do you want to sell?" the Phantom asked quickly. "I've been commissioned to find out whether some of these places are for sale."

"No," Scotty said hastily. "No, we have no intention of selling. Anne's mother plans to return here some day. She is making excellent headway in a movie comeback. Extraordinary woman—even if she is my mother-in-law."

The Phantom heard footsteps on the stairs and looked directly up. Anne was halfway down before she saw him. She stopped dead and one hand flew to the hollow of her throat. Her face grew as white as paper and she stood there like a statue for more than a minute.

The Phantom was slightly puzzled about this. Scotty couldn't have warned her after he rudely locked the Phantom out, so he must have warned someone else.

Then the reaction set in. Anne seemed relieved, almost happy. She went toward the Phantom with outstretched hand. But before either he or she could speak, Scotty spoke up quickly.

"This is Mr. Lake, my dear. He has just apologized for forgetting to introduce himself to us last night. He's a real-estate agent."

That worried look came back to Anne's face, but not too intensely.

"Well," the Phantom said, "I must go to work. I only stopped for a moment to let you know to whom you had been so kind. I'll be prowling around the various estates, getting a line on the condition of the houses. My client insists on speed."

"Just who is your client?" Scotty asked. "We are interested in who may possibly be our neighbors—naturally."

The Phantom waved a reproving finger, suited perfectly to his disguise as a middle-aged man.

"Now, now, don't pry into professional secrets. Frankly, though, I'll say this much. I don't know who my client is. Contact with me was made through a third party. I have an idea my secret client wants to create some kind of a resort here. Turn the mansions into hotels, or sanatoriums, or something of the sort."

Scotty nodded. "Drop in again," he said cordially. "We'll be delighted to see you. Visitors are few here, and there certainly isn't much to do, to break the monotony."

CHAPTER X

THE SUSPECTS GATHER



LEAVING the Alyn house, the Phantom had considerable to occupy his mind. For one thing, he wondered why, if there was so little going on, Scotty was keeping himself busy doing some kind of work which entailed digging into cement or granite. It was plain that he had been, for his trousers cuffs

were coated with fine gray powder.

The Phantom had few doubts but that his own pose as a real-estate dealer would soon come to an end. However, for the time being, he determined to carry on. Therefore, he spent some time looking over the outside of a few houses, marveling at their splendor and utter desolation.

From what he had learned, the houses and land had been paid for in cash. They were still the property of the original owners. However, the local real-estate agent had explained to him why the estates were tax free for so long a period of time—the concession the county had made in order to get the movie colony here.

Besides, the Phantom had further learned that the owners of the estates were, for the most part, veterans of World War I, and as such could benefit from special laws exempting veterans from full real-estate taxes, even had the county not made such concessions. Even if there had been taxes, they would have been so small as to have been of no consequence to such wealthy owners. They probably would have kept up the tax payments, in order to have had some property left, if financial reverses beset them.

In the case of Don Mallory's estate, the tax situation had been advantageous, for since there was no one to pay taxes, even his heirs apparently having abandoned it,

the property would have been sold for taxes long ago. The estate just lay there, waiting for some day when some heir with no place else to go might claim it.

In the entire forsaken movie colony, one of the largest of the former show places was owned by Lyle Jackson. As a top-flight director, he'd had as much money as the stars in those days of silent movies. He had built his mansion as though it were a movie set. Ten huge white pillars lined the front of the house, and there was ornamental work in profusion. A big swimming pool, now half-full of stagnant water and aquatic plants, was just behind the house. There were statues, benches, and bird baths in cement and marble.

Beyond the estate was jungle. Thick underbrush, palmettos, tall green ferns and water. Stagnant, green-covered and treacherous-looking. Some of this came from the overflow of the lake.

The nearest estate to Jackson's was that of Paul Ross, now also occupied, and some of the windows had been flung wide. It was a pink monstrosity of a place, and each wing looked as if it were an afterthought on the part of the builder.

What particularly interested the Phantom was why Ross and Jackson, who had not been near this property of theirs in years, should have at once hurried down here as soon as they had been faced at Mrs. Carter's garden party by the bewhiskered man who had called himself Don Mallory. And why hadn't Perry Dixon, the old-time character actor whose artistry had been rivaled only by that of Don Mallory, come here also?

The presence of Kurt Otley was logically explained. He was a Hollywood columnist, and he sensed that there was a story down here. Yet Otley, as possibly himself involved in the whole intrigue and murder mess, was by no means dismissed by the Phantom as a suspect.

The Phantom was still thinking about Otley when he heard voices. They came from a small pier at the lakeside, a pier on which were several benches. Palmettos had grown thickly behind the pier, so that the Phantom was hidden from view and yet close enough to overhear everything that was said.

TWO people were talking. He recognized their voices instantly, voices tense and half-angry. The speakers were Kurt Otley and Anne Alyn Henderson.

"You have evaded my question," Anne was saying. "I asked you why you came here. To torture me?"

"Don't be silly, Anne," Otley said. "I didn't even know you were here. And as for Henderson—"

"He—" Anne hesitated. "I won't talk about him. Not to you. Everything I say will come out in your column or your broadcasts. Kurt, did you see Mother before you left Hollywood?"

"Certainly, I did. She's no has-been, Anne. Not by a long shot. I've already predicted, publicly, that when her picture is released she'll be one of our greatest supporting stars."

"I hope so." Anne said it like a prayer. "She's had so much unhappiness."

"More than her share," Otley agreed, "and you know exactly what I mean, too. Now I'll do some questioning. Your mother doesn't intend ever to live in this mansion down here again. There is no reason she should reopen it right now. She just arranged to buy a place in Beverly Hills. She has contacts to keep her plenty busy, so why should she bother with this estate? It's too big in the first place. I can't understand and why you and Scotty are here."

"Don't keep asking me questions I can't answer," Anne parried. "I—I'm going back, Kurt. I don't want to see you again. I hope I make that quite clear."

She swept along a path, ten feet from where the Phantom was concealed. Kurt Otley started after her, but stopped, muttered something under his breath and returned to the pier where he sat down and stared out over the lake. The Phantom slipped quietly away.

Purely on a hunch he went to Paul Ross' house and found the ex-movie star disconsolately seated on the porch. The Phantom introduced himself as Lake, the real-estate agent, and asked if Ross' property was for sale.

"Sell this white elephant?" Ross waved a hand at the house. "Well—no. Not right away, at any rate. Perhaps in two or three weeks I might be interested. Will you come back then?"

"Perhaps," the Phantom said. "What about the price?"

"It won't be much," Ross grimaced. "I paid a fortune for it, but I know when I'm licked. Heaven knows I could use some money, too. Be sure to come back in—say, three weeks. I'll make it worth your while if the deal goes through."

There was some reason why Ross didn't want to sell immediately. He needed the money, by his own candid confession, but he wanted to stay right here, for the time being.

"In three weeks it may be too late," the Phantom felt him out. "Why not talk money right now?"

"No," Ross snapped. "I said I wanted to wait. Come back."

He arose and went into the house, slamming the door behind him. The Phantom

shrugged and walked away. He wondered if Lyle Jackson would act the same way, and determined to find out.

As the Phantom approached Jackson's mansion, he saw the former director engaged in serious conversation with Anne Henderson. He came upon them abruptly and Anne saw him. With just a few more words to Jackson, she walked quickly away. Jackson had no inkling of why she had departed so hastily, but the Phantom did. He knew she had seen him. Jackson turned and walked into his house.

The Phantom took the same path down which Anne had hurried. He was not especially surprised when she suddenly stepped from behind a palm tree to confront him.

"I—I made a mistake last night," she said hesitantly. "I didn't mean that note for you. I thought you were someone else."

"Meaning Jerry Bacon, the private detective?" the Phantom asked softly.

She stared at him, then nodded slowly.

"You know he is dead, of course," the Phantom went on. "Murdered in cold blood. You must know that, too."

"I had nothing to do with it," she pleaded. "You must believe me! I'll pay you to keep quiet. I'll do almost anything if you won't talk!"

"Now we're getting somewhere," the Phantom told her. "All I ask for my silence is everything you know—why you gave me that note, thinking I was Jerry Bacon. It might be construed as an attempt on your part to keep Bacon in his hotel room until the murderers could get around to him. A jury would be apt to believe that."

"No!" she cried. "No—you mustn't think that! It isn't true. I only wanted to talk to Mr. Bacon alone."

"Why? About what?"

"I can't tell you. Believe me, if only my happiness were at stake, I wouldn't care, but there is someone else. I can't talk. I won't!"

"Your mother hired Jerry Bacon, who worked for movie people, to fulfill some mission for her. The fact that he was a private detective wasn't lost upon the person who directed his murder. That person is close to you. As close as your—husband, shall we say?"

SHE turned pale, but held onto her nerves by sheer grit. The Phantom knew he had struck home with that last remark. Anne's husband—if Scotty Henderson was her husband—was involved.

"Who are you?" she finally managed to say. "What are you doing here? Who sent you?"

"I thought I was going to do the questioning," the Phantom said. "It's a case of blackmail, isn't it? With you in between

the two interested parties. I know one is your mother and you are trying to help her. Just who is the other person? And why this move to these desolate estates so far from Hollywood?"

Anne looked around nervously. "I can't tell you now. I've already been away too long. If they miss me, they'll start looking. I know you aren't just a real-estate dealer, any more than Jerry Bacon was. Somehow, I find it possible to trust you, but there isn't time now. It will take too long to make you understand."

"Another time then—soon?" the Phantom suggested. "Incidentally, you can trust me."

"I knew that," she replied and gave another nervous look over her shoulder. "Tonight, at ten. It will have to be some distance away. They watch closely near the house. There is a cement pavilion far to the rear of Mr. Jackson's estate, on the edge of the swamp. No one goes there. I'll try to meet you at that spot tonight."

"I'd be there, too, if I were you," the Phantom said, "unless forcibly restrained. Otherwise, I might come to your house for a little visit."

"No," she said, in unconcealed horror. "Don't do that. I'll be there—somehow."

Then she turned and fled. The Phantom watched her veer off the path and start through the thickness of palmettos and ferns which had crowded almost all other vegetation off the premises. She was heading for the rear entrance to her mother's house.

The Phantom had few doubts about her now. She was honest, he believed, and involved in this matter through no will of her own. She might give him some definite lead to what it was all about. The greatest thing lacking—except the identity of the killer—was a motive. If the Phantom found that, he might soon find the trail to the murderer.

A great deal was going to depend upon this girl.

CHAPTER XI MIDNIGHT TRAP



GLANCING at his watch, the Phantom was surprised at the length of time he had spent on these estates. It would be dark in half an hour. He walked over to the pier where he had overheard Otley and Anne Henderson talking. Otley had departed. The Phantom sat down and lit a cigarette.

It was peaceful here. He had an oppor-

tunity to think, and this series of unexplained and apparently inexplicable ruthless crimes required thought.

The drama—and tragedies—had begun with the sudden appearance of the man who had called himself Don Mallory. Whether or not he had told the truth was still problematical, but following his statement had come the murder of a radio patrolman, the wounding of the self-styled Mallory, and his kidnaping. The murderer had had help in that job, perhaps the same men who had trapped the Phantom in the subway, or others like them.

The man or men who had killed the policeman had not killed the man called Mallory. They had wanted him alive, and they had taken great pains to keep him alive, even to forcing a doctor to treat his wound.

Mallory—the Phantom decided so to designate the old man in his own mind, for the time being—now was being held in one of these castlelike mansions. Dr. Blake, who had been snatched to treat the man's wound had described the illumination in the room to which he had been taken as only candles. That pointed to one of these estates, for all other homes and buildings in the area were supplied with electricity. The wires to these mansions had long since been removed, to obviate the danger of fire, since there was no real caretaker—only the volunteer known as "Crazy" Slade. Though Slade could have been the amnesia victim, Don Mallory.

The same men might kidnap the doctor again, if Mallory required further treatment and, according to the doctor, he probably would. The Phantom mulled over that possibility for a few moments, and decided it might work out to his advantage later on.

Anne Alyn Henderson was involved in some way, most likely through a blackmail scheme against her mother. Bacon had been retained to protect the mother's interests, and had died while trying to perform his duty.

The fact that Paul Ross and Lyle Jackson had hurried down here indicated that they knew more than they were willing to tell. Otley's presence, the Phantom again passed off as something to set down to the curiosity of a columnist whose specialty was sensationalism. He did wonder, once more, why Perry Dixon, the character actor, had not followed the others. Perhaps he had no idea as to what was going on.

They were all after something—Anne's husband as well as the others. And to the Phantom, Scotty Henderson appeared to be some kind of professional crook with a retinue of ugly mugs working with him. Of all the men the Phantom had encountered, so far, he set Scotty down as the most dangerous.

There was little to go on, in order to discover what was in the air so important that murder had to be resorted to. The people involved were reticent. Sheriff Cotesworth was willing to help, of course. He might, too, especially if he should be able to get a line on the machete-carrying assassins who had died in a New York subway. By tracing them, the Phantom might uncover their connection with the arch killer and get a line on his identity. At least it was something not to be overlooked.

Now Anne had promised to talk in just a few hours. Perhaps she might split the thing wide open. If she didn't, the Phantom intended to take some stronger measures with the others involved—Ross, Jackson, Otley and Scott Henderson. If he stepped on somebody's toes, it didn't matter. The Phantom was investigating murder, and would not be detracted from the main issue.

He crushed out his cigarette and glanced across the lake, now almost obscured by oncoming darkness. He saw something in the evening mists. At almost the same instant he heard the gentle slapping of paddles, then a rowboat came into view for a bare instant.

THE Phantom crouched, waiting. Whoever this was, he tried hard not to make much noise. The bow of the boat scraped against land. The Phantom padded forward, merging with the gray of evening and keeping hidden behind ferns as high as his shoulders.

When he reached a point where he could observe the man in the rowboat at fairly close range, what he saw startled him. For the man who stepped out of the boat wore long white whiskers and long white hair. His clothes were ragged and he moved with a slouch that made him look almost hunch-backed.

Before the Phantom could make a rush for him, the man had faded away. The Phantom pushed out into the open, hoping that the white-whiskered man might come by. He certainly looked like the Don Mallory who had started all this fuss in New York. And he acted as if he had been hurt, or was dead tired.

The Phantom did get another glimpse of the man, but he was some distance away now, hardly more than a dim silhouette and moving faster. Finally he circled Lyle Jackson's big house, but by the time the Phantom reached it, the front door was closing on Jackson's rather startled features in the deepening gloom.

For a man whom Dr. Blake had said was badly injured, this Mallory seemed to be doing all right for himself. It was time to settle this business now. The Phantom ap-

proached Jackson's house warily. He was unarmed, for his gun and equipment were still hidden on the Alyn estate.

He slipped up on Jackson's front porch and moved quietly toward the door. Sidestepping, he peered through a window looking into the living room, but it was dark and apparently unoccupied. He went back to the door, but as he stepped close to investigate the lock, his foot landed on a piece of loose board. It gave off a loud, substantial squeak.

Instantly the Phantom heard someone walking rapidly to the door. It opened and Lyle Jackson stood there, a bobbing candle held high for its light to fall upon the Phantom.

"What the devil do you want?" Jackson said hoarsely. "Oh—the real-estate man. Well, why are you snooping around my house?"

"A man I want to talk with just came in here," the Phantom said.

"What man?" Jackson snapped. "There is no one in the house but me. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Someone who looks like a man who says he is Don Mallory just entered. You know exactly what I mean, Jackson, because you were at Mrs. Carter's garden party in New York when this Mallory appeared there. Stop kidding. I'm the Phantom Detective."

Jackson's jaw dropped and utter astonishment showed in his face. The candle he held wavered a trifle. He stepped back, but seemed unable to articulate the invitation he intended to make for the Phantom to enter.

He found his voice when the door was closed, however.

"Phantom," he said, "this certainly is a surprise. But then I should have known you'd keep on investigating."

"Yes, I'm still in it," the Phantom said dryly. "Now what about the old man?"

"If he came in here, I never saw him," Jackson said, and though his voice rang with sincerity, the Phantom was not forgetting that this man had coached actors in all kinds of mimicry. Without a doubt he was himself giving a good performance right now.

"Strange," the Phantom said. "I saw him enter, and someone who looked like you opened the door for him. Jackson, it's time to talk truthfully. Unless you do, I'll be compelled to believe you are criminally involved—in murder. Where is he?"

Jackson turned and lighted several more candles. He put down the one he had been carrying, walked over to a chair and dropped into it.

"I want you to help me search this house," he said. "I've had a feeling, ever since I got here that I am being watched.

For the last two hours I have been upstairs in one of the studies. I swear that's the truth."

Which made him a double liar, for the Phantom had seen him not more than an hour before, talking to Anne Alyn Henderson. He decided against springing this surprise on Jackson now. It was better to wait and hear what Anne had to say before he moved in with force.

"Just why did you come down here, Mr. Jackson?" the Phantom asked.

"For the same reason you did," Jackson answered curtly. "I'm trying to find Don Mallory, if he is alive. Now help me search, will you?"

They spent ninety minutes before they gave up. There was no trace of the old man. Jackson reiterated that his only interest was to locate the man who claimed to be Mallory.

The Phantom left him not long before he was due to meet Anne, and he realized that in Jackson he had found a clever, worthy antagonist in a duel of words. Jackson talked a lot and said nothing of any consequence. He shifted questions to his own benefit, confused the issue, and steadfastly refused to change his story as to the reason for his coming to Florida.

The Phantom gave up—for the time being.

CHAPTER XII

RENDEZVOUS WITH DEATH



SHORTLY before the appointed time, the Phantom located the rendezvous Anne had chosen. It was a rather ornate pavilion equipped with stone seats. Some violently green lizards and one or two jet-black scorpions scurried away at his approach. He sat down and waited. Night sounds, temporarily silenced by his approach, began again.

Stretching behind him was swamp land, heavily covered with vegetation and old trees from which hung tons of Spanish moss. A more desolate spot could not have been envisioned in the mind of a movie set artist.

The Phantom touched the holstered gun he had recovered after he had departed from Jackson's house. He also had retrieved his kits of make-up equipment and tools though Scotty Henderson had thrown out his usually array of guards, with their rifles and dogs and it had taken some patient, cautious maneuvering to avoid them.

Brush crackled. The Phantom's hand

closed around his gun butt. Then he saw Anne's willowy figure climb slowly up the steps to the pavilion. She seemed vastly relieved to find him waiting.

"I can't stay long," she said. "And there is so much to tell. But first I must know who you are. I must have proof of it, otherwise I won't say a word. I know you're not an ordinary real-estate agent."

"You guessed right," the Phantom told her. "I'm an investigator. They call me the Phantom Detective."

"The Phantom!" Anne breathed softly. "I couldn't ask for any better, could I? But how can I be sure?"

The Phantom produced his badge and a tiny flashlight with which to illuminate it.

"Police officers all over the country are familiar with this," he explained. "I hardly suppose that you will be, but it's all the identification I carry."

"But I do know about it!" she said excitedly. "You worked on a murder mystery at a movie studio some time ago. I remember the studio police talking about you and the badge. I'm satisfied, and I'll tell you everything I know."

The Phantom listened quietly, without interrupting her, while she told a weird story of crime. Her mother had married a second time—the man who was Anne's father—in the belief that her first husband was dead. That first husband was Scott Henderson and he was very much alive. He had appeared after all those years and had blackmailed Nancy Alyn on the threat of swearing she knew he was alive and had knowingly committed bigamy. He had compelled Anne's mother to pay until she had sold or pawned everything she owned of tangible value. Then he had demanded more.

"Mother was just getting back into pictures," Anne explained. "Stock rôles, but her first was most important, and will easily make her a secondary star. But if Henderson told what he knew, she wouldn't have a chance. She had to stall him somehow—until after the picture was released. Then it wouldn't matter so much. People wouldn't be prejudiced. Scotty gradually built up a blackmail ring and preyed on others, too, but Mother wasn't neglected. And all that, even though her marriage to Scotty lasted only a month.

"Henderson demanded more and more money until the cupboard was bare. Then he said she would have to borrow or steal it. Mother decided then to tell him about a fortune that's hidden down here."

The Phantom whistled softly. "So that's it. I thought there was a pretty strong lure to draw all these people here. Whose fortune? How is it represented?"

"I know who it belonged to—once—but I

—I'm not sure how it's represented. I do know that just before the studios moved from Florida to Hollywood, the banks here were in danger of failing. Everybody in this colony made withdrawals in cash. Just in time, too, because the bank did fail."

"I saw the bank that went under," the Phantom said. "Go on."

"Most of the movie folk left right afterward, with their cash. One of them didn't, and Mother knew that he had hidden his money, and she knew it must still be here because soon after that, that particular man—died. So Mother told Scotty there was a fortune hidden in one of these houses, though she didn't know which one. It might even be her own, she said. But she knew Scotty was avid enough to forget blackmail and go after the hidden fortune."

"Then there must be two bands of criminals after the same thing," the Phantom said musingly. "One operates from information your mother provided. The other because its leader discovered that Don Malory is alive and might be able, under pressure, to tell where the money is hidden. By the way, Anne, just how do you fit into this? You are supposed to be Henderson's wife—"

"I'm not his wife," she said quickly. "I'm his prisoner. He took me as hostage so Mother wouldn't be able to change her mind and go to the police. Then he discovered, somehow, that she had retained Mr. Bacon. Henderson has good connections in Hollywood. When you appeared, he was sure you must be Bacon."

"And when he searched me, he found Bacon's card," the Phantom said sadly. "He sent one of his men, one who hadn't seen me, to kill Bacon. This murderous emissary had the real Jerry Bacon pointed out to him and killed him. Henderson knew, of course, that you had passed me a note?"

SHE nodded and seemed somewhat embarrassed.

"They usually keep me under strict observation, and one of them saw me writing it just before I came downstairs. . . . Phantom, I'm trying to be fair, but I must warn you that my Mother comes first. Above all other—"

"Quiet!" the Phantom warned suddenly. "Duck down beneath this parapet. If I give you the word, climb over and run for it through the ferns. I'll cover you with gunfire if necessary."

"Do you think it's Henderson?"

"How can I tell in this darkness?" the Phantom countered. "Someone is trying to sneak up. Listen—you'd better start now before they surround this pavilion. I'll give you a hand."

She took orders well, dropped into the

brush and made her way as noiselessly as possible away from the pavilion. The Phantom had his gun ready, although finding a target in this ebony blackness would have been all but impossible.

He realized that whoever was coming must be likewise handicapped. Perhaps they'd had dogs following his scent, although he had heard no yapping. Maybe they had trailed Anne part of the distance, then lost her, and were beating the bush trying to find her. It made little difference how they had converged upon this spot. The fact that they were coming placed the Phantom in considerable jeopardy.

By listening closely he could approximate the number of men surrounding him and guessed there were eight or ten. Armed with rifles they could outrange him—if they could find him.

This particular danger, he realized, called for a strategic retreat, although here he did have a certain advantage in being able to protect himself behind the parapet that ran waist-high all around the pavilion. Also the area close by it was fairly well-cleared so that if any of the men charged, they would discover it was suicide. He could hold out here for a fair length of time. There were nine bullets in his automatic and nine more in an extra clip reposing in his pocket.

Then he heard a scream—a woman's scream—and his hopes dropped. That was Anne. She had probably walked straight into an ambush. He heard her voice again.

"He's on the pavilion! I left him there a minute ago."

Someone growled orders which escaped the Phantom, but he knew it meant the pavilion was going to be surrounded. He was astounded over the way Anne had revealed his hiding place, almost as if she were one of the gang.

The Phantom vaulted off the end of the pavilion, ducked, and streaked for the brush. Flashlight swept the ground around him. One seeped across his path, then jabbed back, encircling him in its ray.

A rifle cracked, a spiteful, sharp explosion. The bullet hummed above his head. If the gunmen were that bad as marksmen, he had a chance.

The next shot all but dusted his cheek and the Phantom threw himself forward in a nose dive. It carried him off dry, firm ground into swamp and he spat out muck and foul-tasting water. He clambered up and reached the thick palmettos.

The men were closing in, though. They made plenty of noise—almost too much. He wondered why. He kept retreating, getting deeper and deeper into the swamp every step he took.

At times he was up to his knees in the

muck and there were precious few hummocks upon which he could rest. Then dogs bayed, and the Phantom groaned. They were going to track him down!

A dog yelped so close to him that he was startled. One party had forged ahead. He was in danger of being cut off now, for so far there had been no opposition behind him.

He saw the party a moment later, four men and two dogs. The men had rifles cocked and ready. And he knew that if they saw him and opened fire, he wouldn't have a chance. It was time to take the offensive, even if only for a few seconds.

He brought his automatic down slowly and pulled the trigger. The man holding the dogs in leash screamed, threw up his hands and fell. The dogs scampered away, dragging their leashes. The other three men promptly did some mud diving themselves, but not before the Phantom persuaded them with a few more pieces of steel.

He maneuvered forward a trifle, on the alert against those rifles. He dragged his feet through the swamp instead of lifting them. Each time a shoe came out of the water it made a plopping sound that could carry some distance. These men would fire in the general direction of any suspicious noise.

Quite unexpectedly, however, there seemed to be no opposition. He kept retreating, looking for a way out of this swamp to dry land where he could make better time and get clear. But that path to safety seemed to be nonexistent. The deeper he traveled, the wider the swamp became.

HE KNEW he was well past the group which had come so close and wondered what kind of luck had enabled him to escape them. The others were in the morass, though, and not too fussy about how much noise they made. He stopped to listen and estimated that they were closing in on three sides, forcing him back and back, deeper into the swamp.

He didn't mind, so long as they didn't come too close or completely surround him, although by this time the Phantom was resigned to a bitter fight to get through.

Suddenly the swamp ended and he felt firm earth underfoot. That was a break he had hardly expected, but a welcome one. Now he could run lightly and quietly, in spite of the mud clinging to his shoes. He saw the stark outlines of bare, dead trees, rows and rows of them draped with Spanish moss. It hung like gigantic gray beards from every branch.

The Phantom stopped to rest, conserving
[Turn page]

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his stamina against any possible physical encounter with these men who were pursuing him.

That they were still coming he could tell from hearing their shoes making those familiar sucking sounds in the swamp.

He realized that the swamp they were passing through must be the one where the body of the man supposed to be Don Mal-lory had been discovered long after he was declared missing.

Sheriff Cotesworth had described the region well.

Cotesworth! Quicksand!

That's what the sheriff had said. There was a lot of quicksand in the vicinity.

With sudden horror the Phantom realized what was happening. They had cleverly driven him toward the quicksand area. It must be just beyond those trees, and there was nowhere else he could go. Not unless he wanted to charge through their lines, and that was all but impossible.

HE SHUFFLED his feet across the ground, searching for stones. He didn't care how much noise he made now. They knew where he was going, where he was at this precise instant. It was all part of a scheme and Anne seemed to be responsible for his predicament.

She had made the rendezvous with him at the pavilion.

Scooping up two of the heaviest rocks he encountered, the Phantom kept going. After about thirty steps he was under the trees, but they gave him scant protection. Beyond them was more level and apparently dry land. He hurled a rock with a rolling motion that sent it skidding across the ground. It skidded about ten feet beyond the last rows of trees, then there was a gurgling sound. He knew the rock had entered the quicksand.

There was only a quarter moon, but many stars, and they illuminated the scene fairly well, giving it an almost ghostly appearance. The Phantom hurled the other rock, this time high into the air so he could follow its descent. It hit that innocent-looking ground and vanished at once, engulfed by the millions of grains of slippery sand.

The Phantom broke out in a cold sweat, despite the clammy heat. He couldn't go forward, nor could he go to either side of him without running head-on into the half-circle of men.

He couldn't retreat, because the quicksand meant certain death.

As he hesitated, trying to make up his mind which chance to take, two rifles spat. He dived for the ground. It was too late now to consider anything other than a trip through the quicksand.

CHAPTER XIII

TWO MURDERERS



BEFORE now the Phantom had been in traps like this. Impossible circumstances which called for quick and clear thinking. He forced himself to use his head, knowing that for the moment he was safe enough, nose down in the dirt, however uncomfortable and ignoble it may have felt.

The rifles spat again.

This time he was ready and his automatic blazed three times in quick succession. The third shot drew a howl of pain—and a dozen shots from all directions except to the rear.

The moment he pressed the trigger for the third time, however, he rolled over quickly and none of the bullets came close. That couldn't go on. The pursuers would come closer and closer. Some one of them would draw a bead, trick him or force him into shooting, then the others would blaze away at the jet of flame his gun made. Besides, his ammunition was getting low.

Someone started running toward the firm earth. Another set of footsteps joined the first man. They were charging!

The Phantom leveled his gun and emptied the clip, scurried away and evaded the resulting shots his gun drew. He had ejected the empty clip and inserted the fresh one when an idea came to him.

There wasn't much time to put it into operation. He peered up at the trees overhead, looking for a certain kind of branch, and soon found it. There were no leaves to impede his vision and the trees were backgrounded by a canopy of starlight.

Rising to a runner's starting position, he listened for a second, felt reasonably certain none of the men were too close at hand, then he moved fast across the ground almost to the edge of that morass of quicksand.

He rose to his full height, gave a leap, and seized the lower branch of one tree. Quickly he drew himself up onto it and the gray veil of Spanish moss now became welcome protection, for it shielded him in case the killers ventured to use flashlights.

The branch he had selected was quite thick and ended where a storm had broken it off abruptly. However, two slenderer and longer limbs projected from the thicker one. In heavy shadows, if it were set upright, it would have given the illusion of a man with his arms above his head.

The Phantom whipped out his kit of burglar tools and selected a small but sharp

saw. It could cut through tempered steel, so it made short work of this particular limb. Without much noise either. The small amount of scraping that resulted was drowned out by the steady sighing of the trees and the whispers of its moss.

He cut that limb almost off, then dropped quietly to the ground and hastened to complete his next step. The men dogging his heels were closer than ever now. But he did manage to find some strong vine, which was what he wanted.

Clambering back to his perch, he cut the limb entirely off, but first tied the vine around it and braced himself to support the weight of the freed chunk of dry wood. Standing on what was left of the branch, he reached up, passed the vine around a higher limb and tied it. Then he scrambled to that limb and dragged the cut part with him.

Straddling the limb, he cautiously worked his way out until he felt the dry wood begin to sag. There he stopped, worked the piece of limb out until he dangled directly over the quicksand. To make certain of this he cut away another piece of wood and dropped it. The wood hit the apparently firm ground, started to move, and was drawn out of sight.

A large piece, like the one he wanted to use, would have to hit that quicksand point first, to sink quickly, and even then there would be some resistance because of the lightness of the wood. That was precisely what the Phantom wanted.

He gauged the branches below. He had already tested them, found them stout enough for his purpose and now he was ready for the final act of his little play. If it failed, he would have to try and battle his way through the ring of steel. There would be no other alternative.

Below him, he could hear the men coming still closer and closer. Most of them were on this dry strip of land now and moving cautiously, both in fear of him and of the quicksand. He saw a shadowy form about thirty yards away and fired directly at it. He missed, but the flame of his gun must have been seen from a dozen different directions.

Instantly the rifles opened up. The Phantom fired two more shots and drew still more fire, whipping through the tree. Then slowly he disengaged the tied end of the vine. The piece of branch dropped a little. Suddenly he let go of it and at the same time he let out a blood-curdling scream and dropped down to the next thick branch.

THE limb which he had let go hit the quicksand, point first, and sank fast. Flashlights swept across the treacherous ground, just in time so that some of the

men must have seen that odd object disappearing beneath the sand. It looked human, with arms outstretched in a frantic grab at thin air.

Adding to the illusion was a dark felt hat resting lightly on the surface of the quicksand. The Phantom had scaled that down a moment before.

"He's gone!" someone shouted. "Our bullets knocked him out of the tree or he jumped, thinking the ground was sound. I saw him go under! His arms were in the air."

"Yeah," another voice chimed in, "I saw him too! My flash was right on him. There's his hat. I saw it fall off his head."

Men swarmed below the tree where the Phantom was hidden, clinging to the trunk high up, and sheltered by the heavy moss. Even if they threw the beams of all their lights into that tree, he would not be seen.

Then Scotty Henderson's voice reached him. Scotty spoke with savage triumph.

"Boys, you've done a grand job tonight. There's one more snoopin' detective gone. He won't be coming out of that quicksand to bother us any more."

The Phantom smiled grimly. He was well aware that his death would be greeted with joy by these men, but he hadn't expected such shouts of sadistic glee. Henderson silenced the men with a word of warning.

"Listen to me now. We've taken care of this snooper, but I'm telling you it was sheer luck, because I made Anne tell me where he was. We ringed him in, forced him back, and he didn't know it was straight into plenty of quicksand. But there will be others. Maybe not as smart, but smart enough. We've got to get busy, find that dough and clear out."

"What if it ain't in the old lady's house?" one of the men asked. "She only gave you a sort of idea it might be there, instead of in the guy's own dump. Suppose that crazy galoot cached it in one of them castles which were opened up today?"

"We'll move in anyhow, whether they're occupied or not," Henderson declared savagely. "Nothing is going to stop us. Not with half a million dollars' worth of cash waiting. If we'd only got here sooner and picked up that old coot and made him talk, it would have been easy! Now he's disappeared, and it's muscle work, but we'll be well paid for it."

"How about using some of that dynamite we lugged along?" another man asked. "It's easier than cutting through all that cement with picks and chisels."

"We'll use it if necessary," Henderson said grimly. "We know, from what Nancy Alyn has told me, that Don Mallory buried the dough under a layer of cement some-

where. That means a cellar, most likely. But he was a smart bird. After the other houses were abandoned, he entered them and slapped cement in every cellar. But we'll find it. Now let's get out of here."

Soon the Phantom heard them slopping through the muck of the swamp and he breathed normally again. He shuddered too, for he had watched that limb being drawn down by the quicksand and it had resembled a human being to a remarkable degree. He, himself, would have been fooled by it.

Henderson and his men withdrew, making their way through that swamp again. Soon the Phantom was following in their tracks and now that the danger was over he had time to wonder anew about the way Anne Alyn had betrayed him. He would have staked a great deal upon her integrity.

He had time to plan also. So far as Henderson was concerned, he had revealed his position in this affair. It was that of a money-hungry blackmailer trying to locate a fortune before someone else discovered it. While he was still a dangerous enemy, it was the man behind the kidnaping of Don Mallory who really worried the Phantom.

Henderson knew nothing of that kidnaping, it seemed, nor that Mallory might be alive. He had been speaking of Crazy Slade when he had mentioned "the old coot," probably with the idea that the self-elected old caretaker would know something about the money cache.

It appeared plain that no one knew in which of the abandoned houses in this former movie paradise called Luana the fortune had been hidden. No one except Don Mallory himself. In New York, the only clue of any kind Mallory had given was mention of the name, "Luana," and his announcement that a secret was hidden there. Had he been kidnaped to force him to reveal that secret? That seemed likely. But who had done it, committing murder on the way?

The man behind the kidnaping, the Phantom was thinking now, could have been Otley. It would not be the first time a columnist had gone wrong, although in his position Otley would have been far more easily suspected of being the head of a blackmail ring than would Scott Henderson.

PAUL ROSS was up to something, too, the Phantom was sure. He had confessed that he needed money, yet he had temporarily passed up what he thought was a chance to cash in on all this nearly worthless property. Ross knew about that hidden money and wanted to find it—of that the Phantom was certain. Though why he

or anyone else who had ever known about it should have waited so long to try to get it could not be explained, unless it was only recently that they had learned that there might be a possibility of finding the hidden fortune.

Lyle Jackson presented a rather similar problem, except that he was even deeper in the mess. He had denied that the be-whiskered man had entered his home, while the Phantom had actually seen the man do just that.

Jackson had insisted that the Phantom help search his house. Why? To throw off suspicion because he knew the old man had either made his exit or was well-hidden? Or could it have been because Jackson actually was afraid and wanted the Phantom's help?

The old man himself—Don Mallory—was supposed to be badly wounded by an arrow. How then, could he have rowed a boat across the lake? It seemed incredible to think that he possessed strength enough for that.

The only man who previously had been on the Phantom's list of suspects was notable by his absence from the scene. So far as the Phantom knew, Perry Dixon had not left New York. Still it was easily possible that he had reached these estates and was hidden somewhere, biding his time.

The Phantom wished that a search of all the mansions was possible, but he knew that could not be done. Not by himself alone, nor with the help of a dozen men. It would take too long and things seemed to be progressing to a showdown.

Finally the Phantom was clear of the estates. He located his car and drove away as quietly as possible.

The little town was sound asleep when he reached it. He left the car some distance from the hotel and carefully made his way toward the three-story hotel building.

The Phantom was supposed to be dead and he decided it was best to limit those who might know the truth. Henderson was ripe for arrest, but the Phantom believed that so long as Henderson was at large with his gang, then the man behind the killing of that New York policeman would be handicapped. If the two criminal elements selected to shoot it out, the Phantom didn't particularly care. In the old days some powerful gangs had been eliminated that way.

As usual at this hour of the night, the hotel lobby was deserted. The Phantom stepped up to the desk, looked for the register, but didn't find it. He went behind the desk and when he discovered it on a shelf he saw that during the day two men had registered. One was a salesman, indicated by the fact that he was getting

commercial rates. The other was Perry Dixon.

The Phantom noted Dixon's room number, then went to his own room and cleaned up. He removed the make-up and created the features of the man whom Dixon, Otley, Jackson and Ross had known in New York as the Phantom. He donned fresh clothes.

There were many things to do before morning. A talk with Dixon seemed to be in order. Cotesworth had promised to dig up some information on the machete killers, and there was a little matter to be discussed with Dr. Blake.

CHAPTER XIV

A DOUBLE FOR DANGER



DOWN on the floor below his own, the Phantom located Perry Dixon's room and tapped on the door. He heard bed springs squeak, then bare feet padded across the floor and the door was unlocked. Perry Dixon, in pajamas, blinked at him sleepily. Then the actor's eyes popped wide open.

"The Phantom!" he exclaimed.

"May I come in?" the Phantom asked, and stepped inside without invitation. "Looks as though we're all here, Mr. Dixon. Are you opening your estate too?"

"No," Dixon said promptly. "But a local real-estate agent here who has been keeping an eye on my property called me in New York to tell me some other real estate men have been dickering for those old white elephants. I thought it might be a good time to unload mine. I'd sell for a fraction of what the place is worth. But I can't quite understand what brought you here. That bearded tramp who claimed to be Don Mallory?"

"Yes—and why are you so certain he wasn't Mallory?"

"Quite simple." Dixon lit a cigarette, sat down on the edge of his bed and looked up, directly at the Phantom. "You see, Mallory and I not only acted together, but we were good friends. I believe I knew him as well as anyone, and that man who appeared at Mrs. Carter's garden party was not Mallory. Not by a long shot."

The Phantom frowned. "You should be the one man to know. Mr. Dixon, you lived here in those days twenty years ago when everyone thought the cinema business was moving here. At that time there was a run on the local bank. Do you recall that?"

"Do I?" Dixon grimaced. "I stood in line for hours waiting to get my money. The

land boom was petering out and everything was on the verge of collapse. I had a lot of money in the bank, just as the other movie people did. We all got it out in time."

"What would you think of the idea that Don Mallory was afraid to put his cash back in any bank and that he concealed it somewhere in his house or in one of the others when they were vacated?"

Dixon shrugged and eyed the glowing tip of his cigarette.

"So that's what lies behind all this to-do. Well, all I know is that Mallory did have more cash in the bank than any of us did. He took it out and so far as I know, that was the last anyone ever heard of it. When his estate was probated some seven or eight years after his death, that fortune certainly was not included."

"Fine." The Phantom nodded. "Only recently, it seems, it has become known that that money still is here, and certain parties are after it. They are greedy enough to stop at nothing—not even murder."

"Well, I'm not looking for it," Dixon said promptly. "If Mallory hid that money, you can be sure he did a good job, and any man will have his hands full, trying to find it. Mallory was always more than normally careful in everything he did. . . . Now, I suppose, you're going to ask me who I think supervised the murder of that patrolman in New York. I'll answer that flatly. I don't know."

"But you must have some suspicions, the Phantom urged. "You were closer to the people connected with the appearance there of the old man who called himself Mallory, and whose removal led to the murder of the police officer, than any casual guest of the garden party. Unless, of course, someone wholly unconnected with the movie business, past or present, is involved."

Dixon crushed out his cigarette. "Look here, Phantom, I'm not a detective. I'm an actor, and a has-been, at that. My only interest here now is in getting rid of my home down here, then getting back to New York as fast as I can. I want nothing to do with murder or hidden money. I won't give any hints that among my friends there may be a murderer. Furthermore, I'm very tired. If you don't mind—"

"I'll see you later then," the Phantom said. "Thanks, anyhow. You may change your mind. Good night."

The door closed behind him and Dixon turned the key. The Phantom walked slowly to the lobby. Dixon's assertions had a ring of sincerity but he also was an actor and fully capable of inserting whatever feeling he wished into what he said.

The Phantom headed for Sheriff Cotesworth's office, arriving there after midnight.

"Something I can do for you, sir?" Cotesworth asked, not recognizing the Phantom in this different disguise.

"You might tell me something about a pair of machete-carrying killers." The Phantom grinned and gave the officer a glimpse of his badge.

"Well, blast me, you sure don't look like the Phantom I met," Cotesworth marveled. "Yep—got me some information, and it's good. Just outside of the town of Elton, some eight miles north of here, is a family of moonshiners. Yes, we have 'em down here too. Doin' pretty good these days of high taxes and scarce liquor. How anybody can drink the stuff they put out . . . But I'm getting off the track. It's this family you might be interested in."

"Just why?" the Phantom queried.

"Well, there's the old man. These folks are from Kentucky and the old man totes a rifle and knows how to use it. He has four sons. Ain't none of 'em much good. Back in my mind was the idea that two of these boys got into a row a few years back and they used machetes. Nasty weapons. Plenty of folks use 'em for cutting canes, but as far as I know that was the first time anybody hereabout ever used them things as weapons."

"Now that's right interesting," said the Phantom. "Are all four of those boys around now?"

"No, sir, they ain't. Two of 'em were seen the other day, but the other two have been missing for the last five or six days."

"I think I'll run up and see that family," the Phantom said.

"When you do, have a gun in your hand and don't be afraid to shoot. The old man has an idea that every man who wears a collar and tie is a revenue agent. Laugh if you want to, but fellows like this Dade Qualen are just like they picture 'em in movies and in stories."

The Phantom went into a more lengthy description of the two men who had died in that New York subway. When he finished, Cotesworth inclined his head in a short nod of assent.

"Sounds like Dade's son all right. Mighty glad I could be of some help, too."

"You have," the Phantom said. "Now, about Dr. Blake. Has he been kidnaped again?"

"Not so far as I know. I guess maybe he hasn't been, because he would come bleating like a sick mule if he was. You expect him to be?"

"Yes. You see, whoever had him kidnaped wants that white-bearded old man to live. Whether he is Don Mallory or this odd coot you told me about named Crazy Slade, he knows where a lot of money is hidden. If he is too sick, they can't torture

the truth out of him because he'd die or pass out."

"So that's it," Cotesworth muttered. Then he looked up brightly. "Maybe I'll get me a tenant for my cell before this is over with."

"Your cell isn't big enough for all those who should be in it," the Phantom said soberly, then changed the subject. "I'm going to drop in to see Dr. Blake shortly. First, though, I'd like to use your phone."

"Help yourself," Cotesworth invited.

The Phantom put through a call to New York and in short order was talking with one of Frank Havens' crack reporters, Steve Huston. That red-headed young man frequently helped the Phantom on many of his cases, and yet he hadn't the faintest inkling as to who the Phantom really was.

"Steve," the Phantom said, after he had given an identifying word, "there is something urgent I want you to do. It's in connection with the murder at Mrs. Carter's garden party the other night."

"I'm your man," Huston answered grimly. "That policeman who was killed was a nice guy. The rat who killed him ought to burn."

"Then quietly check on four men and you may help to see that the rat does burn. The men I mean are Otley, the columnist, Perry Dixon, Lyle Jackson and Paul Ross. I want to know if those men were in New York all during the week preceding the murder. If any of them were away, try to find out where they were. I'll call you back in a couple of hours, so work fast."

"If it's humanly possible, I'll have a report," Huston promised.

The Phantom hung up, turned around and looked at Cotesworth.

"There's only one rail line running through here," he said. "That means only one railroad station."

"Accent the one," Cotesworth grinned. "One train, one ticket agent."

"Will you rout that ticket agent out of bed?" the Phantom asked. "Find out from him if that white-bearded, white-haired man who is either Mallory or Crazy Slade, bought a ticket lately."

COTESWORTH got on the phone and soon had his man. He asked his questions, then glanced at the Phantom.

"You may have done some fancy guessing, but the ticket agent says Crazy Slade did buy a ticket for New York a short time ago. The agent wondered where he ever got the money."

"Ask him if he remembers what kind of money it was," the Phantom directed.

Cotesworth asked, put his hand over the receiver and said:

"It was the old-fashioned—big bills.

First time in years the agent's seen any of them and he wasn't apt to forget."

"Now ask him if anyone else made any inquiries about Crazy Slade," the Phantom told him.

Cotesworth nodded, when he hung up.

"Yep—one of the Qualen boys was over soon after the train pulled out. The agent told him Slade had left on it and that he'd handed over some of those big bills. The Qualen boy got mighty excited."

"Ah," the Phantom said, "now we're really getting somewhere."

The Phantom got Dr. Blake's address from the sheriff and drove there, parking the car about a block away from the doctor's residence. The place was dark, but Dr. Blake answered the Phantom's ring and there was a gun in his fist.

"No, Doctor," the Phantom said. "I'm not one of the men who kidnaped you. I'm looking for them and I need your help."

"How do you know about that?" Dr. Blake demanded. "If that fool Cotesworth has talked—"

"I was in the office when you reported the incident to him, Doctor. You didn't see me, but I was there. I'm the Phantom Detective, and I want you to verify my identity by phoning the sheriff right now."

"Why should I do that?" Dr. Blake asked.

"Because the chances are that you'll be called in again on that particular case. It may be dangerous this time, so I'll take your place."

"Nonsense," Blake said. "They saw me. You and I don't look alike. They aren't fools, sir."

"Phone Cotesworth first," the Phantom said. "Then we'll talk about that."

Blake let him in, but clung to his gun, with the muzzle pointed significantly at the Phantom. Blake called Cotesworth, and when he hung up, he dropped the gun into a desk drawer.

"I'm satisfied," he said. "Now—how do you propose to go about taking my place?"

The Phantom studied the man for a moment, then he set his make-up kit on the desk and went to work. In something less than five minutes, a perfect double for Dr. Blake was created over the disguise already on the Phantom's face.

"Well I've seen many strange things," Blake marveled, "but nothing like this. Say—I don't look as old as that, do I?"

"You're in your prime," the Phantom suavely assured, as he made some of the age lines a little heavier. "Now I'll want a suit of clothes and one of your professional bags. And I hope, Doctor, that we won't have too long a wait for the return of those kidnapers. Do you think that injured man will need attention again soon?"

"If he doesn't get it by morning," Blake

said, "he'll be in a bad way. That wound is infected. He'll get feverish sometime tonight. I told those men what to look for and urged them to get the patient into a hospital. I could tell by their whispering that there would be no hospital, but another enforced trip for me."

"Then we'll wait." The Phantom's voice as he said this was exactly like the voice of Dr. Blake. There were few mimics as good as the Phantom.

In short order the Phantom was dressed in one of Dr. Blake's suits. That took a bit of adjusting, but there was not a great deal of difference in their figures. Then the Phantom transferred his gun, now freshly loaded, and his two kits to the professional bag the doctor provided. On top of this equipment he placed rolls of bandages and cotton. The rest of the bag Dr. Blake filled with the usual articles a physician carries.

CHAPTER XV

PERIL'S BRIGHT FACE



ONLY a short time elapsed before a call came, but it was from one of Dr. Blake's regular patients. However, the Phantom accompanied him just in case. On the way back, Dr. Blake got out on the street behind his home and cut through the back yard while the Phantom drove the car around to the garage in

the event that the snatch would be a duplicate of the first. Nothing happened.

But five minutes after they were inside, the phone rang and a man's excited voice asked for the doctor immediately. He gave the name of a family on the outskirts and begged the physician to come quickly, saying that his wife acted as if she had an acute heart attack. Dr. Blake promised to leave at once.

At the Phantom's suggestion, however, Dr. Blake phoned a neighbor of his proposed patient and asked him if there were any lights in the next house. The neighbor reported there were none.

"This is it then." The Phantom picked up his borrowed bag. "Sit tight for a couple of hours. Answer only calls of the greatest emergency and use my rented car. It's down the street a block."

"Good luck." Blake offered his hand. "I'm obliged to you for taking the risk. I could almost sense those men were killers. Three of 'em. The one who drove never said a word, but the two who sat alongside me talked enough. Local talent from the moonshine area, I'd say."

The Phantom went to Dr. Blake's garage, drove the car out and headed toward the home of the supposed patient. He knew the risk he was taking, but the circumstances called for it. He had to see that old man—save him if possible. That whiskered old fellow alone held the key to this mystery and he must be sorely in need of help.

The attack came when he was a quarter of a mile away from the home for which he was headed, and it was neatly done. A car shot out to block the road. When the Phantom stopped, two men came toward him from either side of his car.

The pair wore handkerchiefs tied around the lower part of their faces. One of them leaped into the back seat and swiftly draped a burlap hood around the Phantom's head and pulled it tight with a drawstring.

"Don't be scared, Doc," he said swiftly. "We're takin' you to see that certain party again. I guess he's worse. He keeps groanin'-in' bad. You fix him up and you won't be sorry."

"I'll fix him up because I'm a doctor." The Phantom's muffled voice came from under the hood.

"Sure, sure," the kidnaper agreed. "Now I'll help you into the back seat. My pal will drive—and no tricks, Doc. You're a pretty good old duck and we'd hate to have to slit your throat."

The Phantom gave a proper reaction to the threat, obeyed orders, and tried his best to determine where the car was headed. That seemed to be impossible for it took many turns and the Phantom was not familiar enough with the locality to place any of them.

Half an hour later the car stopped and his arm was taken in a firm grip. He was warned about steps before he encountered them and soon a door opened and he stepped into a house that smelled musty. They led him across a wide expanse of floor, up a rather long staircase, and then he heard a key fitted into a door. Hinges squeaked a trifle.

Some one put the flat of his hand against the Phantom's back and propelled him forcibly into this room. He stumbled and fell to one knee. Then as the door slammed behind him he reached up and removed the burlap hood.

There was no need to accustom his eyes to brilliant lighting. Four candles were on a dresser beside a single bed upon which lay the old man. He seemed to be unconscious.

The Phantom bent over him. "Can you understand me?" he asked. "Can you hear me? I'm a friend."

The old man never moved a muscle, but he seemed to be breathing just a trifle faster.

"I'm not the doctor who was here before," the Phantom went on. "I only look like him, and it was all planned. I'm a detective."

The old man's eyes opened. They were startlingly blue eyes and full of life. He regarded the Phantom for a moment or two and then, with a stifled moan, he sat up.

"I used to be afraid of detectives," he said slowly. "Now I realize the law is my only hope. But why did you come alone? There are three or four of these devils here. They'll kill both of us!"

"Not if we work this properly," the Phantom whispered. "Keep your voice low. They may be trying to listen. Listen carefully, because there is no time to repeat and while I'm talking, start removing those clothes."

"Remove my clothes?" The old man gaped at him.

"Yes, provided you feel strong enough to walk out of here. Can you do that? If I apply make-up so you look exactly like me?"

"Yes—yes, I can do that. If you are clever enough, it may work. I know make-up. Worked with it many, many times."

"Then you are the real Don Mallory," the Phantom grunted. "Good. I'm going to snip off those whiskers and shave you. I've brought all the material necessary. Be quiet now. We'll talk about it later on."

"But if I walk out as you, then you must intend to remain here. They'll kill you!"

"If they can." The Phantom grinned. "Stop talking now."

WITH deft, experienced hands, the Phantom clipped off the whiskers and the long mane. He carefully preserved the matted hair. Then he cleaned the old man's face smooth and applied make-up. In a surprisingly short time he looked like Dr. Blake.

Then, while the old man dressed in the clothing the Phantom had worn, the Phantom donned Mallory's rags and proceeded to make himself look like him. Actor's mucilage held the white hair and whiskers in place. Perhaps they didn't look exactly like Mallory's, but in this dim candlelight the impersonation would easily pass a casual inspection.

There was one thing the Phantom could not do, with all his magical artistry. That was to change the color of his eyes. So far as Mallory was concerned it didn't matter much, because they would put that burlap hood over his head. But the Phantom didn't intend to give them much of a chance to examine him—after Mallory had departed.

These were desperate measures, but nothing short of them would suffice. He had to

get that old man safely out of here. The Phantom had noticed Mallory's fingertips were blackened, as if burned while applying torture. They had already tried to force the truth out of him.

"How does that wound feel?" he asked.

"It hurts," Mallory answered in a whisper. "Badly sometimes, but I faked a lot of my pain and weakness. I thought they might relax, and give me a chance to get out of here. A doctor in New York—some gangster's doctor—fixed me up and told them my condition was fairly good. I put on an act, letting them think I was worse than I really am. Anyhow, they've been afraid to torture me too much, for fear I might die on them without telling my secret."

"Who shot you in New York?" the Phantom asked.

"I don't know," Mallory said. "I honestly don't. I wanted to see Jackson, who had been my best friend—which was why I went to that garden party. I didn't know where to find him, but I'd seen in the papers that he would be among Mrs. Carter's guests. When I got there I saw others whom I had known. Dixon, for instance, who had never liked me because I'd taken several rôles away from him that he'd wanted. Remember the old silent version of Robin Hood? He studied for that, and I took it from under his nose."

"Paul Ross was there, too. Ross is a money-mad scoundrel. I wouldn't trust him, but I can't say I believe he would shoot me with an arrow. I'm telling you truthfully—I don't know who shot me or that policeman."

"Umm," commented the Phantom. "You say Ross is money-mad, and there is a fortune in cash hidden somewhere around here?"

Mallory's eyes gleamed with suspicion. "I'm not saying anything about that. Maybe this is just a trick and you're in with them, trying to get me to trust you, so I'll talk. If that isn't so—and I hope it isn't—I'll meet you wherever you say."

"Good enough," the Phantom told him. "Here is a key. It will let you into Room Three-o-four at the hotel in town. The lobby is deserted at this hour. You can slip in and hide in that room. I'll come there as quickly as I can."

"And if you don't?"

"Go to Sheriff Cotesworth. He can be trusted. Now we're about ready. Pick up the bag. Straighten your shoulders, no matter how much that wound pains you. Keep them back until they let you go. Try to imitate my voice as much as possible. It won't be hard with that hood over your head. Tell them I'm pretty bad. Now—good luck!"

They shook hands briefly. The Phantom lay face down on the bed. Mallory, in his rôle of Dr. Blake took the part well. He was indeed a capable actor. He rapped on the panels. The door was opened in a moment. Two men, masked, stepped in, picked up the burlap hood and drew it around Mallory's head. Then they led him out and locked the door behind them.

The Phantom sat up immediately and slid his automatic from beneath the pillow. He shoved the safety off, slipped the weapon under his shirt where it could be seized quickly, then sat on the edge of the bed to wait.

He was beginning to see the truth about many things and even a glimmer as to the identity of the killer.

A FULL half hour went by before he heard approaching footsteps. A key was inserted in the lock, turned and the door opened. Through slitted eyes, the Phantom saw the two local hoodlums. They were grinning broadly as if in appreciation of the scene they planned to follow.

"Look, old-timer," one of them said. "The Doc tells me you ain't so bad. Be reasonable. Tell us where you hid that money."

"No," the Phantom mumbled.

"Stubborn yet, huh? Too bad—for you. Remember how it hurt when we burned your fingers. That ain't nothin', you old coot, compared to what we'll do in a minute. Close the door, Jeff. He's goin' to do some hollerin' this time. Now hand me that knife. Listen, old man. Here is what we're goin' to do. First, I'll tear the bandage off your back. Then I'll shove this knife into the wound and start turning it. Think you can stand that? Want to talk?"

The Phantom just groaned, and there was genuine agony in it. They would know in a minute that he was not Mallory.

The Phantom had hoped the man who controlled them would come on the scene. So far he had not put in an appearance, unless he had driven Dr. Blake's car.

The Phantom's right hand moved slightly until he was gripping the automatic. It was time to teach this pair of would-be gangsters a grim lesson. He was somewhat worried about the knife threat though.

The sadistic torture-killer seized his shoulder to tear off his clothes and reach the wound he knew was in the back of the real Don Mallory.

The Phantom suddenly gave a swift turn and heaved himself up and off the bed. One hand parried the almost automatic thrust of the knife. The other hand, gripping his automatic, struck the killer full in the face.

The other murderer hurled himself at the

Phantom before he had a chance to use the gun. The weight of his attack threw the Phantom back onto the bed. Both men were free now, but only one had a knife. The other blade was somewhere under the bed.

The candlelight was fairly good, and when the Phantom had a clear look at these two men he was certain they must be the brothers of the pair he had battled in the New York subway. And, like the first two he had encountered, they were deadly, dangerous killers.

The one with the knife feinted, drawing the Phantom's attention. The other one leaped at him. The Phantom could have shot him, but he held his fire. These men alive would be most useful in convicting the arch criminal who paid and directed them. They must have sensed this reluctance on the part of the Phantom, and were ready to take bold chances.

The one who charged got close enough to deliver a sharp right hook that glanced off the Phantom's cheek. The other came in with upraised knife. Suddenly the Phantom threw himself back across the bed, raised both feet and kicked out with them. His heels caught the knife-armed killer full in the chest and threw him clear across the room. He hit the further wall, howled in pain, and fell.

The Phantom was off the bed before the other man could close in again. He met this attacker head-on. For something like two minutes a terrific fight raged. The Phantom battled a raw-boned, extraordinarily strong enemy who knew many unfair tricks of fighting.

The Phantom was, however, in the pink of condition for in his rightful identity of Richard Curtis Van Loan he spent many hours training for just such battles as this. His blows were harder, more scientifically placed than those of his adversary, and inflicted more pain. Gradually he wore his opponent down until he saw his chance to drive home a right cross.

It hit the Qualen brother full on the mouth and turned him into a fear-stricken, pain-racked individual with one thought in mind—to escape from this man who could fight so well. That Qualen brother did reach the door, got it half-open, and started to step into the hallway.

A gun barked. Qualen let out a yell and fell back. The Phantom floored him with a single punch.

The Phantom knew then that outside this room the real villain was waiting for him. Getting out of there was going to be difficult. The gunman out there had complete control of the only exit from this room.

The Phantom kicked the door shut, after dragging away the unconscious form of the Qualen brother. This drew two shots

from the killer outside, but they missed by a substantial margin.

The other Qualen brother was huddled against the baseboard of the room. He was unconscious and apt to remain so for some time.

The Phantom stepped over to the boarded-up window. He examined it, then went to the bed, the only piece of furniture in the room.

Working swiftly, he tore the bed apart and grasped one metal bed leg. With this he began pounding at the boards which sealed up that window. He kept at this, constantly turning his head to watch the door. It was lucky he did take this precaution, for the killer must have sensed what was going on from the pounding, figured the Phantom might be absorbed in his job and could be taken by surprise.

The Phantom saw the door start to open. He raised his gun and fired twice. Both bullets ripped through the panels, chest-high for a normal man. There was no yell of pain or the fall of a body. The killer had not been in front of the door, but those shots warned him that the Phantom was still on the alert.

He worked hard on that window until he heard three shots from behind the house. This was followed by the whir of a car starter. The Phantom turned and raced for the door. No bullets met his dash from the room. He located the front of the house, mainly by luck, because it was one of the rambling mansions of Luana.

He got the door open, rushed onto the porch and saw a car driving fast toward the road. The Phantom leveled his automatic, took careful aim and emptied the clip. It was a vain act, because the car was almost out of range. It kept on going until its tail-light vanished in the darkness.

CHAPTER XVI

DEAD MAN'S DRAWING



MALLORY, being driven back to town by the man who believed he was Dr. Blake, said as little as possible during the ride. He was a little elated over being called upon to use his acting talents again, but he knew the slightest slip would give the thing away. The palms of his hands were clammy, and he was grateful for the burlap hood over his head.

The wound in his back ached badly, but he could stand that. Warm, fresh air gave him new strength. When the car stopped, he sat there until he realized he was quite

alone. The driver had slipped out of the car and was gone.

Slowly Mallory removed his hood. His surroundings were familiar, but he knew little about this car. He finally mastered it, however, even though it took him more time than he liked to lose, and drove to the center of town. He came to a halt with a slight squeal of tires against pavement when he stepped on the brakes too hard. He had been used only to the old type of car—the only kind he remembered.

He was so intent on following the Phantom's instructions, as he slipped out of the car, that he didn't even notice the smooth-running sedan that sped by as he started for the hotel. Nor did he see the startled expression that came to the eyes of the driver when he saw Mallory, eyes that narrowed with sudden understanding.

Then the car had sped on by. But as Mallory walked to the hotel and through the empty lobby, that car outside was brought to an abrupt halt. The driver leaped out.

Mallory toiled up the stairs to the Phantom's room, unlocked the door with the key the Phantom had provided, entered, but did not turn on the lights. Dawn was just breaking. Nor did he glance back as he went in, or he might have seen a silent man who had come noiselessly to a turn in the stairs where he paused, hidden, until he saw which door the man ahead of him entered.

Inside the room, Mallory sank weakly into a chair and sat there stiffly erect, for his back was not comfortable in any other position.

As minutes went by, he became more and more worried. If that strange man who said he was a detective and put all of Hollywood's make-up artists to shame didn't get away from those murderers, it would be difficult indeed. Mallory needed help.

"I must do something," he muttered. "I can't call in the sheriff. I'd be as bad off

when he got through with me. If I could only reach Jackson, he might help—where is he?"

He stopped considering that tempting idea, anyhow. Once Jackson had been his best friend, but in the years which had elapsed, Jackson might have changed. The unwelcome thought came that Jackson might possibly be the mysterious figure who directed all the activities of that pair of murderous young men in the old house from which the detective had aided Mallory himself to escape.

Mallory went over to the small desk, groaning softly as each step made the wound in his back hurt more. He sat down, and in the dim light began writing a weird story.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: I, Don Mallory, have a feeling that I may not live much longer, and certain facts must be known. Years ago, when the banks were in danger of failing, I withdrew all my money. A considerable sum. I know now that I was a fool. I took this cash to my home, and later on concealed it. From then on, I became afraid of everyone, especially of a whiskered old codger called Crazy Slade. We were friends, in a way. I felt sorry for him, and gave him half a dollar now and then. But Slade knew I had the money. So did a lot of other people.

One night some of these people came to try to find my money—I don't know how many. There could have been only one man. Anyhow, when I came upon one man, plainly hunting for my fortune, I was struck upon the head. When I came to, I was alone. Everything was confused. I couldn't remember who I was, and near me I found Crazy Slade. He was dead—murdered. I thought I had killed him. I didn't know why I should have done such a thing, but there was no one else around. That blow on the head had robbed me of any ability to think clearly. I believed myself a murderer.

I changed clothes with this dead man, shaved off his whiskers and cut his hair. I carried his body to the swamp and did my best to conceal it. Then I hid. In those Luana mansions I

[Turn page]

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(Adv.)

found plenty of places to hide, food enough for a start on a new life, and even old clothes left behind. I let my beard grow and my hair became matty. In one of the houses I found a kit of make-up materials that had been left. I used it without really knowing what it was. Some instinct showed me the manner in which to make my hair white as Slade's had been, because I had made up my mind to pose as Slade, whom I vaguely remembered as always around Luana.

They found Slade's body and my fears grew, though they called the unrecognizable corpse by another name I did not recognize, or know was my own. I was sure I'd killed him. But I was not accused. Years went by, and I was fully accepted as Crazy Slade. Then a number of men who must have known I was not Slade, but Mallory, came one night. I got away from them, but not before they had injured me. They used gun butts on my head. I suppose the blows brought my senses back. I knew who I was. I knew I had not killed Crazy Slade, but it was too late now to convince anyone of that.

I got away when those men left me unconscious, meaning to return and force me to tell where my money was, if they could not find it. I watched them search, hidden, then decided to look up an old friend, Lyle Jackson. If he were alive, he would help me. I got away to New York, not knowing—then—how many years had passed while I had not known who I was. I had no idea of where to look for Jackson, until I read in a newspaper that he would be at Mrs. Carter's garden party.

I went there, but Jackson thought I was an impostor. The body of Crazy Slade had been identified and buried as that of Don Mallory. I was arrested. Someone shot the policeman with an arrow, and wounded me. I became unconscious. When I awakened, I was in a car halfway to Florida. They drove day and night. Back in Luana, they locked me in a room in one of the mansions. They tried to make me tell where I had hidden the money. I refused and they tortured—

Mallory stopped writing. He heard a distinct footfall in the hall. He hurriedly swept the letter into a desk drawer and arose. As he did, someone tapped softly on the door. It was that strange detective, of course, he thought. No one else knew he was here.

MALLORY unlocked the door and threw it open. He gasped and backed up as a man, with a gun pointed at him, walked in and closed the door.

"So it's you!" Mallory gulped.

"I've no time for pleasantries, Don," the visitor said. "I'm giving you one chance to tell me where you hid that money. One chance. I need that money—badly. I intend to have it. If you won't talk, I'll kill you."

"If you do that, you'll never find it," Mallory exclaimed hoarsely.

"It may take time, but I'll find it," the man growled. "Now—are you going to

talk? Remember, your life depends on the answer you give me."

"I remember now," Mallory cried. "Yes, it comes back to me. You went away with the others who composed our colony, but you came back. You tried to find my money then. I caught you looking for it. You hit me—many times. I've tried and tried to think of who it was who did that, but never have remembered until now."

"Your answer?" the man asked smoothly.

"I won't tell! I'll never tell! If I did, you'd kill me, anyhow. I know who you are now, so you can't afford to let me live. You don't care how many people you kill."

The visitor punctuated Mallory's last sentence with a bullet. The gun he held blazed twice more, each slug smashing home, each one capable of causing death.

Mallory collapsed slowly, blood smearing the white shirt which belonged to Dr. Blake. He sank to the floor, fingers clawing at the worn rug as if trying to grasp something to hang onto. As if the rug were life itself.

The murderer quickly backed out of the room and fled down the hall. Already people were stirring. Those shots had aroused practically the entire hotel.

In the Phantom's room, Don Mallory was summoning every ounce of strength he possessed. The physician's bag was within reach and he managed to open it.

Weakening fingers fumbled inside and located a pair of surgical scissors. He got these out and inched himself to the edge of the rug. He raised the rug, supporting it by one elbow and with both hands started scratching on the bare floor with the scissors.

He scratched a half-circle, drew another just inside it. Then two slanting lines between which he drew straight, horizontal lines like steps. He carved a crude object that looked something like a strange fish.

The scissors slipped, clattered gently against the bare floor. Mallory's head sank slowly to the surface of the rug and he was dead. The crude drawing was concealed by the rug, which had fallen back into place.

After the Phantom had failed to hit the escaping chief killer, who was too far away to be touched by the shots from an automatic, he ran around the house to the garages. There was one other car there—a rather ramshackle bit of junk which he guessed belonged to the Qualen brothers. And he saw at once what those shots he had heard from the rear of the house had meant. The killer had taken time enough before fleeing to slam three bullets into a vital part of the motor. There was no use trying to get that crate started.

The Phantom returned to the house and brought the Qualens to their senses. He tied

their arms behind them and kept a gun leveled as he hurried them to the main highway.

There was a fair amount of traffic by now, for morning was near, and in five minutes the Phantom was able to thumb a ride to town. He showed the rather astounded driver his badge, just a bare glimpse of it to indicate he was a law officer with two prisoners.

Then, in the back seat, the Phantom removed the fake beard and whiskers and talked to the Qualen brothers. He talked firmly and fast, but the only answers he got were snarls of hatred.

The driver of the car obligingly headed for Sheriff Cotesworth's office when they reached town, but a crowd around the hotel slowed him up. The Phantom spied Cotesworth hurrying into the place. He hailed the sheriff who came over quickly, and showed some confusion before he could recognize the Phantom in this different disguise.

"Now it ain't that I don't believe you're the Phantom," he said, "but there's a man in the Phantom's room who is disguised to look like Doc Blake, and I know the Phantom made himself up to look like Doc. You look like Doc, too, much as I can see under them whiskers, but still—"

"The man in my room," the Phantom exclaimed. "Is he—"

"Dead—yep," Cotesworth said. "I see you got two of the Qualen boys."

"Lock them up," the Phantom said quickly. "Then come back to the hotel. The dead man is Don Mallory. I rescued him from the Qualens and the killer for whom they were working, but he got away from me. See if you can make these hill-billy thugs talk."

"I doubt it, but I'll try," Cotesworth said.

THE Phantom got out of the car and hurried toward the hotel. In a washroom he removed the disguise of Dr. Blake which was under those whiskers and the long hair.

He recreated the features of the Phantom as he was known in New York at the time of the garden party murder. Then he hurried upstairs. The first man he saw was Perry Dixon, somewhat ashen-faced. Dixon recognized the Phantom instantly.

"It's Don Mallory!" Dixon said, nodding toward the Phantom's room. "He's in there—dead! They noticed he wore make-up and removed it. It's Mallory, all right."

The Phantom stepped into the room. Dr. Blake was there, and he heaved a great sigh of relief when he saw the Phantom.

"I thought the dead man was you," he said. "Until his disguise was removed. I tell you it gave me a start to walk into this room and see my double lying there dead."

The Phantom cleared the room, closed and locked the door. At once he saw the surgical scissors lying near the open medical bag. He picked them up and noticed tiny bits of shellac adhering to the metal. With Dr. Blake's help, he moved the body of Don Mallory, and in doing so noticed ink stains on the dead man's fingers. They had not been there before. He was certain of that because he had carefully noted those hands which showed signs of torture. The Phantom knelt and studied the rug and the floor. Finally he raised the rug and saw Don Mallory's crude drawing.

The Phantom carefully placed the rug back into position. Dr. Blake, busy with his instruments, had not seen what the Phantom was doing.

Getting to his feet, the Phantom's keen eyes swept over the room and paused at the writing desk. Ink on the victim's hands indicated he had been using a pen. In another moment the Phantom had discovered the letter Mallory had been writing.

The Phantom was studying the body of the former movie star when there was a knock on the door.

"It's Cotesworth," the sheriff's voice announced from outside.

The Phantom let him in.

"You have a couple of occupants for your cell, at any rate," he commented.

"And mighty proud of it, too, sir," Cotesworth beamed. "But they wouldn't talk—just as I thought. I came over to see if I could help here."

"Got your car handy?" the Phantom asked. "I'll want to go to Dr. Blake's house for my clothes. These rags of Don Mallory's are ready to fall off me."

He left the room, and Perry Dixon stopped him just outside the room.

"If you are going back to the Luana estates, I'd like to come along," he said. "I know all this killing stems from there and I'm not going to sit idly by while more murders are committed. I may not be a detective, but I might stumble onto something."

"Come along," the Phantom invited. "I am going back as soon as I can change clothing. Incidentally, Mr. Dixon, just what do you know about the shooting of Mallory?"

"Very little," Dixon answered. "I was in my room, dozing, when I heard shots—three of them, I think. I thought at first that a car had backfired, then I realized I had heard a gun. I ran into the hall. Nobody was there, but I did hear someone running down the steps. I saw the door to your room ajar, looked in, and there he was—Mallory. Though, of course, I didn't recognize him at once."

"Did you try to stop the killer you heard going down the steps?"

"I telephoned the desk, but nobody was

there. I ran down myself. Fifty murderers could have passed through that lobby without being seen. This isn't exactly a New York hotel, Phantom."

"I know. Well—I'll be glad to have your company. Any theories, Dixon?"

"No—not one. About the identity of the murderer, that is. But I do feel rather certain of another fact. I think this murderer will hardly stop now. He may think Jackson or Ross or even I know where Mallory hid that money."

"Perhaps," the Phantom agreed. "However, you're wrong in part. You indicate the killer may think three people know the secret. That isn't so. He may believe two people do—because of those three men you mentioned, one is the murderer."

Dixon gulped and swallowed hard. "I see what you mean. I'm suspected, too. Well, I'm innocent, so I have no fear, but I'd certainly not enjoy having the murderer pick on me."

"Wait just a few minutes," the Phantom told Cotesworth when he was on the sidewalk outside the hotel. "I've got a phone call to make." He almost overlooked it.

He returned to the hotel, called New York, and talked to Steve Huston. And what he learned from the red-headed reporter made him grim and determined when he finally stalked out to the street where Sheriff Cotesworth and Perry Dixon were waiting.

"Drop me at Dr. Blake's home first," he said to Cotesworth. "Then back to your office, Sheriff, before we head for Luana."

CHAPTER XVII PHANTOM'S INNING



ABOUT half an hour later, the Phantom was in close conversation with Cotesworth. Perry Dixon sat uncomfortably waiting in the hallway. Since he had seen Mallory lying dead he had been growing more and more nervous.

"So you can readily see," the Phantom went on, continuing with what

he had been saying to the sheriff, "that your cell room is too small for what I have in mind. A bank, however, is a perfect prison. Its windows are barred, and the doors built purposely strong. I'm sure we can work it."

"I'll do my part." Cotesworth grinned broadly. "Sounds real interesting."

The Phantom nodded and stood up, ready now for the trip to the Luana estates in Sheriff Cotesworth's car.

Perry Dixon accompanied him.

"I intend to do my level best to find the man who killed Mallory," Dixon said, as they drove off. "He must be captured before he can do any more damage. And I, for one, don't intend to sit around and wait for him to strike first."

"The more people hunting him, the better," the Phantom approved. "Where will I drop you? At your house?"

"Please," Dixon said.

They passed the house in which Don Mallory had been held prisoner. It was not the Alyn home, which the Phantom had at first believed might be the place where the old man had been taken. Dixon said that this house belonged to a movie star, now dead. The killer had apparently chosen it for this reason. There was less chance of anyone's prowling through the place than in any of the others, with all this new interest in them that had been aroused.

"Take care now," the Phantom warned Dixon when he let the movie man off in front of his own place. "Lock doors and windows. Make anyone who knocks identify himself and even so, don't take any chances. The murderer may very well be someone you trust."

"Phantom," Dixon said, "do you really believe that Mallory hid that money, then lost his memory, and that the money stayed hidden for all these years? And that then his memory returned and he came to New York for help?"

"I certainly do," the Phantom said, with a tightening of his lips. "Mallory was wounded and kidnaped before he could talk in New York. The killer wanted to get at that cache before anyone else did. Once he had Mallory a prisoner he even tortured the actor for information, but didn't get it. Mallory told me that much before he was killed."

"But not where the money was hidden," Dixon sighed.

"No—because he didn't trust even me. . . . Here you are, Mr. Dixon. Snoop around all you like, but be careful. That is—unless you're the killer."

Dixon laughed dryly as he turned away, and quickly disappeared into his huge old mansion. Candlelight was flickering through the windows as the Phantom drove away.

He stopped his car about a quarter of a mile from Nancy Alyn's mansion. He left it there and made his cautious way toward the rear of the big house. The guards were still around, and this time the back door was securely locked—to everyone except the Phantom who was well-equipped to get past anything short of a bank vault.

The lock gave way under his manipulations. The brass burglar chain holding the door he also partly sawed, partly cut with an exceedingly sharp cutting tool.

The house was silent, since it was early morning. Without making a sound, the Phantom reached Anne Alyn's room and scratched on the panels until he heard her whispered query. Then she opened the door and he stepped inside.

"Never mind who I look like," he told her. "I'm the Phantom all right. We've work to do. I need your help. First though, I must be sure just how far I can trust you. Remember what happened at the pavilion? You told Henderson who I was and where he could find me."

"I had to," Anne said frantically. "Scotty had followed me there. He told me if I didn't tell the truth, he'd wire the newspapers and give them the whole story about my mother. And you must remember that I told you my mother came first. And my father—who knows nothing of all this. It would break his heart to know how my mother has been suffering, and no telling what he would do. He would be justified—oh, he would!—but he must be protected from becoming a murderer.

"I love them both—but in all I do down here, my mother still comes first. Anyhow, I—I thought you could take care of yourself. I didn't wilfully betray you, if that's what you mean. You can trust me. I'll do anything to help."

"All right," the Phantom said. "If this works, you'll no longer have to be afraid of Henderson. Now about Kurt Otley. How much faith do you have in him?"

"I—don't know," Anne confessed. "For months he has been begging me to marry him. But naturally, with all this happening, I couldn't consider it—I couldn't think of marrying anybody."

"But once things quieted down you might." The Phantom grinned. "Now tell me where Scotty Henderson sleeps."

"Two rooms down the hall on the other side," she said.

The Phantom tiptoed over to a small desk. He wrote a note, sealed it in an envelope and looked up at Anne.

"Who is in charge of this gang when Scotty doesn't happen to be around?"

"Why—a man named Leach. They call him Nicky."

The Phantom wrote that name on the envelope and handed it to Anne.

"Wait for one hour after I leave, then take a walk, find Nicky Leach and give him this letter. Say someone from town, riding a bicycle brought it and you took it. These mugs would know whether or not a car had stopped here."

"But I'd be supposed to give Scotty any messages that came."

"Scotty," the Phantom told her, "won't be here. Not any more. All set now?"

"All set," she replied unsteadily. "I don't

know what this is all about, but in one hour Leach gets the note."

The Phantom nodded and left, to hurry down the hall to Scotty Henderson's room. The door was not locked and he was inside the room in a flash. Henderson was in bed, breathing heavily. The Phantom bent over and shook him.

Henderson opened his eyes.

"Hello, Scotty," the Phantom said.

His fist collided with Henderson's jaw and the blackmailer's head fell back on the pillow. The Phantom pulled him out of bed, affixed an effective gag, then draped the unconscious man over his shoulder.

Some ten minutes later he was stowing Henderson into the seat of his car. The guards had been evaded and things were working well.

THE Phantom drove to Sheriff Cotesworth's office. Henderson was thrust into the cell with the Qualen brothers and Sheriff Cotesworth was bubbling over with joy.

"We're all set," he told the Phantom. "I've deputized half a dozen good men. Are you sure, sir, this business we planned will come off all right?"

"No reason why it shouldn't," the Phantom said. "We'd better go down and see that things are ready. I've an idea Scotty Henderson's men will be arriving in town at any time now."

The Phantom and Cotesworth were lying prone on the hotel roof which overlooked the empty bank when the first contingent of Henderson's men appeared. One by one they slipped up to the front door. The first man found it open and went in. The others followed until all were inside. Then six men, with rifles, appeared out of the gloom. The bank door was slammed shut. Cotesworth laughed in high glee.

"That does it! We've got 'em all, but I still don't see how it was done."

"The trick was so simple it couldn't fail," the Phantom explained. "I hijacked Henderson, wrote a note signed with his name, telling his first lieutenant to assemble every man and come at once to the old bank. That Don Mallory had not hidden his money on the estates, but had stowed it away in the vaults of the deserted bank. They were to come and help him get it, enter the bank one at a time and wait until Henderson appeared to tell them where to start digging."

"And you're sure Henderson isn't the man who killed Mallory?"

"I wish he was," the Phantom said. "No, there were two separate drives to get this money. One by Henderson, who was tipped off by Anne Alyn's mother. The other by someone who attended that garden party in New York. This man knew that Don Mal-

lory was not dead, but must only have recently learned that he was alive, and known down here as Crazy Slade. He or his men must have attacked Mallory and injured him so that his memory returned. But, somehow, Mallory got away from them and, knowing then who he was, he realized he needed help. So he went to New York where he believed he could find friends."

"Why didn't he come to me?" Cotesworth grumbled. "I'd have been glad to lend him a hand."

"He couldn't, Sheriff," and briefly told about the letter Mallory had written which he, the Phantom, had found, and the information it contained. "Until just a short time before Mallory was killed he was under the impression that he had murdered Crazy Slade. What actually happened was that the same killer who is at work today was after Mallory's money those many years ago, and killed Slade, who got in his way. The killer left hurriedly, then, meaning to return for Mallory later, when the actor recovered consciousness, for the murderer had knocked him out."

"But Mallory prevented that himself, all unknowing. When he awoke, with his memory gone, and found Crazy Slade's body, he thought he had killed Slade. He changed clothes with the corpse, and tried to hide it. It must have been a shock to the killer when that body you found in the swamp was identified—through the clothes and personal effects—as Don Mallory's body."

"Probably, after that, the killer had given up all thought of ever finding the

money until somehow, recently, he must have learned there was a man hanging around Luana, known as Crazy Slade. He came to investigate, knowing that long ago he had killed Slade, and"—the Phantom spread his hands—"you know the rest."

"Well"—Cotesworth shrugged—"I got me three prisoners in my little cell, but I think I could squeeze in another. Guess I'd better go down and see that those black-mailers can't get out of the bank. That was a good idea, turning it into a jail until I could have them transferred to the county building."

"I'm going back to Luana," the Phantom said. "When I return, I'll have the killer for you—or I won't come back."

CHAPTER XVIII

HIDDEN FORTUNE



THE Phantom found Anne Alyn and Kurt Otley on the porch of the big house. Every one of Henderson's men had gone into town on the supposed orders from Henderson. Anne told the Phantom, she now felt free.

"You can stay free." the Phantom said.

"Cause Henderson is locked up and so are his men. Now wait—I realize he can say something which may be detrimental to your

(Continued on page 72)

Next Issue's Novel: MURDER OF A MARIONETTE

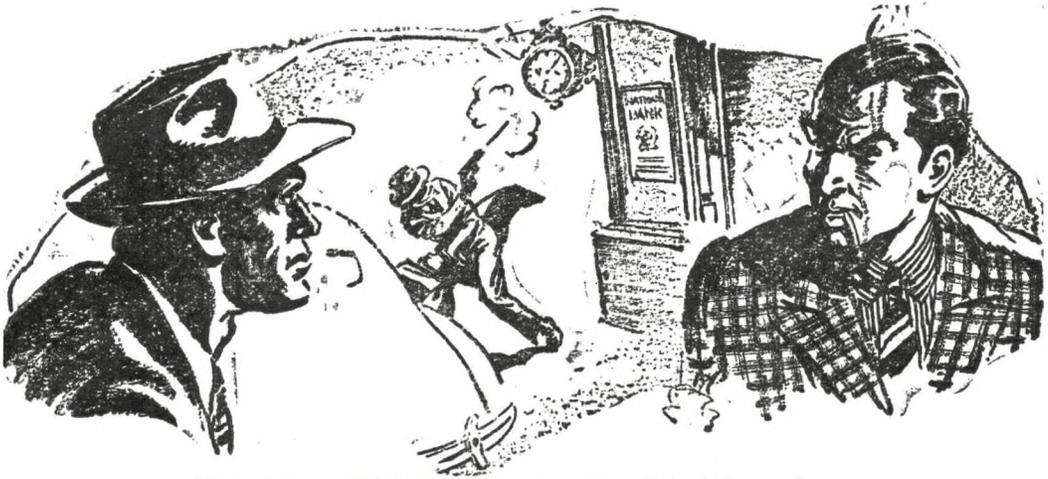
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By MURRAY LEINSTER

Nolan passes the hat around—and collects a killer!

AFTER the tenth man in succession had given him money and gone away, relieved, Detective-sergeant Nolan was definitely disappointed.

"Murphy," he said gloomily, "it looks like it ain't goin' to work!"

Murphy was the turnkey in charge of the detention cells at Headquarters. He merely grunted, disappeared, and brought in Limpy Morgan.

Limpy was apprehensive. Nolan, though, nodded at him with something like an apologetic air.

"I'm sorry, Limpy," he said ruefully. "It was dumb, pinchin' you, but we got a crime wave on our hands. Maybe it's lucky we haven't hung somebody by accident, let alone makin' a wrong pinch."

"Yeah?" said Limpy uncertainly.

"Yeah," repeated Nolan. "You know all about that First and Merchants' stickup yesterday. That guy had nerve, an' he got away clean. That don't look so good for us cops."

Limpy settled uneasily in the chair by Nolan's desk. "Uh-huh," he admitted, without conviction.

"And we had a murder turn up too," said Nolan. "And a neckin' couple saw somebody dump a car into that old

quarry on the Turnertown Pike, droppin' it into forty feet of water. That's coverin' up somethin'! We're runnin' around in circles."

Limpy licked his lips.

"Yeah. . . . That bank job was pretty neat. You got any idea who pulled it?"

NOLAN grinned more ruefully still. "Looked just like a Petey Lahnes job, didn't it, him shooting up the big clock an' all? But we're not lookin' for Petey. That's how you happened to be jugged."

"Look here!" protested Limpy. "I got a alibi, for when that bank job was pulled—"

"Hold it," said Nolan. "I didn't mean for you to be pinched at all. I wrote a memo that I wanted to see you, and somebody took it wrong an' they pinched you. But I just wanted to ask you something, you bein' a friend of Petey's."

"I ain't seen him in a long time," said Limpy agitated. "I—"

"I know," agreed Nolan. "Sure! He's got a bad record, and he was in the pen until three weeks ago, an' this job has his name on it. But listen, Limpy. He didn't pull it. He just got out of the

pen. He held out to breathe free air again. Then he caved.

"He's in a bad way. He's broke an' he needs his friends to help him. He's got a wife, if you remember. I'm tryin' to help him. Can you come through with some cash for him? Call it for his family, if you don't want to admit that he's a friend of yours."

Limpy squirmed, and then stiffened.

"Say!" he said with a start. "Is this straight?"

"Pretty straight," assured Nolan. "How much do you kick in?"

Limpy hesitated, and then fished a roll of bills out of his pocket. He handed one to Nolan.

"I'll give you a receipt," said Nolan.

He began to write. Limpy blinked. Then he peeled off two more banknotes.

"Take this too," he said painfully. "Kinda new idea, a cop collectin' for a—uh—guy like Petey, with that bank—"

"He didn't do it," repeated Nolan. He gave Limpy the receipt. "I'm tryin' to figure out why somebody would dump a car in that quarry last night. You can't tell what's back of it. It worries me. An' that murder— We fished a fella out of the river. He'd been shot and dumped overboard with weights tied to him. The ropes came loose. We got a regular crime wave, Limpy!"

"Me, I don't know a thing," said Limpy earnestly. "Uh—you through with me? I ain't charged with anything?"

"Sure. Not a thing," said Nolan. "I'm sorry about the pinch, Limpy. It was a mistake. An' thanks, for Petey."

Limpy went out, infinitely relieved like the ten men before him. Nolan scowled at his back. He pushed a button and Murphy came from the back of the building. Nolan drummed on his desk.

"It wasn't him either," he said curtly. "Let's try Sammy Trevor. He's just a punk, but even punks sometimes think they got a bright idea. Trot him in, Murphy."

Murphy went ponderously back to the detention cells. He came back with Sammy Trevor, who regarded Nolan with a cold and fishy eye and an air of defiance.

"I'm havin' a talk with all of Petey Lahnes' friends I can get brought in to

see me," said Nolan heavily. "You fit in, don't you?"

"What're you tryin' to do?" demanded Sammy Trevor. "Tryin' to tie me in with that punk? I never had nothin' to do with him!"

"Okay, then," said Nolan. "This ain't official. I'm just tryin' to find out—"

"Tryin' to find somebody who'll stool on him, huh?" demanded Sammy pugnaciously. "Listen, guy! Go somewheres else! Petey Lahnes pulled that bank job, an' you know it! Nobody else was ever dumb enough to finish a stick-up by shootin' holes in a clock.

"That's his trademark. He's dumb. Plenty dumb! But not dumb enough to stick around town after knockin' off the bank! He had a car, didn't he? He's beat it! You're wastin' time tryin' to get a line on him here!"

"I'm not tryin' to get a line on him," said Nolan mildly.

"Then what're you talkin' about?" snarled Sammy, "askin' if he was a friend of mine?"

THE telephone rang by Nolan's elbow. He picked up the instrument.

"Nolan talkin'." He listened, nodded approvingly. "Swell! Just what I was hopin'. It fits in perfect. Okay, guy! You know what to do from now on."

Sammy Trevor laughed harshly as Nolan hung up.

"Bright guys, you cops!" he said scornfully. "Everything open-and-shut, and you ain't even tryin' to find Petey, when he practically signed the job."

"Yeah," said Nolan, "but it wasn't Petey. Not really. Listen, Sammy. He just got out of stir, and it broke him. He's through. He's finished. I sent him up for this last stretch, but I feel sorry for Petey. I'm tryin' to raise some money to help him out. He's got a wife an' kids, too. I'm tryin' to raise a sort of fund. How about chippin' in a few bucks to help him along?"

Sammy Trevor's normal look of cynical shrewdness deepened, and mingled with triumphant scorn until all his features looked sharp and spiteful.

"Takin' up a collection, huh?" he asked. "Because Petey's sick an' just outa stir an' can't help himself! Gonna get him a doctor an' nurses, huh?"

"Somethin' like that," said Nolan. "Do you chip in?"

"Rats, no!" snapped Sammy Trevor triumphantly. "I'm on to you! I always knew you were a crook an' a grafter, Nolan, an' now I can prove it! You're a dirty crook, Nolan!"

He elaborated upon the theme with vicious satisfaction, shaking in his triumphant scorn. Nolan pushed the button on his desk. Murphy appeared.

"You heard 'im," said Nolan. "Put him back in the cooler."

Sammy Trevor laughed.

"I got a lawyer comin'," he said zestfully. "The newspapers'll like this story. Detective-sergeant Nolan takin' up a collection he says is for a punk who's sick, when that punk is burnin' up the roads with forty grand from a stick-up! You'll like it, too, in print—I don't think!"

Nolan regarded Sammy inscrutably.

"Maybe. But Petey is sick, Sammy. Plenty sick. He didn't pull the stick-up, either. Somebody else pulled it an' put Petey's signature on it. Showin' off with a gun an' the big clock in the bank. It looked like Petey, all right, but I've been tellin' my story to everybody in town I thought might be dirty enough to frame him, an' you're the only one who didn't swallow it."

"I knew better," snarled Trevor.

"Yeah," said Nolan. "I guess you did. Funny, ain't it?"

Sammy Trevor snarled again triumphantly—and stopped. He suddenly went white.

"You were sure he went off somewhere in that car he stole," said Nolan. "Or so you said. But y'remember that phone call just now? Some cops have been divin' in an old quarry up on the Turnertown Pike.

"They got a cable on a car that somebody dumped in there last night, an' what do you think they found? It was the car the stick-up man used for his getaway, after he took the bank. That's funny, too, Sammy."

"What the devil—"

"The really funny thing, though," added Nolan, "was that Petey Lahnes was workin' up in the machine-shop at the pen, an' he had a accident. His hand got gashed. It helped get his term cut down. Y'know, he couldn't use a gun. He couldn't even drive a car. That's why I figured it musta been somebody else that knocked off the bank."

SAMMY TREVOR made a noise which tried to be a snarl, but became much too shrill. He was terribly white.

"An' to top it all," said Nolan conversationally, "Petey drifted ashore this mornin', downstream. He was two days dead an' there was bullets in him, an' the ropes you'd tied weights to were danglin'. But the weights had worked loose. We didn't know who'd done it, or where to start. But I think I know now."

"Y'crazy?" gasped Sammy, y'crazy!"

He burst into hysterical profanity which threatened to become a babble.

"Y'know," said Nolan suddenly, "somethin' else occurs to me. You ain't got a prison record, and you've got a license to carry a gun. Maybe you've been waitin' for a good set-up for a big haul, eh? The gat was on you when y'were picked up for questionin', too.

"Y'know, Sammy, I think I'm goin' to have that gun checked with the bullets in Petey Lahnes. Maybe I can even get a check-up with the bullets you shot off in the bank. What d'you think I'm going to find out, Sammy? Will a ballistics man tell me you did both jobs?"

Sammy Trevor squealed. Literally. He made a crazy, utterly hopeless bolt for the door, uttering animal noises of terror and rage in sheer frustration. But Murphy collared him. He carried Sammy Trevor back to the detention cells.

Presently Murphy returned.

"He's goin' to crack," he reported scornfully. "Them smart guys, they always crack when somethin' breaks wrong. He'll be howlin' for a chance to confess before night."

Detective-sergeant Nolan nodded. He did not answer because he was counting money. Quite a respectable stack of bills, gathered from at least eleven friends of Petey Lahnes. When he had finished, Nolan fumbled in his own pocket and added all the bills he found there to the pile.

"Yeah, he'll crack," he said absently. "His kind always does. Pretty certain his gun is the one we were lookin' for. Say, Murphy. Who's goin' off duty that'll take this cash to Petey's wife an' tell her his friends got it together for her? I wouldn't want to take it myself. You see, it was me that sent Petey away for this last stretch of his, an' his wife's got a hate on me for it."



Rocky's hand came out with a gat. "Keep your trap shut"

STRICTLY AGIN THE LAW

By **BENTON BRADEN**

Big-time bank robbers may think they can put it over on a hick constable—but they've never met Jed Holsum before!

THE sedan was making fast time on the pike north of Macon Center but "Rocky" Krytz was not at all satisfied.

"Step on it, Lumpy!" he said tensely. "That's a posse behind us and no doubt about it. And they're gainin' on us. You got to get more speed out of this crate."

"I'm pushin' her just as fast as she'll go, Rocky," "Lumpy" Jarking muttered. "If

that posse is gainin' on us we'll just have to get ready to start gunnin' 'em when they catch up. How far back are they?"

Rocky turned his head again and looked back. This pike led up and down rolling hills. It was only when they reached the crest of a hill that he could get a glimpse of the three cars that were in hot pursuit.

"Two or three miles," he answered, when he caught sight of the cars again and made

a guess. "This is a bad break. I thought we was goin' to have a nice start, thought we'd be ten or fifteen miles away before they could get after us. But they must have had some sort of signal or alarm in that bank. Some rick started shootin' at us before we got fifty yards away. Then it didn't take 'em long to pile into cars and come after us."

Both men scowled bitterly. It had looked like an easy job when they had walked into the First National Bank of Macon Center. The few customers and the cashier of the bank hadn't caused them any trouble at all. It had only taken them minutes to stuff about twenty thousand dollars in currency into a bag, give a final and dire warning, and back out of the bank.

They had coolly walked to their car, got in, and driven away. But somebody had been tipped that a robbery was in progress. A rifle had opened up on them. Rocky, looking back, could see men running in the street some blocks back. Now, out on the open road, there was a posse in cars behind them, and the posse was slowly closing the gap between them.

"Maybe we'd better take a chance on a side road," Rocky muttered. "That posse can only see us when we go over the top of a hill. They might miss us and go straight on if we turned off."

"That's our best bet," Lumpy agreed. "We'll try it at the next . . . Hey, look! What's that?"

Both men blinked as the sedan sped down a long, gentle slope. There was a cross-road just ahead of them. A procession of about fifteen cars was proceeding along that road at a moderate rate of speed. Lumpy spotted the long black car that was second in the column.

"It's a funeral procession!" Lumpy exclaimed. "See the hearse? Some farmer is bein' buried. Say, that gives me an idea. I'm gonna slow down. If we could get into that funeral procession without that posse spottin' us we might fool 'em. They wouldn't figure on that. They'd just glance at the procession and figure we'd gone over the next hill ahead—straight on. If we can just get the right break we're set."

THEY got the break. When they reached the cross-road just about half of the cortege had crossed it. The cars were not crowding each other and there was room for Lumpy to make his maneuver. He braked the car hard as he came up, then turned his wheel to the left, swung the sedan in between two cars of the procession. It was a close squeeze but he made it without touching either of the other cars.

"We made it," Rocky exulted. "And no one in the posse could have seen it. Now

I'll keep my eyes open and see what the posse does when it reaches the cross-road."

Rocky grinned about three minutes later. The procession was well away from the cross-road now. Those three cars in the posse didn't even hesitate. They kept right on the pike and sped on north. Rocky watched until they went out of sight over a hill.

"It's okay, Lumpy," he chuckled. "They fell for it slick as a whistle. They may go twenty miles before they tumble that we have ditched them. Now all we got to do is stick in this procession and nobody will ever suspect that we ain't some of the mourners."

The cortege continued its peaceful journey. The road began to wind into a wooded section. It was a narrow dirt road and there was no other traffic on it at the time. Finally they came out of the woods. Two hundred yards ahead and at the right side of the road there was a white wooden church. In the rear of it the white stones of a cemetery showed.

"This is where they're goin'," Rocky said. "Some farmer died, like I said, and they're havin' the funeral here at this country church, to plant him in that graveyard just behind it. Now here's what we'll do. We'll drive right in there with 'em. We'll park our sedan and go right in the church with 'em. Nobody ever asks any questions at a funeral. And if any officers come prowlin' down this road they'll never dream that our car is parked out here and we are calmly sittin' in the church while some preacher spouts off on the good qualities of the late departed. Stick right with 'em. We can't miss on this."

Lumpy nodded and obeyed. He drove right into the churchyard and parked the sedan inconspicuously with the other cars. They stood with solemn faces while the casket was carried into the church. Then they went in with the others and sat down in a pew that was well to the rear. No one seemed to pay them the slightest attention. Three women stood by the organ and began to sing a hymn. When they finished the preacher made a long prayer. It was evident that this was going to be a long service. That didn't displease the two bandits.

Rocky nudged Lumpy with his elbow when the preacher began to deliver the funeral sermon.

"I don't care how long he spouts off," Rocky whispered. "By the time we get out of here nobody will ever think of us still bein' so close to Macon Center. All we'll have to do is head south and stick to side roads. It'll be a cinch."

The preacher obliged them by being exceptionally long-winded. For an hour and a quarter he quoted from the Scriptures and

expounded on the sterling qualities of the deceased. Then the funeral was concluded by the singing of two more hymns.

Even then, Rocky and Lumpy were given still more time. The whole congregation moved from the church to the burial grounds in the rear. Rocky and Lumpy moved to the side of the church and watched from a short distance. They waited there until the graveside services were almost over.

"We've stalled as long as we can," Rocky decided. "We better get in our car and beat it. Some of those people, now that the funeral is all over, will get too sociable. They'll probably want to know who we are. Come on. Let's get out on the road before they get back to their cars."

They turned and walked back to the parking space. They didn't see anyone until they reached their car. Then a tall, lanky man in a suit that fit him too tightly appeared in front of them. He had a long, solemn face and an Adam's apple that bobbed up and down as he spoke.

"Just a minute," he said. "I want to talk to you fellers."

"We ain't got no time to talk," Rocky said shortly. "We're in a hurry."

"Maybe you ain't in such a hurry as you think you are," the tall man said pointedly. "You stay right where you are. I'll tell you when you can go."

"What's the idea?" Rocky asked nastily. "Who are you?"

"I'm Jed Holsum. The lawfully elected constable of this township. I don't recollect seein' you fellers around here before. You don't live around here, do you?"

"No, we don't," Rocky admitted. "What of it? There ain't no law against our attendin' this funeral, is there?"

"No, I don't reckon there is," Constable Holsum conceded slowly.

"Then leave us alone. We got an important meeting to attend in about an hour. We ain't got no time to waste. Let's go, Lumpy."

"You ain't leavin' just yet!" the constable said with authority. "I'm sworn to enforce the laws and I'm goin' to do it. I can take you right into Macon Center and put you in jail. And, everything considered, I think that's just what I'll do. Maybe you won't be so smart aleck when you see the bars on your cell."

"You'll have to make another guess, Constable!" Rocky snapped as his right hand came out with a gun in it. "Take a look at this gat, Constable. Now you get right into the back seat of that sedan when Lumpy unlocks the doors and behave yourself. If you don't you're liable to wind up as a permanent resident of that underground hotel behind the church—just like that guy that

was just planted. Keep your trap shut and do as we tell you—or you'll get it!"

THE constable's mouth dropped open as he stared at the gun and the snarling face behind it. His Adam's apple went up and down fast as he gulped in surprise. Lumpy jumped over and unlocked the doors of the sedan. They had locked it because they had left the money in the car. The constable didn't have any chance to argue the question. He got into the back seat. Rocky got in with him, holding his gun ready for quick action.

Lumpy took his place at the wheel and backed the car out, turned around, and drove out to the road. They started west in the same direction the procession had been headed.

"Take it easy, Lumpy," Rocky directed. "Don't drive too fast. When you hit a road that looks like it ain't traveled much, turn south. They'll all figure that we went on north somewhere so we shouldn't have any trouble at all. You just sit there and keep still, Constable. You start yappin' and I'll crack you over the head with this gat. Behave yourself and we'll let you out in some quiet spot when we're sure we're in the clear."

The constable didn't argue the point. He sat quietly and only glanced occasionally at the gun that menaced his side. Rocky was careful about the way he held that weapon. He had too much experience to give a country constable any chance to grab it.

Constable Jed Holsum's face began to assume a red hue. A slow-thinking man, his anger was equally slow to mount. But this to him was a terrible disgrace. The good citizens of Lakeside Township had elected him constable and he had failed them. It made him mad to think of it. His face got still redder. He was gradually achieving a "slow burn."

After two miles Lumpy turned south on a narrow dirt road. It was smooth, and Lumpy rolled the car along easily at thirty miles an hour. The road made a little turn and the car rolled down a gentle slope to a small wooden bridge. Lumpy didn't even slow for that little bridge. The car rolled onto it without a jolt. But it was different when the car rolled off the other end of the bridge. The approach had washed out a little there and the car bounced and bounced hard.

Rocky wasn't expecting that. He left his seat and went up in the air. Instinctively he threw out his arms to grab for support. Constable Holsum was better acquainted with the roads of Lakeside Township than Rocky was. Only yesterday he had phoned County Commissioner Rankin and urged him to have that approach fixed up. He was

glad now that the commissioner hadn't acted too quickly. The constable didn't go up in the air. He was set for that heavy jolt.

His left shot out and grabbed Rocky's gun as Rocky was descending. His big bony right hand crunched against Rocky's jaw at the exact moment that Rocky's pants settled on the cushions again. Rocky went out cold.

The constable leaned forward as he jerked the gun from Rocky's hand. He put the muzzle of the gun just behind Lumpy's ear.

"I reckon you'd better stop this vehicle right now," he said. "If you don't I'll have to hit you and then stop it myself."

Lumpy had turned halfway around as he sensed the commotion in back of him. He had had to hang onto the wheel when the car had bounced. He didn't have a chance to go for a gat before that steel was behind his ear. He gritted his teeth in disgust as he brought the sedan to a stop. The constable warily took two guns from Lumpy, then got another one from Rocky's shoulder holster. He made Lumpy get out of the car and drag Rocky to the road by his feet.

It was a minute before Rocky sat up and stared stupidly about him.

"Now I ain't goin' to give you no chance to get the best of me again," Constable Holsum said sternly. "We won't try to do any drivin'. It's only eight miles from here to Macon Center. We'll walk it. You two can walk along about ten feet in front of me so I can keep my eyes on you. Get up, you. Move out!"

They walked a mile, then reached an intersecting main highway that was paved with concrete. They had gone only a few hundred yards on that road when two cars roared up. Men leaped from them and ran toward the constable and his prisoners. The constable looked surprised when he saw Sheriff Duckworth. And there was Henry Alden, cashier of the First National Bank.

"He's got 'em!" Alden cried. "That's the pair!"

"How'd you do it, Jed?" Sheriff Duckworth asked excitedly. "How'd you catch 'em?"

"To tell the truth I was kind of forced into it," Jed said, looking a little puzzled at the men who were crowding around him. "They made me get in the car with 'em. Had a gun on me. I reversed the picture when we hit a bump on that approach to Mud Creek Bridge. Then I just decided I'd walk 'em on in."

"But how did you tumble to 'em, Jed?" the sheriff asked eagerly. "How did you spot them in the first place?"

"Why, I caught them violatin' the law, Sheriff," Jed explained. "You know, you

[Turn page]

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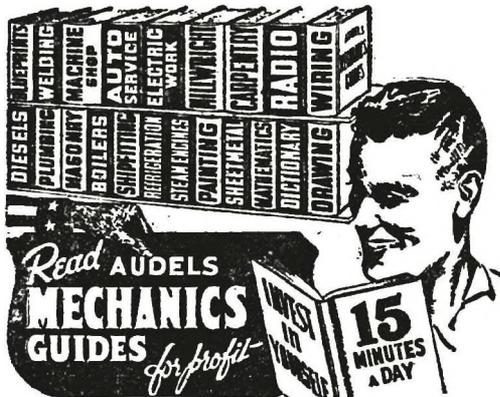
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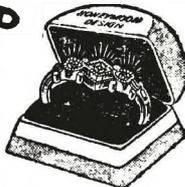
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told me when I was first elected that I should keep an eye on funerals at Lakeside Church. So I was bringin' up the rear of the Jim Tucker procession when these fellers showed up in their sedan. They violated the law. I didn't intend to arrest them in the first place. I was only goin' to give them a warnin'. But they got mean about it and one of 'em pulled a gun on me.

"Even yet I ain't told 'em what I'm takin' 'em in for. When they joined that procession they should have waited for it to go by and then come in as the last car. But these fellers almost hit one of the other cars when they butted into the middle of the procession. You know what you told me, Sheriff. You told me that bustin' into the middle of a funeral procession was strictly agin the law."

MANSIONS OF DESPAIR

(Continued from page 64)

mother. But neither Scotty nor his men will talk for publication for a few days. Meanwhile, it's up to you, Otley."

Otley nodded. "I've thought of the same thing many times, but it couldn't be worked unless Henderson was temporarily throttled. I'll have the story of Anne's mother in tomorrow's column. I'll tell it in my next broadcast—how she has been made an innocent victim. Which happens to be the truth. By the time Henderson talks, his story will be worthless."

"Exactly," the Phantom agreed. "Now I'll give you another story break."

Otley grinned. "But I thought you suspected me of killing that New York police officer—along with everyone else with movie connections who was at that garden party."

"You are not suspected any longer," the Phantom told him. "I know who the killer is. But first let's find the money Don Mallory cached away these many years ago."

"You know where that is?" Anne cried. "I looked in the cellar a little while ago. Mother told Scotty that Mallory may have hidden his money in the cellar of this house. And when I saw the cellar, I knew he had."

"Let's have a look," the Phantom said. They took candles and hurried to the cellar. In it were many huge solid cement mounds, all of which had been chipped away, in part by Henderson's men. The Phantom laughed.

"And they say crooks don't like to work for their money. Believe me, those men labored—and for nothing. You see, Mallory was a cautious man. He created probable hiding places in three or four of these mansions so if anyone hunted the money, they'd have to spend a long time finding out he had tricked them. Come on—we're going to

that pavilion where Henderson trapped me."

The Phantom, Anne and Otley moved silently through the night until they reached the pavilion.

"Mallory concealed his money in this pavilion," the Phantom explained in a low voice. "The more obvious hiding places in the mansions were to throw crooks off. As he was dying, Mallory scratched a crude drawing of the pavilion on the floor and covered it with a rug. I discovered it.

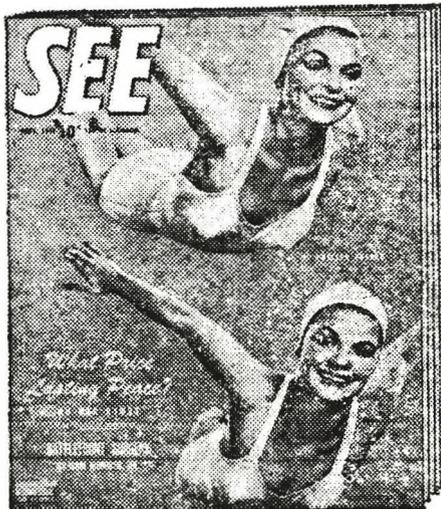
"Otley, see if you can remove that cement fish's head which decorates the top of the stairway. I'll try the one on the other side. I'm sure it can be removed because Mallory raided his fortune before he went to New York, and if he'd found it necessary to dig for the stuff, we'd see signs of it."

Minutes later Otley gave a low cry. The Phantom and Anne hurried to the columnist's side. Otley had succeeded in moving the ornamental fish's head atop the cement guide post beside the steps. The Phantom finished the job of removing it and turned the ray of his small flash into the hollow shell of cement.

There lay Don Mallory's money, still held together by the wrappings of the bank which had been defunct for so many years. It was obvious now that the cache had been opened recently and this accounted for the money Mallory had been carrying when he reached New York. There were boxes of jewels also—a small, easily convertible fortune because of which several men had died, and a blackmailer had risked much to lay his hands on. For this a man once honest had turned crook and killer.

[Turn page]

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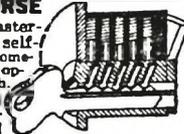
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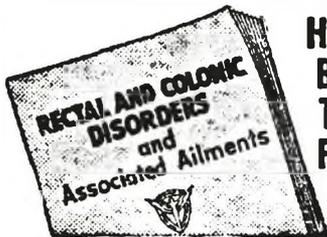
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"We'll get the sheriff out here to take charge of this without delay." The Phantom replaced the heavy fish's head of cement. "I don't even know whose fortune it is now, but I do know it won't fall into the hands of Mallory's killer. Don't mention that we found it. Incidentally, Otley, where were you for the last three hours?"

Otley winced. "I thought I'd passed beyond suspicion. However, I have an alibi. I was with Paul Ross, trying to get him to give me the whole story of what happened when those mansions were deserted. Jackson came in and stayed with us for a while also."

"Thank you," the Phantom said. "We'll go over to Jackson's place."

PAUL ROSS and Perry Dixon were both in Jackson's huge mansion when the Phantom arrived with Otley and Anne. The Phantom led them into the spacious living room and closed the door.

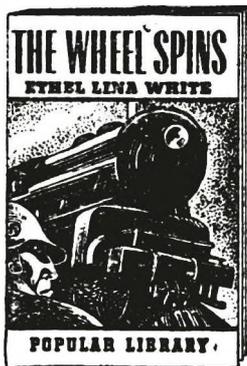
"Well, Phantom," Jackson said nervously, "what brings you here tonight? Don't tell me that, at last, you've discovered who is responsible for all this?"

"Yes, I have," the Phantom answered. "There were two criminal forces at work. One is now out of the picture. The other was headed by a man who is now in this room. His band of crooks was composed of four brothers. Four deadly young men willing to murder for a share in Mallory's fortune. Two of these young men are dead—a pretty object lesson that sometimes easy money is costly. The other two are locked up."

"Now just a moment!" Jackson snapped. "You have directly accused one of us here. It's time you said which one you believe is a killer."

"I intend to," the Phantom said dryly. "Let me begin this way. Some days ago the

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killer came to his estate down here, ostensibly to see about selling it, but in reality to investigate a white-haired old man who had been hanging around the estates for a long time, an old man known as Crazy Slade. The killer had only recently discovered that. He knew the man was not Slade, because long ago he had killed Slade. But he had no more than set eyes on the old man than he knew he was Don Mallory, whom he had believed had been found dead in the swamp twenty years ago. He was quite certain of his identification, because he had known Don Mallory well."

"Which eliminates me," Otley said quickly.

"Quite right." The Phantom inclined his head in a curt nod. "The moment the killer recognized Mallory, he again remembered the fortune Mallory was supposed to have concealed. He needed help to uncover it, and he knew the Qualen family, so he hired the four sons. He set them on the old man to make him tell where his money was cached, in the belief that even an amnesia victim, which he had now discovered Mallory to be, would not have forgotten that.

"Those Qualen boys were not noted for gentleness. They assaulted Mallory, injuring him so badly that his memory returned. He managed to get away from them when they must have left him for a few moments, believing him to be unconscious.

"In some way the killer heard that the supposed Crazy Slade had been seen around the railroad station. He sent one of the Qualens there, and he learned that the old man had purchased a ticket for New York and paid for it with old-type bills. The killer realized then that Mallory had tapped his fortune, and would go to New York to find his old friends. He also cannily realized that the tender attentions of the Qualens must have been instrumental in restoring Mallory's memory, if he knew enough to head for New York. So taking two of the Qualens with him, the killer wangled plane accommodations and beat Mallory to the big city.

"Mallory's closest friends had been you, Jackson, you, Ross, and you, Dixon. All the killer had to do was keep tabs on two of you, and he knew that sooner or later Mallory would show up.

"He did—at the garden party. The Qualen boys were handy, having trailed two of you gentlemen there. The killer contacted them, murdered the policeman who got in his way, and had Mallory kidnaped.

"Scott Henderson appeared down here,

[Turn page]

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then, to confuse the issue. He had been sent by Anne Alyn's mother to get rid of him until after she had made a successful comeback on the screen."

Otley saw that the others did not understand.

"Henderson's a prize heel," he explained. "Anne's mother married him years ago, and he deserted her in less than a month. She heard, on what she thought was good authority, that he was dead. When she married the man who became Anne's father, she believed she was a widow.

"Then, after all this time, and just when she was staging a come-back, Henderson appeared and started to blackmail her, threatening to swear she knew he was alive when she contracted a bigamous marriage, that they had been in communication with each other. Anne's mother foolishly paid, until demands became so high she couldn't.

"I begged her to let me explode the whole mess in my column and gain public sympathy by telling the whole truth. But she was afraid to. Now with Henderson locked up, anything he can say, after my story appears, will be just too bad—for him. Anne's mother can get an annulment of her marriage to him, easily, and marry Anne's father again."

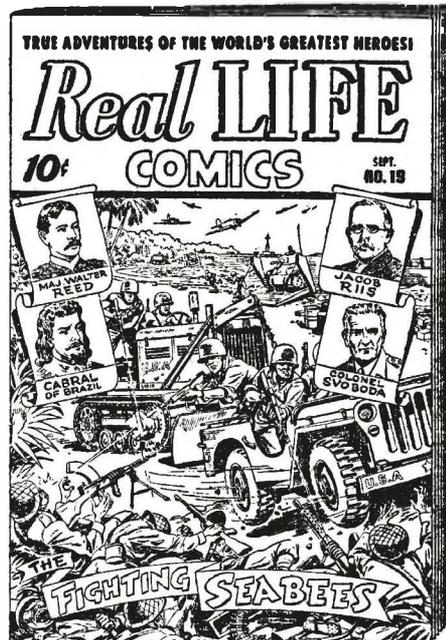
"Henderson won't even know the truth is being told, for a time, at least," the Phantom said grimly. "But now for a worse criminal than Henderson—a murderer."

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DIXON leaped to his feet excitedly. "So when Mallory did regain his memory only a few days ago," he burst out, "the first thing he did was to go looking for the man who had tried to kill him and steal his fortune! Only that man could prove that Mallory hadn't killed Slade. He came looking for—you, Jackson!"

"He came to me as a friend!" Jackson yelled. "I haven't killed anyone!"

"Jackson," the Phantom broke in, "just why did you lie to me about Don Mallory not being in your house? I saw you let him in."

"Mallory made me promise not to tell," Jackson said. "Because he was afraid. Yes, he did come to me. He said he couldn't remember where he'd hidden his money and wanted my help."

"It wasn't Mallory who came to see you," the Phantom said coldly. "It was the murderer, disguised as Mallory. A perfect job,

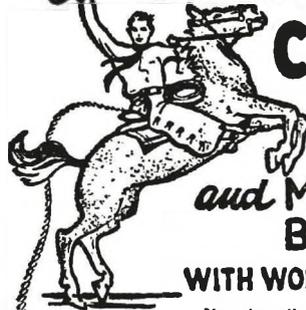
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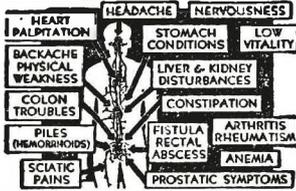
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if it fooled you. Jackson, I'm inclined to believe that both you, and one other man who knew Mallory in the old days, did come down here to aid him—but that is not saying I don't believe his hidden fortune had considerable to do with your interest. However, that is by the way. Right now we have another matter on hand."

His eyes bored into one of the men before him.

"Dixon," he said accusingly, "you could have tricked anyone easily. You've always liked to appear in make-up and fool people."

Dixon's eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to accuse me on flimsy evidence like that?"

"No, I've something to prove your guilt beyond question. First, I looked for an expert archer, who could seize a bow and arrow and shoot it on the spur of the moment. You filled the bill, Dixon. Once, when you were perfecting yourself for the rôle of Robin Hood—which you did not get—you became highly proficient in handling a bow and arrow. No other suspect had such experience.

"Also, when Mallory was murdered, Otley, Jackson and Ross had alibis. They were here together. You were at the hotel, and you killed Mallory as a last resort, when you couldn't find his money, and he recognized you as the man who had been trying to, and had injured him so terribly. You and the Qualens tried to kill me in a New York subway after you learned I was investigating. You did not want me to come here. You wore a disguise to make you look like Mallory then, also.

"You are the only one of the suspects who was here in Florida just before Mallory put in his appearance in New York. I discovered that through contacts I have in New York. I first suspected you, on meeting you down here, when you said Harmon had called you in New York to tell you that real-estate agents were buying up property here, and you had come to see if you could sell yours. I talked to Harmon, and he had done nothing of the sort. You heard that after you reached here, and used it as an excuse for being on the scene. You still hoped to torture Mallory into telling where his cache was—before killing him."

Suddenly he screeched, jumped to his feet and leaped for the Phantom. He was unarmed, but madness, brought on by sheer desperation, gave him courage. He was within arm's length of the Phantom when a fist hit him and sent him reeling back.

Otley leaped on him. Jackson and Ross joined in. . . .

When Sheriff Cotesworth arrived, Dixon was tied and waiting for him. The Phantom related his story, then drew back while the others added their parts.

When they had finished, Cotesworth looked around. The Phantom was not in the room.

Some distance beyond the house, the Phantom walked down what had been a paved private thoroughfare in the colony of Luana of another day. In the deserted mansions he passed were the ghosts of past glories. Here, in this desolation, murder had been hatched and had lain dormant for years until the cupidity of the murderer was again aroused.

Few of the Phantom's cases had their roots as far back as this one, but as he wandered along the silent, darkened area, he knew that somewhere else other crimes were being concocted. Somewhere shrewd, evil brains were busily engaged in thinking of ways to cheat and back-stab their way to easy money.

He also knew that the Phantom Detective would be there to block their way.

The Phantom whistled softly as he walked along. He enjoyed this peace, but it was not for him. His place was in the front lines of the battle against crime.

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— THE PHANTOM SPEAKS

(Continued from page 10)

but a bit more expensive than the old pins. The pin will now cost 15c with the name strip of **THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE**, or 20c without the name strip.

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FROM THE MAIL BAG

WE'RE sure glad to have the many letters and post-cards you folks have been sending in. There have been a number of responses to the question of whether Muriel Havens ought to take more of an interest in these cases.

We've had suggestions regarding the publication of stories about crime chases in which Chip Dorlan and Steve Huston have helped me out. We're analyzing all these letters, and they'll serve to guide us in the selection of stories from the Case-Book of Richard Curtis Van Loan.

This issue I have selected for quotation an extremely interesting letter from a young fellow in the Army who has been a reader of **THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE**

THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE

10 East 40th Street
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I wish to join the **FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM**. I promise to uphold the laws of the nation and do all in my power to aid in their enforcement.

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10-44

for the past twelve years. I think you'll get a kick out of it.

Dear Editor:

I've just finished the August issue of your wonderful magazine. It kept me interested from beginning to end. So will you permit me to give a "salud" to your versatile and stimulating author, Mr. Robert Wallace?

Sorry, I don't have a subscription to your magazine, but I only read detective fiction for relaxation. Although I am addicted to philosophical literature and non-fiction, I buy THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE at the newsstands whenever I feel the urge to read detective fiction, and of course, I found that this magazine is the best there ever was. I've tried to read others, but find them boring after a chapter or two.

In a small way I enjoy one of your rival publications once in a while, but for me they do not compare with THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE.

You couldn't bribe me to read Sherlock Holmes, but on the screen I think he's wonderful. Funny, isn't it? I guess a lot of readers try to guess the real identity of the villain and I've become quite a success in the last three or four years of reading your magazine.

In detective fiction it's been a sort of a weakness for authors to make the person *least* suspected to be the real criminal, i.e. the real brains of the outfit. Therefore, I look for it and *bang!* it's written on the wall.

In this particular story of the August issue it struck me thus:

"It's Bonham," I said. So I wrote the name down on a small piece of paper. And sure enough, he was it. At the end of Chapter Fifteen, and after an explosion, this is the setup:

"Well, Mr. Bonham! You were mighty fortunate. Nothing broken (etc.)." After a few lines—and here's where the author shines brilliantly—Bonham speaks.

"Poor Carlyle is dead, and I killed him. I told him to open that drawer. It was my fault!"

"Nonsense!" the Phantom derided mildly. I've been reading the Phantom for the last twelve years or more and so I just learned to love the Phantom novels and admire their author.

I will always read THE PHANTOM MAGAZINE, and here's hoping lots of people and youngsters like Clarence Underhill join THE FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM! And I'll be always with them, perhaps not in exactly owning a Phantom badge, but in spiritual contact by reading about the fine and stimulating character of the Phantom. Sincerely,

—Pvt. William Weber.

Private Weber's analysis of the way to check on the best possible suspect is one that other readers have noticed. It's something that a good many detectives have discovered, too. Frequently the least likely suspect is the one who is responsible for the list of crimes you are investigating. His cleverness is the explanation of this.

Next issue we're planning to publish other interesting letters and post-cards. Why not send along your thoughts and comments on "The Mansions of Despair" in this issue, or on any one of the other Phantom Detective stories you've read recently? Please address all correspondence to The Editor, THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Be with me here again next issue. Thank you!

—THE PHANTOM.

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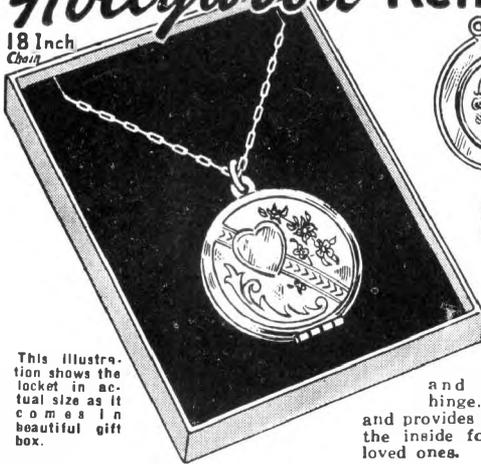
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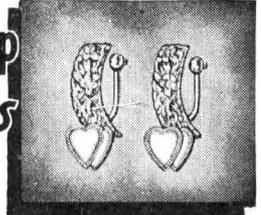
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